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Straddling the Color Line: The Parallels of Passing as a Motif from William Wells Brown to Nella Larsen

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Straddling the Color Line: The Parallels of Passing as a Motif from William Wells Brown to Nella Larsen

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INTRODUCTION

In "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color," Kimberlé Crenshaw explores violence against black women through the frameworks of race and gender, taking an intersectional approach to illustrate "that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those very experiences separately" (1244). Crenshaw additionally focuses on political and representational intersectionality, suggesting that the issues of violence permeate throughout political systems and popular culture that ultimately put African American women into a position of "intersectional disempowerment" maintained through physical violence (1245). Crenshaw's work in analyzing the many aspects that contribute to the development of one's racial identity ultimately provides insight into the convergence of social forces upon black experience in the United States. While previous scholarly readings of William Wells Brown's *Clotel* and Nella Larsen's *Passing* have predominantly focused on the shifting dynamics of racial identity between the two texts, Crenshaw's development of intersectional theory provides an opportunity to expand the viewpoint of passing towards transgressions of gender and class boundaries. The reading of these texts through an intersectional lens allows for the opportunity to start a new conversation about the overlapping forces at play in regards to the oppression of African American women throughout history, allowing for the establishment of new scholarship that can then be expanded upon through further analysis of passing in other literary works.

Samira Kawash defines the creation of the color line as "palpable, physical [boundaries] of separation" that "could map out the separate zones of blackness and whiteness" before going

on to cite the end of the color line's perpetuation as the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*[1] (1). The color line confirmed white supremacy through "unobstructed access to the resources and pleasures of public space," while African Americans suffered "harsh sanctions" if they "risked reaching for something more" (Kawash 1). Through an abstract construct, works of literature from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries grapple with the seemingly permanent perpetuation of the color line as a means of categorizing individuals based on physical appearance, suggesting skin tone to be a failsafe determinant of one's cultural or ethnic background. The increasing ability of mixed-race individuals dubbed "mulattos" to subvert this classification system through their ambiguous skin tone raises numerous questions about the American valuation of race, for the presence of mixed-race children not only implies a defiant crossing over of racial lines, but also serves as a physical representation of this subversive act.

Werner Sollors explores the racist implications of the term "mulatto" having been derived from the word "mule," suggesting that the use of mulatto evokes the connotation of mixed-race individuals as a "cross between two species" while further implying that these individuals are not representative of racial congruence, but rather are "half-breed[s]" or inauthentic representations of mankind (127-29). Numerous writers have been drawn to the subject of racial ambiguity as a means of complicating the social and gender norms across various time periods, implementing ambiguous characters as a means to emphasize yet confront the continuation of racial

[1] Although the 1954 landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* disrupted the legalization of 'separate but equal' that had been maintained since 1896's *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Angela Onwuachi-Willig suggests that *Brown v. Board of Education* only further supported the perpetuation of white supremacy. Onwuachi-Willig asserts that the court case "failed to acknowledge how white perpetrators and even sympathetic Whites had greatly benefitted from a longstanding system of structural racism" was well as ignoring the "full range of the harms of racial segregation" (354-55).

discrimination over time. William Wells Brown provides one of the first instances of a mixed-race character passing across social structures through *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States,* subverting the restrictions of nineteenth-century America through Clotel's ability to pass across social structures. Nella Larsen elaborates on the trope of passing during the twentieth century by modernizing the struggles of mixed-race characters in *Passing*, challenging the strict categorization of the color line by portraying the agency accomplished through the fluidity of ambiguous skin tones.

While numerous critics address the trope of passing in both Brown's and Larsen's works as a means of challenging the white-imposed limitations on African American agency, little scholarship exists on the trope of passing outside of passing across racial structures. Katie Frye addresses the tension created by Clotel's and Mary's ability to pass in *Clotel*, arguing that Clotel's lighter skin tone "does much in the way of providing her with the privileges of whiteness" while passing on the same benefits to her daughter (531). Frye addresses passing as a means to subvert racial boundaries by citing the quadroon ball in *Clotel*, which provided Clotel "in return a leisurely lifestyle and a house of her own," but she does not fully address the way in which this passing extends beyond the color line, limiting her analysis to that of racial subversion (531). Donavan L. Ramon provides a similar analysis of the trope of passing in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, suggesting that passing expands upon "the traditional idea of race shifting" by positioning those who pass as "beginning with a race-less youth and ending with a nebulous death" (59). Although critics fully contend the trope of passing is a tool of subversion to racial structures, they do not apply the trope to the other limiting social structures persistent throughout society as seen by the parallel limitations imposed upon African Americans in Brown's *Clotel*

and Larsen's *Passing* despite the time difference between the works. This thesis seeks to expand the conventions of passing by exploring the ways in which racial passing provides further agency to African American figures despite the perpetuation of the color line throughout American history, portraying the characters' mastery over the limiting social structures such as gender norms and socioeconomic factors that once sought to restrict black excellence in society.

