

Judith
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Bodies That Matter

On the discursive limits of “sex”



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PASSING, QUEERING: NELLA LARSEN'S PSYCHOANALYTIC CHALLENGE

Can identity be viewed other than as a by-product of a manhandling of life, one that, in fact, refers no more to a consistent pattern of sameness than to an inconsequential process of otherness?

—Trinh T. Minh-ha

A number of theoretical questions have been raised by the effort to think the relationship between feminism, psychoanalysis, and race studies. For the most part, psychoanalysis has been used by feminist theorists to theorize sexual difference as a distinct and fundamental set of linguistic and cultural relations. The philosopher Luce Irigaray has claimed that the question of sexual difference is the question for our time.¹ This privileging of sexual difference implies not only that sexual difference should be understood as more fundamental than other forms of difference, but that other forms of difference might be *derived* from sexual difference. This view also presumes that sexual difference constitutes an autonomous sphere of relations or disjunctions, and is not to be understood as articulated through or *as* other vectors of power.

What would it mean, on the other hand, to consider the assumption of sexual positions, the disjunctive ordering of the human as “masculine” or “feminine” as taking place not only through a heterosexualizing symbolic with its taboo on homosexuality, but through a complex set of racial injunctions which operate in part through the taboo on miscegenation. Further,

how might we understand homosexuality and miscegenation to converge at and as the constitutive outside of a normative heterosexuality that is at once the regulation of a racially pure reproduction? To coin Marx, then, let us remember that the reproduction of the species will be articulated as the reproduction of relations of reproduction, that is, as the cathected site of a racialized version of the species in pursuit of hegemony through perpetuity, that requires and produces a normative heterosexuality in its service.² Conversely, the reproduction of heterosexuality will take different forms depending on how race and the reproduction of race are understood. And though there are clearly good historical reasons for keeping “race” and “sexuality” and “sexual difference” as separate analytic spheres, there are also quite pressing and significant historical reasons for asking how and where we might read not only their convergence, but the sites at which the one cannot be constituted save through the other. This is something other than juxtaposing distinct spheres of power, subordination, agency, historicity, and something other than a list of attributes separated by those proverbial commas (gender, sexuality, race, class), that usually mean that we have not yet figured out how to think the relations we seek to mark. Is there a way, then, to read Nella Larsen’s text as engaging psychoanalytic assumptions not to affirm the primacy of sexual difference, but to articulate the convergent modalities of power by which sexual difference is articulated and assumed?

Consider, if you will, the following scene from Nella Larsen’s *Passing*³ in which Irene descends the stairs of her home to find Clare, in her desirable way, standing in the living room. At the moment Irene lights upon Clare, Brian, Irene’s husband, appears to have found Clare as well. Irene thus finds Clare, finds her beautiful, but at the same time finds Brian finding Clare beautiful as well. The doubling will prove to be important. The narrative voice is sympathetic to Irene, but exceeds her perspective on those occasions on which Irene finds speaking to be impossible.

She remembered her own little choked exclamation of admiration, when, on coming downstairs a few minutes later than she had intended, she had rushed into the living room where Brian was waiting and had found Clare there too. Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; her glistening hair drawn smoothly back into a small twist at the nape of her neck; her eyes sparkling like dark jewels [233].

Irene’s exclamation of admiration is never voiced, choked back it seems, retained, preserved as a kind of seeing that does not make its way into speech. She would have spoken, but the choking appears to stifle her voice; what she finds is Brian waiting, Brian finding Clare as well, and Clare herself. The

grammar of the description fails to settle the question of who desires whom: “she had rushed into the living room where Brian was waiting and had found Clare there too”: is it Irene who finds Clare, or Brian, or do they find her together? And what is it that they find in her, such that they no longer find each other, but mirror each other’s desire as each turns toward Clare. Irene will stifle the words which would convey her admiration. Indeed, the exclamation is choked, deprived of air; the exclamation fills the throat and thwarts her speaking. The narrator emerges to speak the words Irene might have spoken: “exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting.” The narrator thus states what remains caught in Irene’s throat, which suggests that Larsen’s narrator serves the function of exposing more than Irene herself can risk. In most cases where Irene finds herself unable to speak, the narrator supplies the words. But when it comes to explaining exactly how Clare dies at the end of the novel, the narrator proves as speechless as Irene.

The question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed, is raised throughout the text, and it is linked with the larger question of the dangers of public exposure of both color and desire. Significantly, it is precisely what Irene describes as Clare’s flaunting that Irene admires, even as Irene knows that Clare, who passes as white, not only flaunts but hides—indeed, is always hiding in that very flaunting. Clare’s disavowal of her color compels Irene to take her distance from Clare, to refuse to respond to her letters, to try to close her out of her life. And though Irene voices a moral objection to Clare’s passing as white, it is clear that Irene engages many of the same social conventions of passing as Clare. Indeed, when they both meet after a long separation, they are both in a rooftop cafe passing as white. And yet, according to Irene, Clare goes too far, passes as white not merely on occasion, but in her life, and in her marriage. Clare embodies a certain kind of sexual daring that Irene defends herself against, for the marriage cannot hold Clare, and Irene finds herself drawn by Clare, wanting to be her, but also wanting her. It is this risk-taking, articulated at once as a racial crossing and sexual infidelity, that alternately entrances Irene and fuels her moral condemnation of Clare with renewed ferocity.

After Irene convinces herself that Brian and Clare are having an affair, Irene watches Clare work her seduction and betrayal on an otherwise unremarkable Dave Freeland at a party. The seduction works through putting into question both the sanctity of marriage and the clarity of racial demarcations:

Scrap of their conversation, in Clare’s husky voice, floated over to her: “. . . always admired you . . . so much about you long ago . . . everybody says so . . . no one but you . . .” And more of the same. The man hung rapt on her words, though he was the husband of Felise Freeland, and the author of novels that revealed a man of perception and a devastating irony. And he fell for such

pishposh! And all because Clare had a trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes and then lifting them suddenly and turning on a caressing smile [254].

