A History of *Passing*

Clark Barwick

> Nella Larsen has written a book that will linger in your memory longer than some more pretentious volumes. . . . The best way to enjoy *Passing* is to read it, and then discuss it, and ask about ten of your friends for their version of the ending, and get the ten different versions you are bound to get. But at all events, read it.
>
> – Alice Dunbar-Nelson, *The Washington Eagle*, May 3, 1929

At 90, Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) remains a deeply relevant novel for today's readers. Yet, as Alice Dunbar-Nelson's prescient quote suggests, *Passing*'s meaning, from its publication date onward, was never stable or concrete. In fact, the novel's very brilliance, with its designed ambiguity and invitation for interpretation, has been its capacity to mean a myriad of things to a myriad of readers, now for almost a century. The history of *Passing*—or the story of Larsen's story—then is its own compelling and instructive narrative, as each successive generation has actively and even literally projected its own needs, desires, and anxieties upon Larsen's groundbreaking work. As a result, *Passing*'s history, with its radical swings in reception and reputation, has been as remarkable as that of any work in American literature. Over the past nine decades, *Passing* has gone from critically acclaimed (late 1920s) to totally obscure and out-of-print (1930-1969) to socially relevant but underappreciated (1970s-early 1980s) to massively significant and canonized (mid-1980s-present). Today Larsen's novel is considered a landmark work in the fields of African American and American literature, feminism, queer studies, modernism, interracial literature, and the history of American race. Hundreds of books, scholarly articles, and dissertations have taken the novel as their focus. Yet, even within Larsen's own compact catalogue, *Passing* has never held a fixed role. In the essay that follows, I will trace the rich history of Larsen's novel, arguing that this record of publication and reading provides us with critical insight not just into the shifting interpretation of an important novel but also into how America has understood—and continues to understand, and will continue to understand—race,

gender, sexuality, and ultimately, those who do not easily fit into its prescriptive categories.

The Publication of *Passing* (1929) and the Harlem Renaissance

When *Passing* first appeared on bookshelves in April of 1929, readers probably did not anticipate a new novel from Larsen coming so soon. *Quicksand*, Larsen's first effort, had been published just a year before, and in the wake of its critical success, Larsen drafted her follow-up, the second of three works intended for Alfred A. Knopf, in merely two months (Berlack 16; Larsen "Letter"). Originally titling her novel "Nig," John Bellew's racist nickname for his presumptively white wife Clare Kendry, Larsen sent an advance copy to her friend Carl Van Vechten, who responded with enthusiasm and acted as the go-between with the publisher (Van Vechten 241).[1] (Larsen would dedicate *Passing* to Van Vechten and his wife Fania Marinoff.) Knopf, a top New York firm whose roster included soon-to-be Nobel Prize-winning Thomas Mann as well as Langston Hughes, accepted Larsen's novel by the fall of 1928 (Larsen "Letter"). By May of the following year, *Passing*, selling at two dollars per copy, went through three printings and sold more than 3,500 units (Hutchinson, *In Search* 328). (Notably, the third printing omitted the novel's final paragraph, an edit that would be replicated in future reprints.)[2]

Upon publication, *Passing* looked and felt very different from previous Harlem Renaissance works. In terms of content, Larsen's approach, with her focus on the psychology and interiority of women's lives, her subject matter (decidedly not "propaganda," as Larsen asserted) (Berlack 16), and her writing style set her apart. However, the actual look of *Passing* was also distinct. In recent years, African American-authored books had often featured Aaron Douglas's (or Douglas-inspired) block designs, which layered images of modern blackness (often a jazz musician) upon scenes of "past" blackness (Africa or the jungle). For potential readers, this motif immediately signaled a book's connection to the "Negro Vogue," or the popular burst of white interest in African American culture during the mid-1920s. The front cover of *Passing*, however, called no attention to race. Instead, the dust jacket was imageless, with "Passing" and Larsen's name cleanly framed within a decorative red border. The back cover, which provided a short synopsis ("The heroine of this novel is a beautiful colored girl who crosses the color-line into the white world..."), was equally subdued. Knopf's target audience, at least in terms of the novel's packaging, was wide.

No one—black, white, or other—would be immediately deterred from giving the novel a chance (see fig. 1).

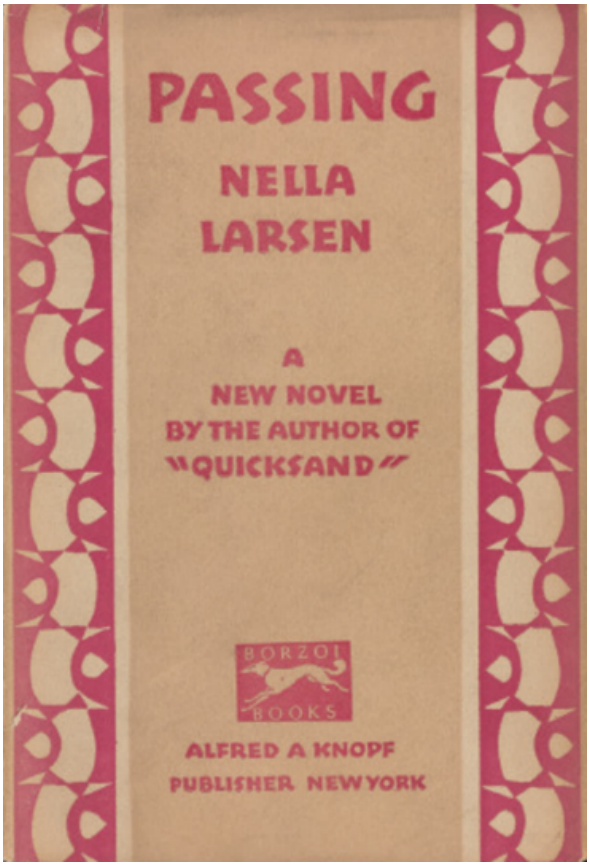

Fig. 1

Knopf first edition of *Passing*, 1929. Courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

The publisher's advertising campaign, on the other hand, was radically different. In May of 1929, Knopf placed a series of eye-catching—and by today's standards, exceptionally racist—advertisements in the *New York Herald Tribune*. One of the first, appearing on May 5, showed a sketch of a man and woman in formal attire above the caption, "I like my ladies darker." The ad misled readers by suggesting that the novel was about an affair between Brian and Clare, and concluded with the warning: "There are thousands of Clare Kendrys and every woman

who 'passes' is a possible storm center" (J24). A second ad, appearing the following week, led with an even more astonishing line. "Hello, Nig!" the ad announced, with another well-dressed couple appearing just above the caption. This time, Bellew was presented as the novel's central character. With the suggestion of domestic violence, the ad reported that the day Bellew discovered Clare to be a "nigger" was the day she "met her death" (10 May: 12). A third ad, relatively tame compared to the previous two, once again showed an urbane couple talking. Beneath this scene was the quote: "In less than five minutes, I knew she was 'fay.'" According to the copy, *Passing* was a "sensational story" that was bound to "startle both Negroes and whites" (17 May: 16). Concerning this last point, it's safe to say that these advertisements were strategically designed to startle *whites* rather than blacks and stir up the kind of buzz that made Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* an immediate bestseller in 1926 (see fig. 2).[3]