CHAPTER ONE

William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* unsettles American ideals of freedom through the story of Clotel, the illegitimate child of Thomas Jefferson and a woman he enslaved, whose conscription into institutional slavery in the South results in a generational network. Brown subverts the conventional slave narrative through Clotel's and her daughter's disruption of social structures that seek to confine them further as enslaved women, presenting the women as characters capable of "passing" between these structures as a way to challenge them. By portraying Clotel's death as representative of the tragic mulatto trope, Brown does not align *Clotel* with other slave narratives, which ordinarily conclude with a triumphant arc of the enslaved person achieving freedom. Although the concept of passing arose with the enforcement of the color line, Juda Bennett defines passing as a "phenomenon of light-skinned blacks allowing and even encouraging people to mistake them for white," emphasizing the inadequacy of justifying slavery based on categorizing individuals based on skin color (36). However, Bennett's definition can be further applied to passing across other social structures that classify individuals. In *Clotel*, Brown presents passing as a means of resistance to the subordination imposed upon African Americans, ultimately accentuating the hypocrisy of white supremacy in the South through the passing of enslaved people across racial, gender, and class structures.

William Wells Brown criticizes the flawed prospect of America's self-proclaimed core principles of freedom and liberty throughout *Clotel*, depicting a slave auction scene to reveal that America merely passes as a free nation in the global environment due to its dependence upon the institution of slavery for success. Brown represents the means by which enslavers commodified

African Americans based on their appearance or physical capabilities, representing the cruelties of slavery through the auctioning of Clotel. Following the death of Clotel's master, advertisements broadcasting the upcoming sale of Clotel gain intense popularity, describing Clotel as possessing a "very superior" quality due to her immense beauty and pale skin tone (Brown 85). By emphasizing Clotel's skin color as a condition that makes her more valuable, the enslavers establish enslaved people's proximity to whiteness as a standard of value, defining Clotel's worth through the social construct of racial hierarchy. The commodification of Clotel's beauty continues as she takes her place on the auction block, for the narrator describes Clotel as possessing a "complexion as white as most of those who were waiting to purchase her," subverting the stereotypically desired qualities, such as good health or a strong work ethic (87). By suggesting that enslaved people were viewed as most valuable based on their proximity to white culture, however, Brown disrupts slavery's traditional modes of evaluation, instead suggesting that enslavers desired those who would more closely align with their white aesthetic rather than black culture. The men value Clotel for her ascribed whiteness as she satisfies their sexual desires, but Clotel's advertised purity is metaphorically tainted by her experience on the auction block, for even though Clotel had "never been from under her mother's care," the racial and sexual profiling of Clotel's body renders her defenseless to the cruelties of slavery (88).

The men at the slave market possess a grotesque obsession with purchasing an enslaved woman who appears to be nearly white, revealing the underlying motivation behind their fetishization of light-skinned slaves— the rape of a slave who appears to be white does not carry the same social implications as the rape of a dark-skinned woman. Walter Johnson maintains that emphasizing certain physical qualities "helped the buyers to mirror their shared fantasies in

the individual slaves who stood before them, to imagine that they were distinguishing themselves through the purchase of the slave they chose" (126). By purchasing slaves who seem white and thus serve as acceptable sites for sexual domination, the enslavers secretly subvert their beliefs of white supremacy while maintaining an acceptable social appearance. Purchasing enslaved people who test the limits of the color line allows the enslavers to obscure the indiscretions of their ownership, for enslaving a person with lighter skin would immunize the enslavers from criticism by making their ownership less visible publicly. Purchasing enslaved individuals with paler skin further becomes a representation of social and financial clout through this public concealment of slavery, as lighter skin tones were highly valued due to their exoticism in contrast to the conventional darker skin of enslaved African Americans. Through this dynamic, Brown makes the racial dynamics of the United States clear: though black bodies are valuable, they do not possess the same value. Brown acknowledges the system of subjugation and submission produced by slavery by portraying the trauma Clotel experiences at the slave auction, directly contrasting the glorification of American freedom with the institutionalization of African Americans as enslaved labor.