Here it is the trick of passing itself that appears to eroticize Clare, the covering over of astonishing black by ivory, the sudden concession of the secret, the magical transformation of a smile into a caress. It is the changeability itself, the dream of a metamorphosis, where that changeableness signifies a certain freedom, a class mobility afforded by whiteness that constitutes the power of that seduction. This time Irene's own vision of Clare is followed not only by a choking of speech, but by a rage that leads to the shattering of her tea cup, and the interruption of chatter. The tea spreads on the carpet like rage, like blood, figured as dark color itself suddenly uncontained by the strictures of whiteness: "Rage boiled up in her./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" (254).

This shattering prefigures the violence that ends the story, in which Clare is discovered by Bellew, her white racist husband, in the company of African-Americans, her color "outed," which initiates her swift and quite literal demise: with Irene ambiguously positioned next to Clare with a hand on her arm, Clare falls from the window, and dies on the street below. Whether she jumped or was pushed remains ambiguous: "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (271).

Prior to this moment, Bellew climbs the stairs to the Harlem apartment where the salon is taking place, and discovers Clare there; her being there is sufficient to convince him that she is black. Blackness is not primarily a visual mark in Larsen's story, not only because Irene and Clare are both light-skinned, but because what can be seen, what qualifies as a visible marking, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness. Clare passes not only because she is light-skinned, but because she refuses to introduce her blackness into conversation, and so withholds the conversational marker which would counter the hegemonic presumption that she is white. Irene herself appears to "pass" insofar as she enters conversations which presume whiteness as the norm without contesting that assumption. This dissociation from blackness that she performs through silence is reversed at the end of the story in which she is exposed to Bellew's white gaze in clear association with African-Americans. It is only on the condition of an association that conditions a naming that her color becomes legible. He cannot "see"

her as black before that association, and he claims to her face with unrestrained racism that he would never associate with blacks. If he associates with her, she cannot be black. But if she associates with blacks, she becomes black, where the sign of blackness is contracted, as it were, through proximity, where “race” itself is figured as a contagion transmissible through proximity. The added presumption is that if he were to associate with blacks, the boundaries of his own whiteness, and surely that of his children, would no longer be easily fixed. Paradoxically, his own racist passion *requires* that association; he cannot be white without blacks and without the constant disavowal of his relation to them. It is only through that disavowal that his whiteness is constituted, and through the institutionalization of that disavowal that his whiteness is perpetually—but anxiously—reconstituted.⁴

Bellew’s speech is overdetermined by this anxiety over racial boundaries. Before he knows that Clare is black, he regularly calls her “Nig,” and it seems that this term of degradation and disavowal is passed between them as a kind of love toy. She allows herself to be eroticized by it, takes it on, acting as if it were the most impossible appellation for her. That he calls her “Nig” suggests that he knows or that there is a kind of knowingness in the language he speaks. And yet, if he can call her that and remain her husband, he cannot know. In this sense, she defines the fetish, an object of desire about which one says, “I know very well that this cannot be, but I desire this all the same,” a formulation which implies its equivalence: “Precisely because this cannot be, I desire it all the more.” And yet Clare is a fetish that holds in place both the rendering of Clare’s blackness as an exotic source of excitation and the denial of her blackness altogether. Here the “naming” is riddled with the knowledge that he claims not to have; he notes that she is becoming darker all the time; the term of degradation permits him to see and not to see at the same time. The term sustains his desire as a kind of disavowal, one which structures not only the ambivalence in his desire for Clare, but the erotic ambivalence by which he constitutes the fragile boundaries of his own racial identity. To reformulate an earlier claim, then: although he claims that he would never associate with African-Americans, he requires the association and its disavowal for an erotic satisfaction that is indistinguishable from his desire to display his own racial purity.

In fact, it appears that the uncertain border between black and white is precisely what he eroticizes, what he needs in order to make Clare into the exotic object to be dominated.⁵ His name, Bellew, like bellow, is itself a howl, the long howl of white male anxiety in the face of the racially ambiguous woman whom he idealizes and loathes. She represents the spectre of a racial ambiguity that must be conquered. But “Bellew” is also the instrument that fans the flame, the illumination that Clare, literally “light,” in some sense is. Her luminescence is dependent on the life he breathes into her; her evanes-

cence is equally a function of that power. "One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone./ There was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. 'Nig! My God! Nig!'" Bellew bellows, and at that moment Clare vanishes from the window (271). His speech vacillates between degradation and deification, but opens and closes on a note of degradation. The force of that vacillation illuminates, inflames Clare, but also works to extinguish her, to blow her out. Clare exploits Bellew's need to see only what he wants to see, working not so much the appearance of whiteness, but the vacillation between black and white as a kind of erotic lure. His final naming closes down that vacillation, but functions also as a fatal condemnation—or so it seems.

For it is, after all, Irene's hand which is last seen on Clare's arm, and the narrator, who is usually able to say what Irene cannot, appears drawn into Irene's nonnarrativizable trauma, blanking out, with drawing at the crucial moment when we expect to learn whose agency it was that catapulted Clare from the window and to her death below. That Irene feels guilt over Clare's death is not quite reason enough to believe that Irene pushed her, since one can easily feel guilty about a death one merely wished would happen, even when one knows that one's wish could not be the proximate cause of the death. The gap in the narrative leaves open whether Clare jumped, Irene pushed, or the force of Bellew's words literally bellowed her out the window. It is, I would suggest, this consequential gap, and the triangulation that surrounds it, that occasions a rethinking of psychoanalysis, in particular, of the social and psychic status of "killing judgments." How are we to explain the chain that leads from judgment to exposure to death, as it operates through the interwoven vectors of sexuality and race?