Passing was met with mostly positive reviews. *The Saturday Review of Literature* called the novel "powerful in its catastrophe" (Seabrook 1017), and The *New York Times Book Review* declared *Passing* to be "effective and convincing" ("Beyond" 14). The most laudatory assessments came from the African American press. In *The Crisis*, W.E.B. Du Bois hailed *Passing* as "one of the finest novels of the year" (234), and in *Opportunity*, Mary Fleming Labaree commended *Passing* as "a novel of achievement and promise" (255). Alice Dunbar-Nelson went even a step further, celebrating Larsen's novel as a "masterpiece," "so provocative of a whole flood of possibilities" (139). Reviewers were split as to Larsen's writing style—some recognized its modernist brilliance, while others found it too terse or "literary" (Seabrook 1017)—and critics were likewise impressed or confounded by the novel's ending.

Yet, more often than not, reviews of *Passing* veered from focusing on the novel's plotline and became lengthy and self-revelatory disquisitions on "the race problem" and Larsen's role within it. *Passing* often transformed, as in a *New York Sun* review, from a fictional work into one of the "many recent studies of the mixed race situation" ("Dilemma"). Reviewers assumed that the novel was meant to educate whites ("One feels that the tale should have been elaborated upon and lengthened a little to make it truly comprehensible to the average white reader"), and critics were glad to explain Larsen's intentions and beliefs in writing the novel ("Miss Larsen, herself the daughter of a white father and a Negro mother [*sic*], believes that while a Negro often is able to pass successfully as a white person in white society, he is never happy having done so and inevitably feels the urge to return to his own race" [Browser 19]). But more profoundly, reviewers placed extraordinary expectations on *Passing*, suggesting that the novel had the potential to "solve the

Fig. 2

Advertisements for *Passing*, 1929. The images appeared in the *New York Herald Tribune* on May 5, 1929 (left) and May 10, 1929 (right).

[race] problem" (Rennels 2) or "help erase racial prejudice" (Griffin 6). Nonetheless, *Passing* was widely discussed, even if Larsen herself was surely bewildered by some of the assessments.

In addition to the high praise of Du Bois and Dunbar-Nelson, Larsen's African American literary contemporaries—those who would eventually comprise the "Harlem Renaissance" such as Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White—lauded *Passing*.[4] (One notable exception was Wallace Thurman, who felt the novel was filled with "ill managed puppets" [119].) In the wake of *Passing*'s "sensational" success, Larsen soon became the first African American woman

to receive a prestigious Guggenheim fellowship, which would allow her to travel abroad as she worked on her anticipated next novel ("Wins" 3).[5]

The Disappearance of *Passing*: 1931-1969

In 1930, *Passing* appeared on *The Crisis*'s "most important books" list for the previous year ("Negro" 51). Yet, by the end of the decade, Larsen and her novel would largely disappear from assessments of African American writing: an absence that endured for the next forty years. *Passing*, which had been so widely discussed—and deemed important, especially by prominent African American intellectuals—dropped suddenly from sight.

The traditional "disappearance" narrative places responsibility on Larsen. In 1930, Larsen was accused of plagiarizing her story "Sanctuary," and though she denied the allegations, the trauma of the experience supposedly diminished her desire to write. Larsen also went through a messy divorce in the 1930s, which was preceded by public coverage of her husband's infidelity. The failure of her marriage and her related depression are often cited as the primary reasons explaining why Larsen quit publishing. In the wake of these two events, Larsen, as the story often goes, became a "mystery woman" by design, dropping out of African American society, moving to the Lower East Side, returning to nursing, and misleading her friends about her whereabouts. Although George Hutchinson has demonstrated that each aspect of this narrative is far more complicated than usually presented (and is sometimes inaccurate), these assumptions about why Larsen disappeared continue.[6]

If Larsen's own decisions impacted how she and her fiction were immediately remembered, there were other significant critical forces at work. By the late 1930s, a literary sea change had occurred, and "Negro" literature now meant something different than it did just a decade prior. In *To Make a Poet Black* (1939), Saunders Redding now defined "Negro" writing as literature *by* African Americans (rather than just *about* African Americans) and as a "literature of necessity" (3), focused on "Negro" themes. This stricter understanding of the field—which was endorsed by Richard Wright and others demanding social realism in African American fiction—was difficult on the Harlem Renaissance in general, and especially on Larsen. *Passing* foregrounded interracial themes, racial crossing, and ambiguity. It was not a protest novel. Moreover, Larsen had a gender problem. While the Renaissance as a whole was characterized and then dismissed as effeminate—Wright

famously maligned 1920s writers as "decorous ambassadors" in their "knee-pants of servility" who went "a-begging to white America" ("Blueprint" 53)—women writers, whose forms and choice of subject matter often did not fit easily within the new parameters and expectations of African American writing, were particularly disregarded by male critics. There was simply no room for Larsen or *Passing* in this new framework.

Over the next few decades, one could watch as Larsen and her fiction were written out of the Harlem Renaissance. In his massive *The Negro Genius: A New Appraisal of the Achievement of the American Negro in Literature and the Fine Arts* (1940), critic Benjamin Brawley relegated Larsen to the category of "Other Writers" and devoted just three sentences to her work (229). Melvin Tolson, who would become influential among African American letters, omitted Larsen from *The Harlem Group of Writers* (1940), his Columbia masters thesis that was one of the first histories of the Harlem Renaissance and produced from first-person interviews. Despite its claims to "comprehensiveness" (v), Sterling Brown, Arthur Davis, and Ulysses Lee's landmark, 1082-page anthology *The Negro Caravan* (1941) glanced over Larsen, merely noting in just one sentence that her work was concerned with upper-class African American life and gave "undue importance" (142) to the subject of passing. In *Negro Voices in American Fiction* (1948), Hugh Gloster acknowledged *Passing* as a significant contribution, but then reduced the novel to a story of how "the Negro-white hybrid frequently fails to attain the satisfactory harmony between his desires and his status in society" (141). Robert Bone's *The Negro Novel in America* (1958), a work that would influence a generation of African American literary criticism, argued that Larsen was "among those who lag[ged] behind" (97). In his brief reading of *Passing*, Bone concluded: "Unfortunately, a false and shoddy denouement prevents the novel from rising above mediocrity" (102).