Following the highly profitable sale of Clotel, the narrator reflects on the inability of even a historically significant family lineage as a means to escape slavery, noting that "thus closed a negro sale, at which two daughters of Thomas Jefferson, the writer of the American Independence, and one of the presidents of the great republic, were disposed of to the highest bidder," ultimately criticizing the manner in which the so-called great republic achieved its success (88). By representing one of America's founding fathers as guilty of enabling the continuation of slavery, Brown criticizes the very foundation of America as a nation, questioning

the morality of those in positions of power. Jennifer Schell addresses the significance of Brown's tainting of Thomas Jefferson's reputation, noting that through the portrayal of Jefferson as indifferent to the brutalities of the slave trade, especially in regard to his own daughter, *Clotel* "tarnished the image of America" that had been carefully designed by the founding fathers (51). Schell goes on to assert that the tarnishing of Jefferson extended to the tarnishing of America's overall prestige as well, revealing that since "racial boundaries had been transgressed" by Jefferson himself, Jefferson had "inexplicably intertwined whiteness and blackness in the genealogy of the nation's history and its people" (51). Brown's graphic portrayal of the injustices faced by African Americans in slave auctions suggests that America merely passes as a successful nation through the efforts of slave labor supported by those in positions of power. Though *Clotel* portrays a fictional representation of Jefferson's character, William Wells Brown represents the harsh conditions that Jefferson's illegitimate children were subjected to through the story of Clotel, ultimately subverting reality by presenting Jefferson's hypocritical claims of freedom.

By fictionalizing Jefferson's disregard for his children's commodification through the slave market in *Clotel*, William Wells Brown introduces a body of criticism not only geared towards subverting Jefferson's reputation as a man of integrity, but also the continuation of African Americans' inhumane subjugation through legislation in the United States. As one of the founding fathers of the United States and the author of the Declaration of Independence, Thomas Jefferson served as the epitome of American ideals, representing freedom and liberty to American citizens who idolized Jefferson as a leader worthy of their respect. However, after rumors about Jefferson's illegitimate relationship with one of his slaves, Sally Hemings, became

public knowledge, Jefferson's rhetoric in the Declaration of Independence no longer suggests a sweeping sense of unity and fellowship in the United States but rather obscures the underlying tension of racial inequality. Despite the promises of liberty in the Declaration of Independence, Jefferson's *Notes on the State of Virginia* attempts to justify racism on the assertion that inherent qualities render African Americans inferior, thus grounding the United States in rhetoric that supported the color line, an imaginary division used as a defense for racism until the twentieth century. Jefferson writes:

> Whether the black of the negro resides in the reticular membrane between the skin and scarfskin, or in the scarfskin itself; whether it proceeds from the colour of the blood, the colour of the bile, or from that of some other secretion, the difference is fixed in nature, and is as real as if its seat and cause were better known to us. (337)

Though Congress formally abolished slavery in 1865, the perpetuation of racist beliefs extended far into the twentieth century, establishing vestiges of slavery such as Jim Crow laws to maintain white supremacy in the South. This rhetoric permeates American history, notably influencing the legality of segregation through the Supreme Court's decision in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, situating African American citizens as defenseless through the concept of "separate but equal." As Mark Golub asserts, however, the significance of *Plessy v. Ferguson* extends far beyond just the legalization of racism– it reveals a deep-rooted fear of those who could not be categorized on either side of the color line by appearance alone. These "ambiguous bodies" as dubbed by Golub contrast the very principles Jefferson used as a defense for slavery over one hundred years prior, thus raising an important question that remained unanswered by supporters of the color line:

what should be done with people who cannot be clearly categorized? Those able to pass as either African American or Caucasian become unsettling to those who found comfort in the clear boundaries of black and white, constituting a "violation of white supremacist norms of sexual behavior" and a "challenge to the assumption of natural racial differences," which Jefferson attempted to define in *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Golub 565). William Wells Brown utilizes these indistinguishable ambiguous bodies as a means to challenge the legal system's desperate attempts to classify individuals by race, allowing passing to serve as an inherent mode of resistance to white supremacy.