Clare's fall: is this a joint effort, or is it at least an action whose causes must remain not fully knowable, not fully traceable? This is an action ambiguously executed, in which the agency of Irene and Clare is significantly confused, and this confusion of agency takes place in relation to the violating speech of the white man. We can read this "finale," as Larsen calls it, as rage boiling up, shattering, leaving shards of whiteness, shattering the veneer of whiteness. Even as it appears that Clare's veneer of whiteness is shattered, it is Bellew's as well; indeed, it is the veneer by which the white project of racial purity is sustained. For Bellew thinks that he would never associate with blacks, but he cannot be white without his "Nig," without the lure of an association that he must resist, without the spectre of a racial ambiguity that he must subordinate and deny. Indeed, he reproduces that racial line by which he seeks to secure his whiteness through producing black women as the necessary and impossible object of desire, as the fetish in relation to which his own whiteness is anxiously and persistently secured.

There are clearly risks in trying to think in psychoanalytic terms about Larsen's story, which, after all, published in 1929, belongs to the tradition of the Harlem Renaissance, and ought properly to be read in the context of that cultural and social world. Whereas many critics have read the text as a tragic story of the social position of the mulatto, others have insisted that the story's brilliance is to be found in its psychological complexity. It seems to me that perhaps one need not choose between the historical and social specificity of the novel, as it has been brought to light by Barbara Christian, Gloria Hull, Hazel Carby, Amritjit Singh, and Mary Helen Washington, on the one hand, and the psychological complexity of cross-identification and jealousy in the text as it has been discussed by Claudia Tate, Cheryl Wall, Mary Mabel Youmans, and Deborah McDowell.⁶ Both Tate and McDowell suggest that critics have split over whether this story ought to be read as a story about race and, in particular, as part of the tragic genre of the mulatto, or whether it ought to be read as psychologically complex and, as both McDowell and Carby insist, an allegory of the difficulty of representing black women's sexuality precisely when that sexuality has been exoticized or rendered as an icon of primitivism. Indeed, Larsen herself appears to be caught in that very dilemma, withholding a representation of black women's sexuality precisely in order to avert the consequence of its becoming exoticized. It is this withholding that one might read in *Quicksand*, a novella published the year before *Passing*, where Helga's abstinence is directly related to the fear of being depicted as belonging to "the jungle." McDowell writes, "since the beginning of their 130-year history, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence. This is clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women's libidinousness."⁷

The conflict between Irene and Clare, one which spans identification, desire, jealousy, and rage, calls to be contextualized within the historically specific constraints of sexuality and race which produced this text in 1929. And though I can only do that in a very crude way here, I would like briefly to sketch a direction for such an analysis. For I would agree with both McDowell and Carby not only that it is unnecessary to choose whether this novella is "about" race or "about" sexuality and sexual conflict, but that the two domains are inextricably linked, such that the text offers a way to read the racialization of sexual conflict.

Claudia Tate argues that "race ... is not the novel's foremost concern" and that "the real impetus for the story is Irene's emotional turbulence" (142) and the psychological ambiguity that surrounds Clare's death. Tate distinguishes her own psychological account from those who reduce the novel to a "trite melodrama" (146) of black women passing for white. By underscoring the ambiguity of Clare's death, Tate brings into relief the narrative and psychic complexity of the novella. Following Tate, Cheryl Wall refuses to separate the

psychological ambiguity of the story from its racial significance. Agreeing that “Larsen’s most striking insights are into psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women,” she argues that what appear to be “the tragic mulattoes of literary convention” are also “the means through which the author demonstrates the psychological costs of racism and sexism.” For Wall, the figure of Clare never fully exists apart from Irene’s own projections of “otherness” (108). Indeed, according to Wall, Irene’s erotic relation to Clare participates in a kind of exoticism that is not fully different from Bellew’s. Irene sees in Clare’s seductive eyes “the unconscious, the unknowable, the erotic, and the passive,” where, according to Wall, “[these] symbolize those aspects of the psyche Irene denies within herself” (108–109). Deborah McDowell specifies this account of psychological complexity and projection by underscoring the conflicted homoeroticism between Clare and Irene. McDowell writes, “though, superficially, Irene’s is an account of Clare’s passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty, underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Clare” (xxvi). Further, McDowell argues that Irene effectively displaces her own desire for Clare in her “imagination of an affair between Clare and Brian” (xxviii), and that in the final scene “Clare’s death represents the death of Irene’s sexual feelings, for Clare” (xxix).

To understand the muted status of homosexuality within this text—and hence the displacement, jealousy, and murderous wish that follow—it is crucial to situate this repression in terms of the specific social constraints on the depiction of black female sexuality mentioned above. In her essay, “The Quicksands of Representation,” Hazel Carby writes,

Larsen’s representation of both race and class are structured through the prism of black female sexuality. Larsen recognized that the repression of the sensual in Afro-American fiction in response to the long history of the exploitation of black sexuality led to the repression of passion and the repression or denial of female sexuality and desire. But, of course, the representation of black female sexuality meant risking its definition as primitive and exotic within a racist society . . . Racist sexual ideologies proclaimed the black woman to be a rampant sexual being, and in response black women writers either focused on defending their morality or displaced sexuality onto another terrain [174].

McDowell, on the other hand, sees Larsen as resisting the sexual explicitness found in black female blues singers such as Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey (xiii), but nevertheless wrestling with the problem of rendering public a sexuality which thereby became available to an exoticizing exploitation.⁸ In a sense, the conflict of lesbian desire in the story can be read in what is almost

spoken, in what is withheld from speech, but which always threatens to stop or disrupt speech. And in this sense the muteness of homosexuality converges in the story with the illegibility of Clare's blackness.