By the 1960s, interest in—and even knowledge of—Nella Larsen was at an all-time low. In 1964, Larsen died alone in her Second Avenue apartment, and her death went unnoticed by national, local, and even the African American press.[7] Yet, African American literature, amidst the protests and riots of the Civil Rights era, had already moved on from the Harlem Renaissance. The rise of Black nationalism gave birth to the Black Arts Movement, which saw itself as the "founding Fathers and Mothers" (Baraka "Foreword" xxiii) of Black culture. While James Smethurst has shown that Black Arts writers actually had deep points of connection to the Harlem Renaissance, it is not difficult to see why *Passing* was not embraced.[8] BAM's ideology and aesthetics celebrated a "Black" authenticity that was wholly separate from white America and

could not tolerate a "HalfWhite" (in Amiri Baraka's terms) ("Poem" 120) author such as Larsen or a text like *Passing*. There was a class component, too. Since the 1920s, the concept of passing had carried a middle-class connotation. (In Claude McKay's *Banjo*, working-class protagonists Jake and Banjo do not engage in the "hopeless, enervating talk of the chances of 'passing white'" common to the "colored intelligentsia" [321].) Baraka, writing in his essay "The Myth of a 'Negro Literature'" (1963), explicitly associated "middle class" with "white," and blamed writers similar to Larsen for cultivating "*any* mediocrity, as long as that mediocrity was guaranteed to prove to America, and recently to the world at large, that they were not really who they were, i.e. Negroes" (20). There was also the issue of *Passing*'s form. The Black Arts Movement valued performative genres—or as Larry Neal put it, the literature of "a *living* reality" (654)—such as drama, poetry, and music. *Passing*, as a psychological novel, held no utility. Ultimately for BAM, Larsen's novel was conservative, genteel, and antiquated.

Yet, another paradigm shift was on the way. Despite the Black Arts Movement's complicated relationship with earlier African American writing, academic and popular interest in the Harlem Renaissance actually exploded during the late 1960s. The broader Civil Rights movement had brought new interest in African American history and culture, and the emergent academic field of Afro-American/Black Studies, which like American Studies and Critical Ethnic Studies resulted from campus organizing and protests, instituted the Harlem Renaissance (known to this point as the "Negro Renaissance") as foundational to its curriculum. As a result, Harlem Renaissance texts began to rapidly come back into print—Jean Toomer's *Cane* was one of the first in 1967—as a new generation of scholars and popular readers discovered black writing from the 1920s and 1930s.

The Reemergence of *Passing*: 1969-1985

It was in this historical moment, after forty years, that *Passing* reappeared. In 1957, Knopf had failed to renew the copyright for *Passing*, and publishers now took advantage of this lapse.[9] The two editions that were soon published, however—one by Arno Press in 1969 and another by Collier Books in 1971—could not have been more different.

The Arno edition, with its stark two-toned, black-and-white cover and its sturdy hardback binding, was designed for university and public libraries. Arno, whose majority owner was *The New York Times*, specialized in returning "forgotten" books to print, and in 1968, launched its "The American Negro: His History and Literature" series under auspic-

es of "set[ting] the record straight." As a brochure for the series noted, "the Negro past has for the most part been suppressed, neglected or distorted . . . Wherever American history has been made, the Negro was there. But you'd never know it. Most of his contributions have been left out of our schoolbooks, and his writings kept off library shelves. The classics written over the past century by and about Negroes have been forgotten . . . until now" (Arno). The "Afro-American Culture" sub-series included Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Zora Neale Hurston, Rudolph Fisher, W.E.B. Du Bois, and made the Harlem Renaissance instantly available for the first time in decades.

Aimed as Arno was at educating "all Americans" (Arno), the *Passing* edition opened with an introduction situating Larsen's novel in the context of African American literary history. "From the beginning," William H. Robinson, a Howard University English professor, wrote, taking nothing for granted, "the black woman has played an important role in the developments and literary expressions of American Negro culture" (i). Robinson proceeded with a lineage of black women writers from Lucy Terry to Margaret Walker, and he then detailed the "passing" tradition, or as he put it, the history of those texts concerned with "fair-skinned Negroes abandoning their black identities and 'passing' for white people" (ii). Ultimately, only two of the introduction's six pages focused on Larsen or her novel. *Passing*, Robinson concluded, was distinct from prior passing novels as Irene's difficulties were "quite ordinary" domestic issues rather than "the reasons that vex the usual mulatto" (v). He added that the book's "authentic insight" came from "Miss Larsen's own parentage," having "a Danish mother and a Negro father" (vi).

The 1971 Collier edition, in contrast, was explicitly meant to be read as a "Black" novel in a time of American racial unrest. Designed for a mass audience, the paperback communicated urgency, with "*Passing*" blazed in red above a collage of everyday African Americans. Just under the title, the cover alerted the potential reader that *Passing* was "the tragic story of a beautiful light-skinned mulatto passing for white in high society, who sought dangerously—and too late—to claim her black heritage. A searing novel of racial conflict in the 1930s [*sic*]." The novel's back cover continued with this insistence on blackness, describing Clare Kendry as "an alien black soul" who "yearned for the black experience." Larsen herself was now referred to as a "black" writer who had crafted a "provocative spellbinder of social tragedy and violent, meaningless death" (see fig. 3).

In his introduction, Hoyt Fuller, a Black Arts Movement writer and current editor of *Black World*, attempted to claim *Passing* as a "Black" text and connect the novel with recent developments. Black America,

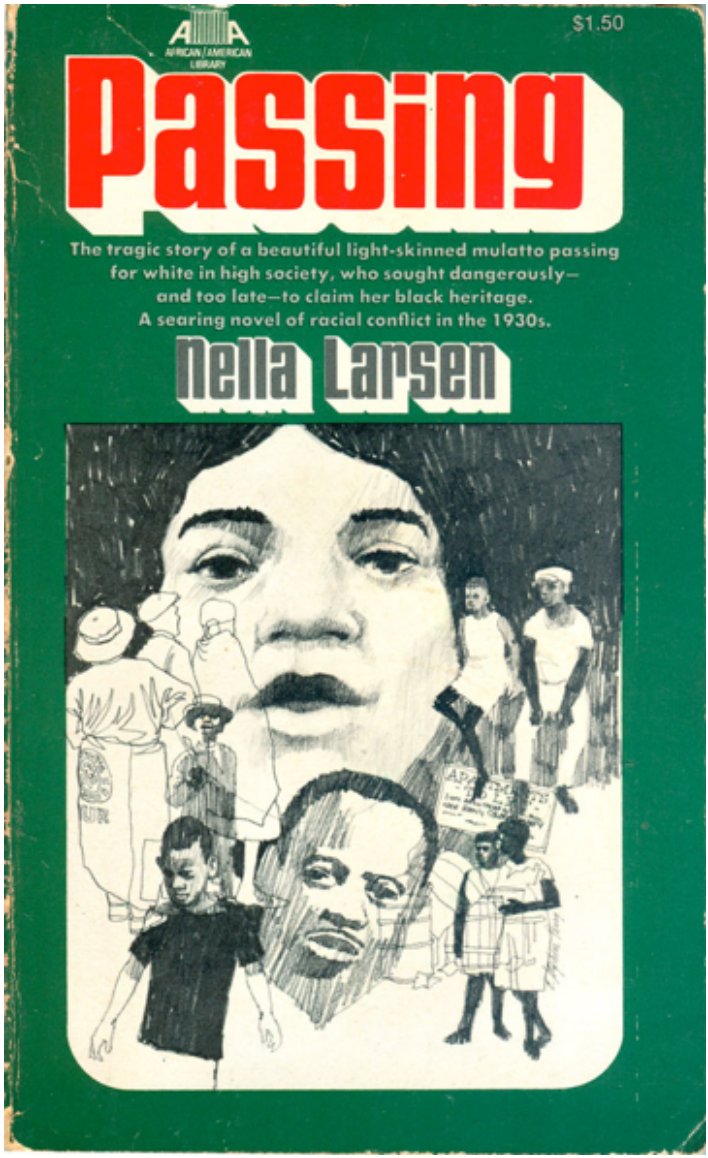

Fig. 3

Collier, 1971

Fuller began, was in the midst of "the New Black Renaissance," and young Black writers, intellectuals, and teachers were "rediscover[ing]" the Harlem Renaissance, whose writers they "avidly read, quoted, and even personally revered" (13). For too long, literary historians, observ-