Though Clotel's appearance reveals the horrific commodification endured by slaves, her indistinct skin tone provides a means of resistance to the rigidity of racial boundaries enforced in the South, enabling Clotel and her daughter to pass across racial structures to achieve some form of agency. Clotel can easily pass as a black or white woman due to her light complexion, but Brown specifically explores the process by which Mary, Clotel's daughter, faces cruelty in slavery as a result of her inherited skin tone, which is even lighter than her mother's. After Clotel's husband abandons their family in favor of remarrying a prominent white woman for political gain, his new wife comes to resent Mary's existence as a reminder of his racial infidelity, causing the wife to question herself as to "what should be done to make [Mary] look like other negroes" (Brown 156). Unlike the implications of the male gaze upon black bodies, the female gaze reveals a threat to the vows of marriage, for the male enslaver's sexual indiscretions violate not only the sanctity of the woman's marriage, but also the pristine white lineage of their family tree. This revelation of Mrs. Green's insecurities further reflects larger feelings of societal anxieties stemming from African Americans who cannot clearly be identified

as black— if Mary's skin color does not represent her status as a slave, then Mary threatens slavery's basis upon blackness as a defense for the racial inequalities of the South. In an attempt to alleviate her feelings of instability, Mrs. Green forces Mary to work outside in the sun, thus darkening Mary's complexion by means of manual labor. Eulanda A. Sanders asserts that slave owners used skin darkening "to ensure that a slave visually maintained her chattel role," serving as a physical representation of slaves' servitude and further intimidating slaves into compliance (279). Mary suffers as a young enslaved woman due to her unrepresentative pale skin tone, but Brown later utilizes Mary's ability to pass as a means of resistance, ultimately allowing Mary to escape the institution of slavery in the United States.

Towards the end of *Clotel*, Mary reveals that her light skin color serves as an unintended form of resistance against potential purchasers, remarking that she was "examined by many people, but none seemed willing to purchase me" as all the purchasers viewed her as "too white" and believed Mary would "run away and pass as a free white woman" (222). Because of this concern, the slave traders express disinterest in purchasing Mary, enabling her purchase by a French man who later provides Mary with her freedom by leaving America. The slave traders' refusal to purchase Mary reveals the subjectiveness of identifying individuals solely by skin color, for Mary's ability to position herself on either side of the color line renders her too ambiguous to typecast. Through the shift in viewpoints towards Clotel and Mary's skintones as either an asset or a threat, Brown asserts the valuation of black bodies as relative to the circumstances to which they are subjected. By means of Clotel's pale skin tone and Mary's inherited near-whiteness, both women utilize their skin as a means of resistance against the racial

structures of the South, a process which undermines the ideology of white supremacy through the inability to distinguish white from black.

While passing typically refers to the fluidity across racial boundaries, William Wells Brown also explores the application of passing to gender representations, a process which Clotel and Mary later employ via crossdressing in attempts to achieve freedom from the confines of both their gender and slavery. In an act of jealousy and resentment of Clotel's beauty despite her social conditions, Clotel's new owner cuts her hair "as short as any of the full-blooded negroes in the dwelling," though a women's hair often serves as an expression of femininity and individuality (150). Clotel remains physically healthy, but the removal of her hair serves as a form of mental intimidation intended to further coerce African Americans into compliance by denying black women any semblance of individual identity. Michael Berthold asserts that the removal of Clotel's hair is a symbolic rape, contending that with the loss of her hair, Clotel is "rudely returned to herself and to slavery's world of imminent abuses and arrests" (26). Kimberlé Crenshaw further explores the theme of rape as a manner of dictating black expression in society through an intersectional approach, stating that the rape of a black woman describes the "unique vulnerability of women of color to see these converging systems of domination," which she asserts to be racism and patriarchal influence (1266). Clotel's master intended the removal of Clotel's hair to serve as a reminder of her submission, unknowingly outfitting Clotel with a gender neutral appearance that empowers her with the means to pass as male, in turn providing Clotel with agency to achieve her own freedom via crossdressing. Although Clotel's enslaver intended for the removal of Clotel's hair to crush her spirit, Clotel's androgynous appearance later works to her benefit, for when Clotel subverts gender norms by taking on the

appearance of a man, she fools officials who wish to find fugitive slaves. When the officers investigate Clotel's belongings, "they found nothing but a woman's apparel in the box, which raised their curiosity," suggesting that Clotel's disguise would have been foolproof had her suitcase not revealed her true gender identity (203). By presenting the ways in which white masters exercised control over their slaves' appearances, Brown explores the manipulation of the enslaved by the dominant white culture of the period, revealing the extent to which slaves lacked control over their circumstances.