To specify this convergence let me turn first to the periodic use of the term "queering" in the story itself, where queering is linked to the eruption of anger into speech such that speech is stifled and broken, and then to the scene in which Clare and Irene first exchange their glances, a reciprocal seeing that verges on threatening absorption. Conversations in *Passing* appear to constitute the painful, if not repressive, surface of social relations. It is what Clare withholds in conversation that permits her to "pass"; and when Irene's conversation falters, the narrator refers to the sudden gap in the surface of language as "queer" or as "queering." At the time, it seems, "queer" did not yet mean homosexual, but it did encompass an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy which might well include the sexual. Its meanings include: of obscure origin, the state of feeling ill or bad, not straight, obscure, perverse, eccentric. As a verb-form, "to queer" has a history of meaning: to quiz or ridicule, to puzzle, but also, to swindle and to cheat. In Larsen's text, the aunts who raise Clare as white forbid her to mention her race; they are described as "queer" (189). When Gertrude, another passing black woman, hears a racial slur against blacks, Larsen writes, "from Gertrude's direction came a queer little suppressed sound, a snort or a giggle" (202)—something queer, something short of proper conversation, passable prose. Brian's longing to travel to Brazil is described as an "old, queer, unhappy restlessness" (208), suggesting a longing to be freed of propriety.

That Larsen links queerness with a potentially problematic eruption of sexuality seems clear: Irene worries about her sons picking up ideas about sex at school; Junior, she remarks, "'picked up some queer ideas about things—some things—from the older boys.' 'Queer ideas?' [Brian] repeated. 'D'you mean ideas about sex, Irene?' 'Ye-es. Not quite nice ones, dreadful jokes, and things like that'" (219–220). Sometimes conversation becomes "queer" when anger interrupts the social surface of conversation. Upon becoming convinced that Brian and Clare are having an affair, Irene is described by Larsen this way: "Irene cried out: 'But Brian, I —' and stopped, amazed at the fierce anger that had blazed up in her. / Brian's head came round with a jerk. His brows lifted in an odd surprise. / Her voice, she realized *had* gone queer" (249). As a term for betraying what ought to remain concealed, "queering" works as the exposure within language—an exposure that disrupts the repressive surface of language—of both sexuality and race. After meeting Clare's husband on the street with her black friend Felise, Irene confesses that she has previously "passed" in front of him. Larsen writes, "Felise drawled: 'Aha! Been "passing" have you? Well, I've queered that'" (259).

In the last instance, queering is what upsets and exposes passing; it is the act by which the racially and sexually repressive surface of conversation is exploded, by rage, by sexuality, by the insistence on color.

Irene and Clare first meet up after years apart in a café where they are both passing as white. And the process by which each comes to recognize the other, and recognize her as black is at once the process of their erotic absorption each into the other's eyes. The narrator reports that Irene found Clare to be "an attractive-looking woman . . . with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin . . . a shade too provocative" (177). Irene feels herself stared at by Clare, and clearly stares back, for she notes that Clare "showed [not] the slightest trace of disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny." Irene then "feel(s) her color heighten under the continued inspection, [and] slid her eyes down. What she wondered could be the reason for such persistent attention? Had she, in her haste in the taxi, put her hat on backwards?" From the start, then, Irene takes Clare's stare to be a kind of inspection, a threat of exposure which she returns first as scrutiny and distrust only then to find herself thoroughly seduced: "She stole another glance. Still looking. What strange languorous eyes she had!" Irene resists being watched, but then falls into the gaze, averts the recognition at the same time that she "surrenders" to the charm of the smile.

The ambivalence wracks the motion of the narrative. Irene subsequently tries to move Clare out of her life, refuses to answer her letters, vows not to invite her anywhere, but finds herself caught up by Clare's seduction. Is it that Irene cannot bear the identification with Clare, or is it that she cannot bear her desire for Clare; is it that she identifies with Clare's passing but needs to disavow it not only because she seeks to uphold the "race" that Clare betrays but because her desire for Clare will betray the family that works as the bulwark for that uplifted race? Indeed, this is a moral version of the family which opposes any sign of passion even within the marriage, even any passionate attachment to the children. Irene comes to hate Clare not only because Clare lies, passes, and betrays her race, but because Clare's lying secures a tentative sexual freedom for Clare, and reflects back to Irene the passion that Irene denies herself. She hates Clare not only because Clare has such passion, but because Clare awakens such passion in Irene, indeed, a passion for Clare: "In the look Clare gave Irene, there was something groping, and hopeless, and yet so absolutely determined that it was like an image of the futile searching and firm resolution in Irene's own soul, and increased the feeling of doubt and compunction that had been growing within her about Clare Kendry." She distrusts Clare as she distrusts herself, but this groping is also what draws her in. The next line reads: "She gave in" (231).

When Irene can resist Clare, she does it in the name of "race," where "race" is tied to the DuBoisian notion of uplift and denotes an idea of

“progress” that is not only masculinist but which, in Larsen’s story, becomes construed as upward class mobility. This moral notion of “race” which, by the way, is often contested by the celebratory rhetoric of “color” in the text, also requires the idealization of bourgeois family life in which women retain their place in the family. The institution of the family also protects black women from a public exposure of sexuality that would be rendered vulnerable to a racist construction and exploitation. The sexuality that might queer the family becomes a kind of danger: Brian’s desire to travel, the boys’ jokes, all must be unilaterally subdued, kept out of public speech, not merely in the name of race, but in the name of a notion of racial progress that has become linked with class mobility, masculine uplift, and the bourgeois family. Ironically, Du Bois himself came to praise Larsen’s *Quicksand* precisely for elevating black fiction beyond the kind of sexual exoticization that patrons such as Carl Van Vechten sought to promote.⁹ Without recognizing that Larsen was struggling with the conflict produced, on the one hand, by such exotic and racist renderings and, on the other hand, by the moral injunctions typified by Du Bois, Du Bois himself praises her writings as an example of uplift itself.¹⁰ And yet, one might argue that *Passing* exemplifies precisely the cost of uplift for black women as an ambiguous death/suicide, whereas *Quicksand* exemplifies that cost as a kind of death in marriage, where both stories resolve on the impossibility of sexual freedom for black women.¹¹

What becomes psychically repressed in *Passing* is linked to the specificity of the social constraints on black women’s sexuality that inform Larsen’s text. If, as Carby insists, the prospect of black women’s sexual freedom at the time of Larsen’s writing rendered them vulnerable to public violations, including rape, because their bodies continued to be sites of conquest within white racism, then the psychic resistance to homosexuality and to a sexual life outside the parameters of the family must be read in part as a resistance to an endangering public exposure.