ing "from without, rather than within the Black community," had reduced *Passing*'s "peccadilloes of mulattoes" (11) as throwing back to an earlier era. Rather, Nella Larsen was a Black novelist—who like her characters had "gone off to Europe for a try at rejecting her Blackness, only to return in the end to wrap it closely around her again" (12)—and *Passing* "held relevance for all Black people" (15) by foregrounding the accomplishments of the upper-class and giving "inspiration and a sense of pride to the masses" (16).

However, as Fuller's introduction proceeded, he seemed less and less convinced of *Passing*'s Blackness. Larsen's novel, he wrote, was actually an "aggressively bourgeois" (18) narrative about "society Negroes" (16). Her fictive world was "unreal," as "artificial and ultimately lifeless as a glamorous stage set," and none of her characters were "admirable." In fact, Larsen was guilty of dwelling on "white" traits—skin color, names, demeanors, interests—of her upper-class characters while skipping over descriptions of her "darker," "ordinary" (19) participants. Her most prominent African American character, Irene Redfield, was in fact "a casual passer" (20) and refused to really relate to her race. Fuller even coded Larsen's writing as "white," falling "somewhere between the easy worldliness of a Katherine Mansfield and the deliberate scene-setting of a mediocre home magazine storyteller . . . rather banal, though . . . always competent" (18). Ultimately, the value of *Passing* was how it portrayed the "illuminating side-drama" of "near-white" African Americans who "sought their own peculiar accommodation to the laws which regulated their lives, and in doing so could only cast their lot in ultimate psychological terms with all the other millions who also suffered under the imposed restrictions" (23-24).

The 1970s brought about major critical assessments of the Harlem Renaissance, and while Larsen received more recognition than during the previous decades, *Passing* was met with a reluctance to see the novel's complexity. In his seminal *Harlem Renaissance* (1971), a monograph that popularized the period and was a finalist for the National Book Award, Nathan Huggins praised Larsen yet found her fiction to be flawed. Initiating a trend among scholars that would endure for two decades, Huggins deemed *Passing* to be Larsen's "lesser novel." Huggins continually pathologized Larsen's depiction of race—e.g., *Passing* "treats the schizophrenia which results from racial dualism"—and ultimately found the novel's conclusion to be "perfunctory and entirely unsatisfactory" (159). Hiroko Sato, writing in Arna Bontemps's *The Harlem Renaissance Remembered* (1972), echoed Huggins. "Compared to [her] first novel, the second one, *Passing*, is a slight book. Though cleverly written, she failed to keep the thematic unity" (88). In *From the Dark Tower* (1974), Arthur Davis again noted that *Passing* was "not

as good a novel as *Quicksand*," and argued that its subject matter would not be "understood at all by young blacks, particularly those who believe in black nationalism" (97). Margaret Perry was even less generous. In *Silence to the Drums* (1976), she lamented: "Even though the narrative moves smoothly . . . the story itself is inconsequential . . . and again (surely a Larsen weakness), unconvincing" (77). Amritjit Singh, in *Novels of the Harlem Renaissance* (1976), was frustrated by the novel's ambiguities and second-guessed Larsen's narrative approach. "It is unfortunate," he wrote, "that Larsen—who exhibits the sensitivity and literary skill to match the challenge of her theme—does not choose to deal with passing from Clare's point of view, exposing the many subtle shades of feeling in the life of a woman who chooses to cross the color line" (100). And in his tour-de-force *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (1981), David Levering Lewis hailed *Quicksand* ("one of the three best novels of the Renaissance" [231]) but completely skipped over *Passing*.

For an up-and-coming generation of Black feminists, this dismissiveness did not sit well. *Passing*, for these scholars, was an intricate, deeply meaningful work that had been marginalized by a mostly male critical establishment in favor of a mostly male Harlem Renaissance. Claudia Tate, in one of the first significant challenges to this orthodoxy, demanded a reassessment:

> Critics, of course, hastily comment on Larsen's skill as they either celebrate other Harlem Renaissance writers or look ahead to the socially conscious writers of the 30s. Few address the psychological dimension of Larsen's work. They see instead a writer who chose to escape the American racial climate in order to depict trite melodramas about egocentric black women passing for white. This critical viewpoint has obscured Larsen's talent and relegated *Passing* to the status of a minor novel of the Harlem Renaissance. But Larsen's craft deserves more attention than this position attracts. *Passing* demands that we recognize its rightful place among important works of literary subtlety and psychological ambiguity. (146)

For Tate, *Passing*'s perceived "social pretentiousness" (142) was an "intentional stylistic device" (146) rather than a defect, and the novel's ambiguity—and its potential for multiple interpretations, especially at the end—attested to the author's "consummate skill" rather than her deficiency as a writer. The recovery of *Passing* was under way. Mary Helen Washington and Cheryl Wall made major contributions to this effort, and Larsen's work figured prominently in Gloria T. Hull, Patricia

Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith's signal Black Women's Studies reader *But Some of Us Are Brave* (1982).[10]

Passing, Canonical Ascendance, and the Era of Identity Politics: 1986-2019

From this Black feminist recovery came the most widely read and influential reissue of *Passing* to date. In 1986, Rutgers University Press brought out a tandem edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, edited by Deborah McDowell. This volume, with its iconic James Van Der Zee image of three African American flappers on the cover, was part of Rutgers's "American Women Writers" series, and was designed, as the first Larsen reissue to include scholarly notes, to be taught. In her introduction, McDowell situated Larsen's fiction among the complex field of African American women's writing, underscoring the pressures that a novelist like Larsen, writing in the liberating 1920s but with the legacy of Slavery not far in the past, faced in representing black female sexuality. Yet, in her analysis, McDowell pushed beyond heteronormative readings that located Irene's frustration as emanating from Clare's perceived pursuit of Brian. In fact, the "sexless" marriages of *Passing*—and the racial framework of the novel altogether—were actually covers for the "idea of a lesbian relationship" (xxiii) between Irene and Clare. "Though, superficially, Irene's is an account of Clare's passing for white and related issues of racial identity and loyalty," McDowell wrote, "underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene's awakening sexual desire for Clare" (xxvi). Offering copious evidence to support this argument, McDowell concluded that Larsen was a trailblazer for later writers like Ann Allen Shockley, Gayl Jones, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Ntozake Shange, and Gloria Naylor, who could "name" the eroticism that Larsen's era prevented (xxxi). Rutgers's reissue of *Quicksand* and *Passing* was met with immense interest. By 1997, the tandem edition had sold 70,000 copies and was the press's top-seller (Schwabsky NJ1). McDowell's volume would be reprinted almost every year for two decades, with the nineteenth printing arriving in 2009.