Though Clotel's attempt at gaining freedom by crossdressing ultimately fails, Mary similarly takes on the task of passing as a man as a mode of resistance to slavery, succeeding in obtaining her lover's freedom by switching genders. After George's arrest and sentencing to death due to his involvement in a slave rebellion, Mary mourns the future loss of her lover, causing her desperately to present George with the idea of switching places as a means to save his life. As a result of their similar physical appearances, Mary and George easily pass as a member of the opposite gender, for George was "of small stature, and both were white, there was no difficulty in his passing out without detection," and since Mary "usually left the cell weeping, with handkerchief in hand, and sometimes at her face, he had only adopt this mode and his escape was safe" (Brown 213-214). Berthold criticizes Mary's self-sacrificing actions, noting that by switching places and genders with George, Mary "does nothing so much as restrict her own mobility and freedom by literally consigning herself to a prison cell," burdening herself with further confinement in addition to the already existing structures of slavery (27). Katie Frye disputes Berthold's analysis of Mary's crossdressing, instead arguing that crossdressing "becomes a kind of attack on the socially sanctioned forms of masculinity and femininity, so

that, in Brown's version, a female slave, the lowest rung in the social hierarchy of the slaveholding South, is able to use masculinity to achieve her goals" (538). Despite these contrasting perspectives on the significance of crossdressing in *Clotel*, Mary succeeds in securing George's freedom, ultimately sacrificing her own happiness in order to emphasize the injustices faced by those who attempted to overturn slavery in the South. Just as Clotel's body represents a forced conscription into the dominant white culture of the South, Mary similarly experiences a loss of control over her own body, serving as a larger social criticism of the prevailing social order. By adapting their physical appearances to embody men, Clotel and Mary gain agency over their previous subordination as both women and slaves, resisting the dominance of patriarchal authority by becoming makeshift men themselves.

In addition to asserting gender passing as a means of resistance in *Clotel*, William Wells Brown explores the means by which slaves both benefit from and resist their roles of subordination, subverting the inequalities of class structures by portraying the various ways in which slaves secure freedom. Brown first rehashes the tale of a man who used his position as a slave to his advantage, recalling that the man had "neither hat upon his head or coat upon his back" but was "driving before him a very nice fat pig, and appeared to all who saw him to be a labourer employed on an adjoining farm" (165). By portraying himself as an obedient slave following orders to please his master, the man successfully takes ownership of his submission and manipulates it to his benefit, achieving freedom by flattering those who relish in their positions of enforced authority. Clotel's crossdressing attempt at becoming a southern gentleman similarly satirizes gender norms and class structures of the time through her costume, which characterizes the wealthy as simultaneously handicapped and sickly rather than the epitome of

economic success. Clotel dresses in a "neat suit of black" and a "white silk handkerchief tied round her chin, as if she was an invalid," accessorized by a "pair of green glasses" all while she "assumed to be very ill" (168). This performance of pretending to be both male and a member of the upper class allows Clotel to manipulate the intersectional forces seeking to limit her expression, for through this production Clotel reveals the ways in which these unconventional modes of passing allow her to maintain a sense of fluidity across the various social forces acting against her. Though Clotel's pale complexion and short haircut lend themselves to her successful crossdressing, Clotel's inability to maintain the façade under pressure results in the discovery of her ruse, ultimately resulting in her forced return to the slave market.