To the extent that Irene desires Clare, she desires the trespass that Clare performs, and hates her for the disloyalty that that trespass entails. To the extent that Irene herself eroticizes Clare’s racial trespass and Clare’s clear lack of loyalty for family and its institutions of monogamy, Irene herself is in a double bind: caught between the prospect of becoming free from an ideology of “race” uncritical in its own masculinism and classism, on the one hand, and the violations of white racism that attend the deprivatization of black women’s sexuality, on the other. Irene’s psychic ambivalence toward Clare, then, needs to be situated in this historical double-bind.¹² At the same time, we can see mapped within Larsen’s text the incipient possibility of a solidarity among black women. The identification between Clare and Irene might be read as the unlive political promise of a solidarity yet to come.

McDowell points out that Irene imagines that Brian is with Clare, and that this imagining coincides with the intensification of Irene’s desire for Clare.

Irene passes her desire for Clare through Brian; he becomes the phantasmatic occasion for Irene to consummate her desire for Clare, but also to deflect from the recognition that it is *her* desire which is being articulated through Brian. Brian carries that repudiated homosexuality, and Irene's jealousy, then, can be understood not only as a rivalry with him for Clare, but the painful consequence of a sacrifice of passion that she repeatedly makes, a sacrifice that entails the displacement or rerouting of her desire through Brian. That Brian appears to act on Irene's desire (although this, importantly, is never confirmed and, so, may be nothing other than an imaginary conviction on Irene's part), suggests that part of that jealousy is anger that he occupies a legitimated sexual position from which he can carry out the desire which she invested in him, that he dares to act the desire which she relegated to him to act on. This is not to discount the possibility that Irene also desires Brian, but there is very little evidence of a passionate attachment to him in the text. Indeed, it is against his passion, and in favor of preserving bourgeois ideals that she clamors to keep him. Her jealousy may well be routed along a conventional heterosexual narrative, but—as we saw in *Cather*—that is not to foreclose the interpretation that a lesbian passion runs that course.

Freud writes of a certain kind of “jealousy” which appears at first to be the desire to have the heterosexual partner whose attention has wandered, but is motivated by a desire to occupy the place of that wandering partner in order to consummate a foreclosed homosexuality. He calls this a “delusional jealousy . . . what is left of a homosexuality that has run its course, and it rightly takes its position among the classical forms of paranoia. As an attempt at defence against an unduly strong homosexual impulse it may, in a man, be described in the formula: ‘I do not love him, she loves him!’”¹³ And, in a woman and in *Passing*, the following formula might apply: “I, Irene, do not love her, Clare: he, Brian, does!”

It is precisely here, in accounting for the sacrifice, that one reformulation of psychoanalysis in terms of race becomes necessary. In his essay on narcissism, Freud argues that a boy child begins to love through sacrificing some portion of his own narcissism, that the idealization of the mother is nothing other than that narcissism transferred outward, that the mother stands for that lost narcissism, promises the return of that narcissism, and never delivers on that promise. For as long as she remains the idealized object of love, she carries his narcissism, she is his displaced narcissism, and, insofar as *she* carries it, she is perceived to *withhold* it from him. Idealization, then, is always at the expense of the ego who idealizes. The ego-ideal is produced as a consequence of being severed from the ego, where the ego is understood to sacrifice some part of its narcissism in the formation and externalization of this ideal.

The love of the ideal will thus always be ambivalent, for the ideal deprecates the ego as it compels its love. For the moment, I would like to detach

the logic of this explanation from the drama between boy child and mother which is Freud's focus (not to discount that focus, but to bring into relief other possible foci), and underscore the consequence of ambivalence in the process of idealization. The one I idealize is the one who carries for me the self-love that I myself have invested in that one. And accordingly, I hate that one, for he/she has taken my place even as I yielded my place to him/her, and yet I require that one, for he/she represents the promise of the return of my own self-love. Self-love, self-esteem is thus preserved and vanquished at the site of the ideal.

How can this analysis be related to the questions concerning the racialization of sexuality I have tried to pose? The ego-ideal and its derivative, the super-ego, are regulatory mechanisms by which social ideals are psychically sustained. In this way, the social regulation of the psyche can be read as the juncture of racial and gendered prohibitions and regulations and their forced psychic appropriations. Freud argues speculatively that this ego-ideal lays the groundwork for the super-ego, and that the super-ego is lived as the psychic activity of "watching" and, from the perspective that is the ego, the experience of "being watched": "it (the super-ego) constantly watches the real ego and measures it by that (ego-) ideal." Hence, the super-ego stands for the measure, the law, the norm, one which is embodied by a fabrication, a figure of a being whose sole feature it is to watch, to watch in order to judge, as a kind of persistent scrutiny, detection, effort to expose, that hounds the ego and reminds it of its failures. The ego thus designates the psychic experience of being seen, and the super-ego, that of seeing, watching, exposing the ego. Now, this watching agency is not the same as the idealization which is the ego-ideal; it stands back both from the ego-ideal and the ego, and measures the latter against the former and always, always finds it wanting. The super-ego is not only the measure of the ego, the interiorized judge, but the activity of prohibition, the psychic agency of regulation, what Freud calls *conscience*.¹⁴

For Freud, this superego represents a norm, a standard, an ideal which is in part socially received; it is the psychic agency by which social regulation proceeds. But it is not just any norm; it is the set of norms by which the sexes are differentiated and installed. The super-ego thus first arises, says Freud, as a prohibition that regulates sexuality in the service of producing socially ideal "men" and "women." This is the point at which Lacan intervened in order to develop his notion of the symbolic, the set of laws conveyed by language itself which compel conformity to notions of "masculinity" and "femininity." And many psychoanalytic feminists have taken this claim as a point of departure for their own work. They have claimed in various ways that sexual difference is as primary as language, that there is no speaking, no writing, without the presupposition of sexual difference. And this has led to a second claim

which I want to contest, namely, that sexual difference is more primary or more fundamental than other kinds of differences, including racial difference. It is this assertion of the priority of sexual difference over racial difference that has marked so much psychoanalytic feminism as white, for the assumption here is not only that sexual difference is more fundamental, but that there is a relationship called “sexual difference” that is itself unmarked by race. That whiteness is not understood by such a perspective as a racial category is clear; it is yet another power that need not speak its name. Hence, to claim that sexual difference is more fundamental than racial difference is effectively to assume that sexual difference is white sexual difference, and that whiteness is not a form of racial difference.