In short order, scholars from a range of disciplines and theoretical perspectives began to engage *Passing* and produce innovative criticism that opened Larsen's novel up beyond its traditional spheres. One such landscape-changing example was Judith Butler's "Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge" (1993), an essay that would become foundational to queer and performance studies and introduce Larsen's novel to a range of new readers. Butler argued that *Passing*

demanded its audience to understand racial, gender, and sexual identities as intersectional and mutually constitutive, thereby undermining essentialized and privileged identities. With the advent of "identity politics," Larsen amassed new popularity, and her works became central to a range of fields.

After decades of denial, Larsen finally and indisputably joined the Harlem Renaissance canon as one of its "classic" writers (Andrews). In 1994, *Passing* appeared in *The Portable Harlem Renaissance Reader*, one of the first anthologies solely dedicated to the period. Within African American literature, Larsen's fiction was featured in the first *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (1997), and her writing was situated prominently in Cheryl Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995). For the first time, Larsen also began to be widely recognized as an *American* writer. In 1990, *Passing* was anthologized in *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, and in *The Oxford Book of Women's Writing in the United States* (1995) and other such volumes, Larsen was now acknowledged as one of America's most important woman writers—something that was not always a given, even recently among feminists. *Passing* was foregrounded in Henry Abelove, Michele Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin's *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader* (1993), and scholars of American modernism also began to reconsider Larsen as a major writer.[11] Just a decade earlier, all of this would have been inconceivable.

Such newfound attention also generated interest in Larsen's own story. For decades, Larsen had been labeled a "mystery woman"—a characterization that Larsen never disabused—even though many of her major details were never difficult to learn. Headnotes, forewords, and even journal articles frequently got her facts wrong, and Larsen's "unknown-ness" became a standard and even seductive part of her literary persona. However, in Larsen's case, these gaps and errors particularly mattered, as scholars turned to her origins—especially her parentage and racial background—to make larger claims about *Passing*. Beginning in the 1990s, biographers began to seriously consider Larsen's life, and this research had a significant impact on the reception of Larsen's novel. In 1993, Charles Larson published *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer & Nella Larsen*, and one year later, Thadious Davis brought out *Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance*. These two works, along with George Hutchinson's definitive *In Search of Nella Larsen* (2006), revealed the complexity of Larsen's life and provided proper context for reassessing her fiction. Noticeably, Larsen's image—usually one of the few extant photos of her shot by Carl Van Vechten in 1932—became more prominent. (The cover of Charles Larson's *An Intimation of Things Distant: The Collected Fiction of Nella*

Larsen was an early example of this.) Although for years critics had conflated Larsen's story with Irene and Clare's, this invitation was now clearer than ever.

In addition to these biographies, one of the greatest signs of Larsen's growing significance—and her transcendence from "African American" or even "American" author—was her inclusion in the Penguin Classics and the Modern Library "Classics" series. When Penguin published *Passing* in 1997, Larsen's name now appeared alongside the most revered writers in the history of the English language—Dickens, James, the Brontës—and she became the first African American woman featured in the series. Notably, the Penguin edition was the first standalone edition of *Passing* to appear in almost three decades, signaling a shift in how Larsen's novel was regarded as its own significant work that no longer needed to be paired with the more "accomplished" *Quicksand*. The reissue was designed to feel like a sophisticated Penguin Classic—Archibald Motley's graceful oil-on-canvas portrait "The Octoroon Girl" (1925) appeared on its cover, framed by the familiar Penguin blue-green spine and back cover. In her introduction, Thadious Davis declared Larsen the "premiere novelist of the New Negro movement" (xxxii) and situated *Passing* as emerging from "the golden days of black cultural consciousness" (ix). Larsen's novel, Davis wrote, "seiz[ed] control of racial representation and countering racial stereotypes," thereby redefining "the black urban novel as equally a woman's textual space, as a woman's genre reclaimed from the night life and set loose in all its possibilities" (xxx). Met with strong sales, Penguin soon published its second edition of *Passing* in 2003, again with Davis's introduction but now with Palmer Hayden's provocative "The Subway" (1930) on its cover. In this new image, a light-skinned flapper stands in a subway car amidst diverse company and peers with one eye over the shoulder of white businessman who is reading a newspaper.

The Modern Library edition, published in 2002, also hailed *Passing* as one of the "World's Best Books." Yet, this version was distinct from Penguin's reissues in several important ways. The front cover was a modern photograph—a striking blue-scale image of a woman (Clare?) looking seductively into the camera—and this edition included a "Reading Group Guide," demonstrating the publisher's desire to reach an even more popular audience. However, in her introduction, acclaimed playwright Ntozake Shange also emphasized *Passing*'s important place in "an America whose biracial population is growing" (xv-xvi). Larsen's novel, as Mae Henderson elaborated in her critical introduction, was now appreciated as a major text within the field of interracial literature, rather than only (or primarily) as an African American novel uniquely focused on a specific concept and social strata. In

Neither Black nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature (1997), Werner Sollors asserted that *Passing* was a "virtual encyclopedia" (276) enumerating "a whole repertoire of recurrent thematic aspects in interracial literature" (24). And *Passing*'s role within this increasingly important field wasn't purely an academic matter. In just a decade, Barack Obama, whose background closely resembled Larsen's, would become President of the United States. Like Larsen, Obama had connections to Chicago, was the child of a white mother and a black immigrant father, had lived around the world, and was a gifted author whose writing interrogated the experiences of being biracial in America. During Obama's campaign and presidency, many of the very issues that Larsen dealt with—namely, racial authenticity and race loyalty—became front-and-center in American culture. *Passing*, once again, took on a new resonance.