Within Lacanian terms, the ideals or norms that are conveyed in language are the ideals or norms that govern sexual difference, and that go under the name of the symbolic. But what requires radical rethinking is what social relations compose this domain of the symbolic, what convergent set of historical formations of racialized gender, of gendered race, of the sexualization of racial ideals, or the racialization of gender norms, makes up both the social regulation of sexuality and its psychic articulations. If, as Norma Alarcón has insisted, women of color are “multiply interpellated,” called by many names, constituted in and by that multiple calling, then this implies that the symbolic domain, the domain of socially instituted norms, is composed of *racializing norms*, and that they exist not merely alongside gender norms, but are articulated through one another.¹⁵ Hence, it is no longer possible to make sexual difference prior to racial difference or, for that matter, to make them into fully separable axes of social regulation and power.

In some ways, this is precisely the challenge to psychoanalysis that Nella Larsen offers in *Passing*. And here is where I would follow Barbara Christian’s advice to consider literary narrative as a place where theory takes place,¹⁶ and would simply add that I take Larsen’s *Passing* to be in part a theorization of desire, displacement, and jealous rage that has significant implications for rewriting psychoanalytic theory in ways that explicitly come to terms with race. If the watching agency described by Freud is figured as a watching judge, a judge who embodies a set of ideals, and if those ideals are to some large degree socially instituted and maintained, then this watching agency is the means by which social norms sear the psyche, expose it to a condemnation that can lead to suicide. Indeed, Freud remarked that the superego, if left fully unrestrained, will fully deprive the ego of its desire, a deprivation which is psychic death, and which Freud claims leads to suicide. If we rethink Freud’s “super-ego” as the psychic force of social regulation, and we rethink social regulation in terms which include vectors of power such as gender and race, then it should be possible to articulate the psyche politically in ways which have consequences for social survival.

For Clare, it seems, cannot survive, and her death marks the success of a certain symbolic ordering of gender, sexuality and race, as it marks as well the sites of potential resistance. It may be that as Zulena, Irene's black servant, picks up the shattered whiteness of the broken tea cup, she opens the question of what will be made of such shards. We might read a text such as Toni Morrison's *Sula* as the piecing together of the shattered whiteness that composes the remains of both Clare and Irene in Nella Larsen's text, rewriting Clare as Sula, and Irene as Nel, refiguring that lethal identification between them as the promise of connection in Nel's final call: "girl, girl, girlgirlgirl."¹⁷

At the close of Larsen's *Passing*, it is Bellew who climbs the stairs and "sees" Clare, takes the measure of her blackness against the ideal of whiteness and finds her wanting. Although Clare has said that she longs for the exposure in order to become free of him, she is also attached to him and his norms for her economic well-being, and it is no accident—even if it is figured as one—that the exposure of her color leads straightway to her death, the literalization of a "social death." Irene, as well, does not want Clare free, not only because Irene might lose Brian, but because she must halt Clare's sexual freedom to halt her own. Claudia Tate argues that the final action is importantly ambiguous, that it constitutes a "psychological death" for Irene just as it literalizes death for Clare. Irene appears to offer a helping hand to Clare who somehow passes out the window to her death. Here, as Henry Louis Gates, Jr. suggests, passing carries the double meaning of crossing the color line and crossing over into death: passing as a kind of passing on.¹⁸

If Irene turns on Clare to contain Clare's sexuality, as she has turned on and extinguished her own passion, she does this under the eyes of the bellowing white man; his speech, his exposure, his watching divides them against each other. In this sense, Bellew speaks the force of the regulatory norm of whiteness, but Irene identifies with that condemnatory judgment. Clare is the promise of freedom at too high a price, both to Irene and to herself. It is not precisely Clare's race that is "exposed," but blackness itself is produced as marked and marred, a public sign of particularity in the service of the dissimulated universality of whiteness. If Clare betrays Bellew, it is in part because she turns the power of dissimulation against her white husband, and her betrayal of him, at once a sexual betrayal, undermines the reproductive aspirations of white racial purity, exposing the tenuous borders that that purity requires. If Bellew anxiously reproduces white racial purity, he produces the prohibition against miscegenation by which that purity is guaranteed, a prohibition that requires strictures of heterosexuality, sexual fidelity, and monogamy. And if Irene seeks to sustain the black family at the expense of passion and in the name of uplift, she does it in part to avert the position for black women outside the family, that of being sexually degraded and endangered by the very terms of white masculinism that Bellew represents (for

instance, she tells Clare not to come to the dance for the Negro Welfare Fund alone, that she'll be taken as a prostitute). Bellew's watching, the power of exposure that he wields, is a historically entrenched social power of the white male gaze, but one whose masculinity is enacted and guaranteed through heterosexuality as a ritual of racial purification. His masculinity cannot be secured except through a consecration of his whiteness. And whereas Bellew requires the spectre of the black woman as an object of desire, he must destroy this spectre to avoid the kind of association that might destabilize the territorial boundaries of his own whiteness. This ritualistic expulsion is dramatized quite clearly at the end of *Passing* when Bellew's exposing and endangering gaze and Clare's fall to death are simultaneous with Irene's offer of an apparently helping hand. Fearing the loss of her husband and fearing her own desire, Irene is positioned at the social site of contradiction: both options threaten to jettison her into a public sphere in which she might become subject, as it were, to the same bad winds. But Irene fails to realize that Clare is as constrained as she is, that Clare's freedom could not be acquired at the expense of Irene, that they do not ultimately enslave each other, but that they are both caught in the vacillating breath of that symbolic bellowing: "Nig! My God! Nig!"

If Bellew's bellowing can be read as a symbolic racialization, a way in which both Irene and Clare are interpellated by a set of symbolic norms governing black female sexuality, then the symbolic is not merely organized by "phallic power," but by a "phallicism" that is centrally sustained by racial anxiety and sexualized rituals of racial purification. Irene's self-sacrifice might be understood then as an effort to avoid becoming the object of that kind of sexual violence, as one that makes her cling to an arid family life and destroy whatever emergence of passion might call that safety into question. Her jealousy must then be read as a psychic event orchestrated within and by this social map of power. Her passion for Clare had to be destroyed only because she could not find a viable place for her own sexuality to live. Trapped by a promise of safety through class mobility, Irene accepted the terms of power which threatened her, becoming its instrument in the end. More troubling than a scene in which the white man finds and scorns his "Other" in the black women, this drama displays in all its painfulness the ways in which the interpellation of the white norm is reiterated and executed by those whom it would—and does—vanquish. This is a performative enactment of "race" that mobilizes every character in its sweep.

And yet, the story reoccupies symbolic power to expose that symbolic force in return, and in the course of that exposure began to further a powerful tradition of words, one which promised to sustain the lives and passions of precisely those who could not survive within the story itself. Tragically, the logic of "passing" and "exposure" came to afflict and, indeed, to end Nella

Larsen's own authorial career, for when she published a short story, "Sanctuary," in 1930, she was accused of plagiarism, that is, exposed as "passing" as the true originator of the work.¹⁹ Her response to this condemning exposure was to recede into an anonymity from which she did not emerge. Irene slipped into such a living death, as did Helga in *Quicksand*. Perhaps the alternative would have meant a turning of that queering rage no longer against herself or Clare, but against the regulatory norms that force such a turn: against both the passionless promise of that bourgeois family and the bellowing of racism in its social and psychic reverberations, most especially, in the deathly rituals it engages.

- 20 "Paul's Case," Willa Cather, *Five Stories* (New York: Vintage, 1956), p. 149.
- 21 Cather's misogyny effectively renders "Tommy the Unsentimental" implausible as a narrative of love and loss. That Jessica is degraded from the start makes the final "sacrifice" appear superfluous. In this respect it seems especially useful to consider Toni Morrison's acute criticism of Cather's *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*. Morrison argues that the credibility of Cather's narrative is undermined by a recurring and aggrandizing racism. The relation between Sapphira, the slave-mistress, and Nancy, daughter of a devoted slave, lacks plausibility, and the relation between Nancy and her own mother is never credibly represented, because Cather, like Sapphira, has produced the slave girl in the service of her own gratification. Such a displacement resonates with the displacements of Cather's cross-gendered narrations as well, raising the question of the extent to which fictional displacement can be read as a strategy of repudiation. See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 18–28.
- 22 Willa Cather, "Tom Outland's Story," *Five Stories*, p. 66.
- 23 For a list of Cather's early pseudonymous names, see O'Brien, *Willa Cather*, p. 230.

6 PASSING, QUEERING: NELLA LARSEN'S PSYCHOANALYTIC CHALLENGE

The following is a revised version of a lecture given at the University of Santa Cruz in October 1992 as part of a conference on "Psychoanalysis in African-American Contexts: Feminist Reconfigurations" sponsored by Elizabeth Abel, Barbara Christian, and Helene Moglen.

- 1 See Luce Irigaray, *Éthique de la différence sexuelle*, p. 13.
- 2 Freud's *Totem and Taboo* attests to the inseparability of the discourse of species reproduction and the discourse of race. In that text, one might consider the twin uses of "development" as (a) the movement toward an advanced state of culture and (b) the "achievement" of genital sexuality within monogamous heterosexuality.
- 3 *Passing*, in *An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella Larsen*, Charles Larson, ed., forward by Marita Golden (New York: Anchor Books, 1992), pp. 163–276.
- 4 This suggests one sense in which "race" might be construed as performative. Bellevue produces his whiteness through a ritualized production of its sexual barriers. This anxious repetition accumulates the force of the material effect of a circumscribed whiteness, but its boundary concedes its tenuous status precisely because it requires the "blackness" that it excludes. In this sense, a dominant "race" is constructed (in the sense of *materialized*) through reiteration and exclusion.
- 5 This is like the colonized subject who must resemble the colonizer to a certain degree, but who is prohibited from resembling the colonizer too well. For a fuller description of this dynamic, see Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man," p. 126.
- 6 Where references in the text are made to the following authors, they are to the following studies unless otherwise indicated: Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1987); Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958); Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (London and New York: Oxford University Press, 1987); Barbara Christian, *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition 1892–1976* (Westport, Ct.: Greenwood Press, 1980) and "Trajectories of Self-Definition: Placing Contemporary Afro-American Women's Fiction," in Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, eds., *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985),