In 1997, amidst this rapid rise to canonical status, Larsen was once again embroiled in a bizarre plagiarism scandal. On this occasion, however, Larsen was not the accused. During the writing of Steven Spielberg's *Amistad*, a film that was itself a controversial representation of African American history, screenwriter David Franzoni allegedly lifted content from African American novelist Barbara Chase-Riboud's bestselling fiction (Weinraub "Filmmakers" E1). Chase-Riboud sued, and during the countersuit, Chase-Riboud was herself accused of plagiarizing. Erika Page, an African Studies major at New York University, had identified lines from *Passing* in Chase-Riboud's novel *The President's Daughter* (1994) while writing an undergraduate paper.[12] Aware of the *Amistad* case, Page contacted DreamWorks, Spielberg's production company, which then used this revelation as a basis for its lawsuit (Waxman F2). The controversy made the front page of the *New York Times* (under the headline "Writer Who Cried Plagiarism Used Passages She Didn't Write" [Loke A1]), and in a *Washington Post* follow-up, Chase-Riboud denied any plagiarism. Rather, she insisted that her narrative technique, participating in the African American literary tradition, involved "weav[ing] documents and documentary material into the narrative of the novel, into the fiction" (Waxman F2). This entire episode echoed Larsen's own plagiarism scandal from the 1930s, and again raised questions about literary ownership and "racialized" storytelling, especially when it involved the craft of an African American woman writer. Though Chase-Riboud successfully settled her suit against DreamWorks, future editions of *The President's Daughter* included a reader's guide that acknowledged that the novel was "in rich dialogue" (471) with *Passing*.[13]

During the 2000s, scholars continued to uncover new details about Larsen—George Hutchinson's *In Search of Nella Larsen* (2006) was

nominated for a Pulitzer Prize—and by this point, hundreds of books, journal articles, and dissertations had taken *Passing* as their subject. Out of this moment came the Norton Critical Edition of *Passing* (2007), edited by Carla Kaplan and by far the most comprehensive to date. Whereas earlier editions, either explicitly or implicitly, endorsed a particular ideological approach or reading of Larsen's novel, Kaplan's edition was inclusive, providing not only an archive of supplemental documents but also full-text criticism from a range of scholarly perspectives. Among its 546 pages—of which Larsen's actual novel represented only a slim portion—the volume included reviews of *Passing*, contemporary newspaper accounts, Larsen's letters, personal documents (e.g. her 1929 Guggenheim application), and writings, as well as "passing" fiction from before and during the Harlem Renaissance. While readers could now locate much of the primary-source history of *Passing* between these two covers, *Passing* itself was becoming "evidence" in histories on American race. One such example, Allyson Hobbs's excellent *A Chosen Exile: A History of Racial Passing in American Life* (2014), turned extensively to Larsen's novel to investigate the often invisible history of passing.

If Larsen's popularity had exploded in the United States over the past two decades, another noteworthy *Passing* trend was on the rise: her novel began to appear in translation all over the world beginning in 2010. Swiss publisher Dörlemann brought out *Seitenwechsel* ("Switching Sides"), the first German language edition. Two French editions, *Clair-obscur* ("Chiaroscuro") and *Passer la ligne* ("Crossing the Line"), were published. The Spanish imprint Editorial Contraseña introduced *Claroscuro* ("Chiaroscuro"), and *Pasar* would soon follow. In no time, Arabic and Hebrew editions joined previously translated Danish, Italian, and Japanese versions.[14] No longer was English a prerequisite for reading *Passing*.

Yet, the covers and packaging of these new editions, just as with the English editions of the previous twenty years, varied widely and targeted very different audiences. The German edition, for instance, featured a striking black-and-white photograph of a young black girl, with her back to the camera, lugging (strangling?) a white female doll nearly her own size. The image was actually affixed to the hardback and set against a beautiful lavender background (see fig. 4). The Spanish edition, far more inviting, presented cartoon-like renderings of Irene and Clare, posed side-by-side in colorful print dresses, beaded necklaces, and heels (see fig. 5). The most arresting cover appeared on the Arabic edition of *Passing*. Here, a single oversized face, with large eyes, chalk-white skin, red eyelids and lips, and a billowing Afro, stared back at the potential reader. The starkness of the woman's expression commu-

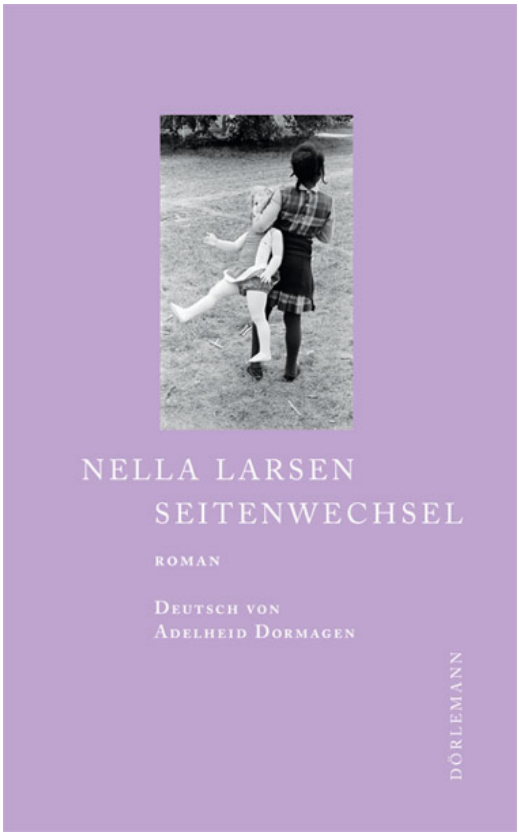

Fig. 4

German edition, Dörlemann Verlag, 2011. Courtesy of Dörlemann Verlag.

nicated, depending on one's interpretation, either searing contempt or utter sadness (see fig. 6). The Hebrew edition, in contrast, reached back to Archibald Motley's oil painting "Cocktails" (1926), although notably cropping out the African American butler in the original (see fig. 7). Some editions of *Passing* attempted to situate the novel for local audiences. The front and back covers of the Spanish *Claroscuro*, for example, made extensive note of Larsen as "amiga de García Lorca." Some translated editions appeared with extensive introductions. Others presented *Passing* without context.

So why was *Passing* just now being translated? As Brent Edwards demonstrates in *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003), Harlem Renaissance print culture was widely translated (and mis-translated) during and after the 1920s. In the case of Europe, Larsen certainly knew the conti-

Fig. 5

Spanish edition, Editorial Contraseña, 2011. Cover design by Sara Morante. Courtesy of Editorial Contraseña.

nent and the continent knew her, as she had spent formative years in Denmark and then returned for two years as a Guggenheim fellow in the 1930s. Both of her novels, in their plots but also in their very language, engage with cultures beyond the United States. One possibility is that Larsen's international readership simply came to her novel through English editions. In 1989, British publisher Serpent's Tail issued a tandem edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, and prior to this, copies of the Knopf edition, as well as subsequent English-language editions, almost certainly made their way overseas. Yet, some publishers were likely deterred from translating Larsen's novel because the concept of passing, as presented in the novel, is so specifically American