- pp. 233–48; Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures in Black: Words, Signs, and the “Racial” Self* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1987); Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Gloria Hull, *Color, Sex, and Poetry: Three Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987); Deborah E. McDowell, “Introduction” in *Quicksand and Passing* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1986); Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, “Self-Representation as Art in the Novels of Nella Larsen,” in Janice Morgan and Colette T. Hall, eds., *Redefining Autobiography in Twentieth-Century Fiction* (New York: Garland, 1991); Hiroko Sato, “Under the Harlem Shadow: A Study of Jessie Faucet and Nella Larsen,” in Arno Bontemps, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (New York: Dodd, 1972), pp. 63–89; Amritjit Singh, *The Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1976); Claudia Tate, “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*. A Problem of Interpretation,” *Black American Literature Forum* 14:4 (1980): pp. 142–46; Hortense Thornton, “Sexism as Quagmire: Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*,” *CLA Journal* 16 (1973): pp. 285–301; Cheryl Wall, “Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen’s Novels,” *Black American Literature Forum*, vol. 20, nos. 1–2 (1986), pp. 97–111; Mary Helen Washington, *Invented Lives: Narratives of Black Women 1860–1960* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1987).
- 7 Deborah E. McDowell, “‘That nameless ... shameful impulse’: Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*,” in Joel Weixlmann and Houston A. Baker, Jr., eds., *Black Feminist Criticism and Critical Theory: Studies in Black American Literature*, vol. 3 (Greenwood, Fla.: Penkevill Publishing Company, 1988), p. 141. Reprinted in part as “Introduction” to *Quicksand and Passing*. All further citations to McDowell in the text are to this essay.
 - 8 Jewelle Gomez suggests that black lesbian sexuality very often thrived behind the church pew. See Jewelle Gomez, “A Cultural Legacy Denied and Discovered: Black Lesbians in Fiction by Women,” *Home Girls: A Black Feminist Anthology* (Latham, NY: Kitchen Table Press, 1983), pp. 120–21.
 - 9 For an analysis of the racist implications of such patronage, see Bruce Kellner, “‘Refined Racism’: White Patronage in the Harlem Renaissance,” in *The Harlem Renaissance Reconsidered*, pp. 93–106.
 - 10 McDowell writes, “Reviewing Claude McKay’s *Home to Harlem* and Larsen’s *Quicksand* together for *The Crisis*, for example, Du Bois praised Larsen’s novel as ‘a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work,’ but criticized McKay’s as so ‘nauseating’ in its emphasis on ‘drunkenness, fighting, and sexual promiscuity’ that it made him feel ... like taking a bath.” She cites “Rpt. in *Voices of a Black Nation: Political Journalism in the Harlem Renaissance*, Theodore G. Vincent, ed., (San Francisco: Ramparts Press, 1973), p. 359,” in McDowell, p. 164.
 - 11 Indeed, it is the ways in which Helga Crane consistently uses the language of the “primitive” and the “jungle” to describe sexual feeling that places her in a tragic alliance with Du Bois.
 - 12 For an effort to reconcile psychoanalytic conflict and the problematic of incest and the specific history of the African-American family post-slavery, see Hortense J. Spillers, “‘The Permanent Obliquity of the In(pha)llibly Straight’: In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers,” in Cheryl Wall, ed., *Changing Our Own Words* (New Brunswick: Rutgers, 1989), pp. 127–49.
 - 13 Sigmund Freud, “Some Neurotic Mechanisms in Jealousy, Paranoia and Homosexuality,” *SE*, Vol. 18, 1922, p. 225.
 - 14 Significantly, Freud argues that conscience is the sublimation of homosexual libido, that the homosexual desires which are prohibited are not thoroughly destroyed; they

are satisfied by the prohibition itself. In this way, the pangs of conscience are nothing other than the displaced satisfactions of homosexual desire. The guilt about such desire is, oddly, the very way in which that desire is preserved.

This consideration of guilt as a way of locking up or safeguarding desire may well have implications for the theme of white guilt. For the question there is whether white guilt is itself the satisfaction of racist passion, whether the reliving of racism that white guilt constantly performs is not itself the very satisfaction of racism that white guilt ostensibly abhors. For white guilt—when it is not lost to self-pity—produces a paralytic moralizing that *requires* racism to sustain its own sanctimonious posturing; precisely because white moralizing is itself nourished by racist passions, it can never be the basis on which to build and affirm a community across difference; rooted in the desire to be exempted from white racism, to produce oneself as the exemption, this strategy virtually requires that the white community remain mired in racism; hatred is merely transferred outward, and thereby preserved, but it is not overcome.

- 15 Norma Alarcón, "The Theoretical Subject(s) of *This Bridge Called My Back* and Anglo-American Feminism," in Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul: Haciendo Caras* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 1990), pp. 356–69.
- 16 Barbara Christian, "The Race for Theory" in *The Nature and Context of Minority Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), pp. 37–49.
- 17 Toni Morrison, *Sula* (New York: Knopf, 1973), p. 174.
- 18 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *Figures*, p. 202.
- 19 I am thankful to Barbara Christian for pointing out to me the link between the theme of "passing" and the accusation of plagiarism against Larsen.

7 ARGUING WITH THE REAL

- 1 Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*. Cited in the text as *SO*.
- 2 It is at the theorization of this "negativity" that Žižek rightly links the Lacanian notion of the "lack" to the Hegelian notion of "negativity."
- 3 Freud distinguishes between repression (*Verdrängung*) and foreclosure (*Verwerfung*) to distinguish between a negation proper to neurosis and that proper to psychosis. This distinction will be discussed further on this essay in conjunction with the real which, Lacan argues, is produced through foreclosure.
- 4 See Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (London: Verso, 1985).
- 5 The non-teleologically constrained notion of futurity opened up by the necessary incompleteness of any discursive formation within the political field links the project of radical democracy with Derrida's work. Later the question will be taken up, whether and how Žižek's strong criticisms of deconstruction and Derrida in particular, situate his theory in relation to futurity. My argument will be that the grounding of "contingency" in the Lacanian notion of the real produces the social field as a permanent stasis, and that this position aligns him more closely with the Althusserian doctrine of "permanent ideology" than with the notion of incalculable futurity found in the work of Derrida, Drucilla Cornell, and some aspects of the Laclau/Mouffe version of radical democracy.
- 6 See Chantal Mouffe, "Feminism, Citizenship, and Radical Democratic Politics," in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, pp. 369–84.
- 7 See Laclau's illuminating essay, "New Reflections on the Revolution of our Time," in the book with the same name (London: Verso, 1991). Cited in the text as *NRRT*.