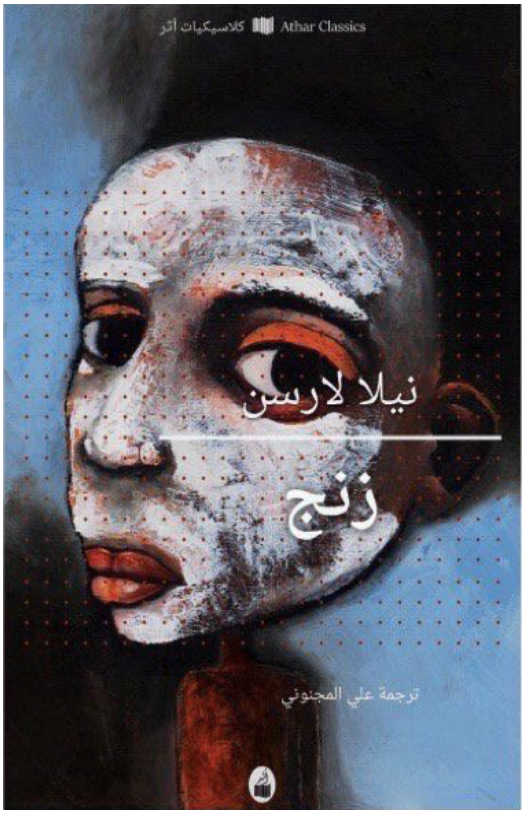

Fig. 6

Arabic edition, Dar Athar, 2016. Courtesy of Dar Athar.

that it would not translate easily to foreign audiences. There are other possibilities, too. Historically, as *Passing* destabilizes race and undermines essentialized concepts of blackness, Larsen's novel would have been less useful to pan-African activists seeking diasporic continuity. Nevertheless, *Passing* now seems ready for translation anywhere. In fact, Larsen is now even claimed by Danish literary scholars as a "dansk-amerikansk forfatter" ("Danish-American author") (*Dobbeltliv* 199).

In 2018, Penguin Classics published its third and latest installment of *Passing*, with packaging that resonated with the current moment. Its cover, an update of the 1997 edition, featured a close-up re-rendering of Motley's "The Octoroon Girl," except this time with the woman's eyes downcast. This more somber interpretation met the mood of many Americans, one year after the inauguration of Donald Trump and following a year of his attacks on people of color, women, im-

migrants, queer and transgendered people (see figs. 8-9). While the back cover's language reflected specific cultural change—Clare and Irene were now "light-skinned," their gatherings were "African American," and their relationship was explicitly "homoerotic"—the book itself was situated in the present, as a "powerful, thrilling, and tragic tale about the fluidity of racial identity that continues to resonate today." In her introduction, Emily Bernard again connected the past with the present, arguing that both Larsen and Clare Kendry "would have had easier lives as mixed-race women in the twenty-first century." Bernard pointed to the inclusion of new categories on the 2000 U.S. Census that allowed individuals, for the first time in history, to identify with more than one race. "Already, the structure of the new census has enabled people with complex racial backgrounds to more aptly define themselves. Unfortunately, the script had already been written for Clare . . . [who] paid for the crime of her hunger not only to defy racial convention but also the customs of gender, as well" (xxii). Bernard's edition of *Passing* garnered wide publicity, and its cover was chosen for the front of Penguin's Spring 2018 catalogue, which introduced more than 400 new titles.[15]

Fig. 7
Hebrew edition, Am Oved 2017. Cover design by Doreet Scharfstein. Courtesy of Am Oved.

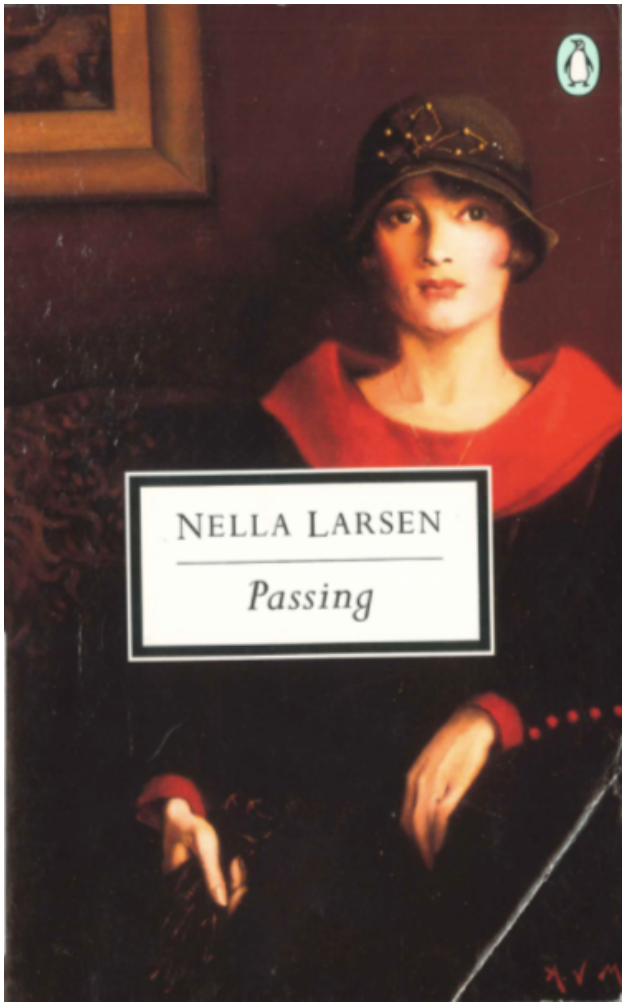

Fig. 8

Penguin, 1997. Courtesy of Random House.

Passing at 90: What's Next?

Ninety years later, the story of *Passing* continues. In March 2018, the *New York Times* righted a longstanding wrong. Almost fifty-four years after Larsen's death, the newspaper finally corrected its 1964 oversight and published a much deserved, extended obituary for Larsen (Wertheim F5). The obit, which was part of the "Overlooked" series honoring scores of "remarkable women" whose deaths the paper had

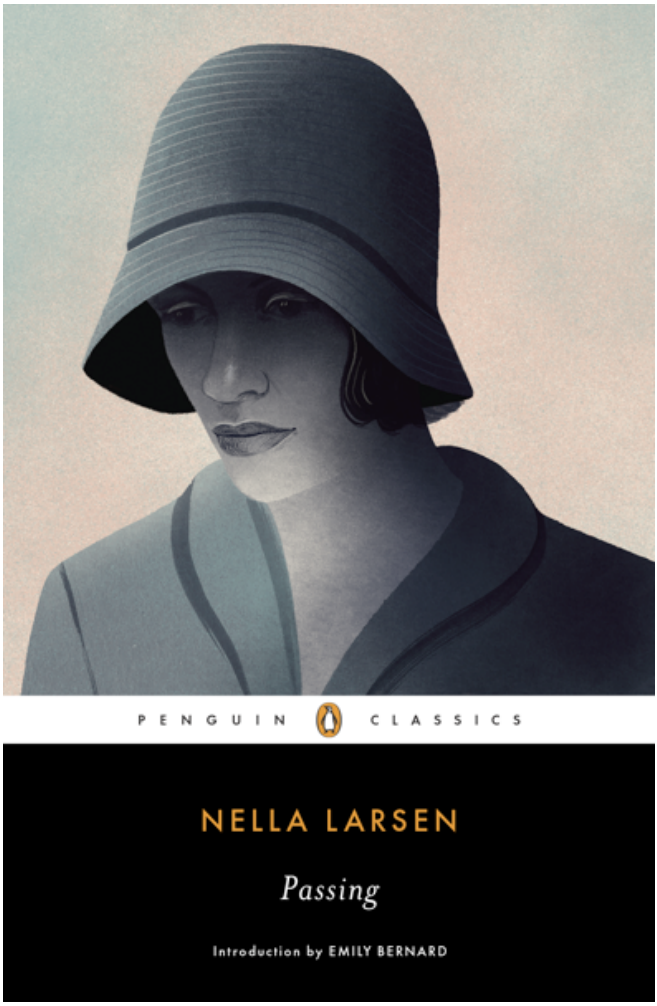

Fig. 9

Penguin, 2018. Courtesy of Random House.

originally ignored, did more than just rectify an initial slight. The *Times*'s eulogy, appearing in both print and prominently on its website, called wide attention to Larsen and introduced (or re-introduced) her work to a mass audience. This spotlight, coupled with the press for Bernard's edition of *Passing*, once again placed Larsen's career and her novel in the popular consciousness.[16]

With all of this renewed interest, what will *Passing*'s next chapter hold? If the past is any predictor of the future—and if we take Alice

Dunbar-Nelson's "ten different versions" from "ten of your friends" (139) comment seriously—*Passing* will continue to mean many things to many readers. For scholars, the digital age will continue to mediate and transform how we understand Larsen's novel. *Passing* certainly warrants the "Digital Thoreau" treatment, or an interactive and multimedia experience where readers can access the text of the novel alongside primary, archival, and contextual documents including images, correspondence, past editions, and commentary. While this would be indispensible for current and emergent Larsen scholars, such a *Passing* platform would also be invaluable as a teaching tool. There is a need for this, as recent scholarship has focused on the ways in which to teach Larsen and *Passing*.[17]

For general readers, there will continue to be more options than ever for encountering *Passing*. With the novel's copyright now fully expired, anyone anywhere can produce their own edition of *Passing*. Hence, over the past fifteen years, there has been a proliferation of inexpensive paperback versions flooding the market.[18] These re-issues usually feature a vague image of a woman on their covers—one Martino Publishing edition foregrounds a barefoot woman holding a flag (?)— and unlike their scholarly counterparts, these slim trade copies frequently present the novel without introduction or notes. Similarly, numerous publishers now offer e-text editions of *Passing* (sometimes for free), and there are at least two audiobook versions available.[19] There is a cinematic version of *Passing* in the works—Rebecca Hall's directorial debut was greenlit in 2018 and is scheduled to star Ruth Negga and Tessa Thompson (Bradbury)—and according to U.S. copyright records, four other scripts have been registered over the years.[20] With all of these new points-of-contact, Larsen's work has inspired countless websites, blog posts, and "fan" commentary. Only a cursory social media search reveals just how much *Passing* continues to mean to readers around the world. As access to *Passing* expands, this sort of reader engagement will almost certainly flourish.

In his 1929 review of *Passing*, W.E.B. Du Bois asserted that in "another generation" readers would have "great difficulty" comprehending such a "petty, silly matter" as passing, which he deemed "of no real importance" (234). On the one hand, Du Bois was correct—in the strictest racial sense, we encounter few stories today about African Americans strategically crossing the color line. (In fact, most popular stories of passing now seem to involve the opposite, with whites seeking to become "black.") On the other hand, the impulse to defy, avoid, or ignore discrimination—be it on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, class, religion, nationality, ability, or immigration status—is unfortunately still understandable. For this reason, *Passing*, as it interrogates

what it means to belong, what it means to be artificially excluded, and what it means to exist in the middle-space, will likely continue to resonate with new generations, even as future readers engage with Larsen's masterpiece in new and unexpected ways.

Notes

1. Biographer Thadious Davis writes that "Nig" was "a clear nod" to Van Vechten's novel *Nigger Heaven* (*Nella Larsen* 226).

2. See John K. Young's *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature*, pp. 37-64.

3. According to entries in his daybooks, Van Vechten was very involved in this sensationalist marketing campaign (241).

4. For specific references, see Hughes (Kaplan, ed. *Passing* 167), Johnson (275), and White (Davis 295).

5. Extended accounts of *Passing*'s initial publication and reception can be found in Davis pp. 287-330, Hutchinson, *In Search* pp. 294-331, and Hutchinson, "Representing" pp. 47-66.

6. For the disappearance narrative, see Larsen's biographical headnote in the most recent *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2014).

7. There was only one public announcement of Larsen's death. On April 7, 1964, the *New York Times* published a brief listing but no detailed obituary.

8. See James Smethurst, *The Black Arts Movement: Literary Nationalism in the 1960s and 1970s* (2005).

9. In 1929, Alfred A. Knopf copyrighted *Passing* and held the rights to the novel for the next twenty-eight years. To the best of my research, Knopf did not renew the copyright in 1957, when it could have been extended for another 28 years. When writing her Larsen biography in the 1990s, Davis was told by Knopf that no copyright records had been kept (xvii).

10. See Mary Helen Washington, "Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance." *Ms.*, December 1980, pp. 44-50, and Cheryl Wall, "Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels." *Black American Literature Forum*, Spring-Summer 1986, pp. 97-111.

11. Concerning American modernism, see Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995) and Walter Benn Michaels's *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995).

12. Page recognized the lines: "It's funny about passing. We disapprove of it, yet condone it. It excites our contempt, and yet some admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but protect it" (*The President's* Daughter [2009] 195). In *Passing*, the similar lines read: "It's funny about 'passing.' We

disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it" (Knopf [1929] 97-98).

13. Chase-Riboud's case ended up better than Larsen's, as she settled her original ten million dollar copyright infringement suit against DreamWorks for an undisclosed amount (Weinraub "Plagiarism" A10).

14. See جنز (2016); *חוצה את הקו* (2017); *Dobbeltliv* (2015); *Passing* (1995); 白い黒人 = Passing (2006).

15. Around this same time, *Passing* replaced *Quicksand* in the latest *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* (2014), again signaling the shifting importance of Larsen's second novel, both within her catalogue and within the African American canon.

16. Maureen Corrigan's review of *Passing* appeared on NPR's "Fresh Air" and was later published online. See "3 Harlem Renaissance Novels Deliver an Ingenious Take on Race." *NPR*, 30 January 2018. www.npr.org/2018/01/30/581795960/3-harlem-renaissance-novels-deliver-an-ingenious-take-on-race. Accessed 28 March 2019.

17. See Jacquelyn McLendon, ed. *Approaches to Teaching the Novels of Nella Larsen* (2016).

18. Trade editions include Dover (2004), Martino (2011), and Oshun (2013).

19. Audiobook editions include Recorded Books (2011) and Audioliterature (2017).

20. In Philip Linder's screenplay *Passing* (2015), Irene Redfield lives in 1980s Chicago and tells her story to her granddaughter Zora. Other copyrighted scripts include Durrow and Cox (screenplay, 2003), Dickey (screenplay, 1989), and Short (play, 1995).

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About the Author

Clark Barwick, Ph.D. is a Senior Lecturer of Communication at Indiana University's Kelley School of Business. His scholarship focuses on the Harlem Renaissance and the racial politics of cultural memory. Email: mbarwick@indiana.edu.