Though other characters throughout *Clotel* explore passing as a means of subverting the rigid social structures dictating inequalities between class, race, and gender, William Wells Brown depicts the act of suicide as the ultimate subversion of these repressive boundaries, emphasizing the hypocrisy of American ideals through Clotel's suicide. After being sold back into the slave trade, Clotel desperately attempts to escape her captors, but after finding herself trapped on the Long Bridge which "passes from the lower part of the city across the Potomac," Clotel reclaims what agency she can over her previously restrained capacity by jumping off the bridge into the river and committing sucide (205). By refusing to bow to the will of her captors any further, Clotel subverts the conventional power dynamic that situates white males as the protectors of the hierarchical structure of America, instead positioning Clotel's death as a means to disestablish the system of African American compliance. Through Clotel's willingness to lose her life as an expense of avoiding re-enslavement, Brown presents the act of suicide as a means of allowing enslaved people to reclaim agency over their lives, emplying the trope of the tragic

mulatta through Clotel's suicide.[2] Though Clotel achieved some semblance of agency through her ability to pass across not only racial boundaries but also across classes and genders, Brown's expression of Clotel as a tragic mulatta serves as criticism of the very real conditions facing enslaved African Americans during the period, suggesting that true equality can only be found through death.

Just as enslaved people attempted to escape their impending bondage by jumping off of slave ships during the Middle Passage, Clotel's suicidal jump evokes yet modernizes and recontextualizes this act of rebellion, allowing Clotel to assert ownership over her conditions rather than allowing her body to become a contested space by the enslavers who wish to profit from her sale. Clotel's suicide highlights the hypocrisy of the freedom promised in the Declaration of Independence by positioning Clotel's death across from Mount Vernon, echoing the irony of the Founding Fathers maintaining the enslavement of people while proclaiming the United States to be the proponent of liberty and justice. Clotel's suicidal act serves as her final moment of passing across societal structures, for by passing away Clotel completes the paramount form of resistance to her commodification, denying the enslavers any further transactions of capitalizing off of her body. By asserting the agency to achieve her freedom from slavery through death, Clotel ultimately subverts the expectations of her subordinate role as an enslaved woman in the South, deciding her own fate independently from the numerous social structures that previously dictated her role in society.

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[2] Emily Clark defines the tragic mulatta figure as mixed race woman who is "sometimes enslaved, sometimes free, but always doomed by her racial liminality, which denies her a niche in a rigidly bi-racial world" (260). Clark further argues the representation of Brown's Clotel as the tragic mulatta figure to be the "most explicitly political expression" in *Clotel* due to Brown's background of having escaped slavery himself.

In William Wells Brown's *Clotel; or, the President's Daughter: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States*, Brown depicts the numerous social structures that limited enslaved people's agency in the South, unsettling the American ideals of freedom through Clotel's story. Despite her important family lineage as a descendant of Thomas Jefferson, Clotel experiences a traumatic initiation into the slave trade, rendering her defenseless against the regulatory patriarchal and racial forces which thrive upon the successful slave economy. However, Brown subverts the stereotypical slave narrative through the characters of Clotel and Mary, enabling the women to disrupt the forces attempting to confine them into subordination. Through their passing across racial, gender, and class structures, Clotel and Mary manipulate their seemingly hopeless roles as slaves to their advantage, transforming their appearances and subordination into a means of resistance by easily blending into the dominant white culture of the period. Despite the restrictions they faced as both slaves and women in the South, the two women ultimately achieve agency over their situations through passing across societal boundaries, motivating the women to continue their fight for freedom despite their low odds of success.

CHAPTER TWO

Nella Larsen's *Passing* portrays the struggles of racial tensions in twentieth-century America due to the system of stratification enforced by the color line, commenting not only on the mutability and inefficiency of the color line as a mechanism for racial categorization, but also on the socioeconomic restrictions imposed upon African Americans through segregation. Similarly to William Wells Brown's use of passing as a motif of resistance to racial structures of the nineteenth century, Larsen employs the motif of passing through Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry[3], whose differing manipulations of passing allow the women to achieve some measure of upward mobility through their fluidity across racial and economic limitations. Through the women's success in using passing as a mode of subverting the rigid divisions of the color line, Larsen echoes William Wells Brown's use of passing as a mode of resistance to African American subordination, modernizing the restraints of slavery through the women's attempts to escape the imposed structural racism of the present day. Nella Larsen's *Passing* explores Juda Bennett's definition of passing through the relationship between Irene and Clare, ultimately representing a larger social argument about racial identity through the women's contrasting rationale behind passing as a means of influencing agency over their social limitations.

Through Irene's reflection upon Clare's childhood after their happenstance encounter, Larsen explores the means by which passing provides Clare with an opportunity for economic advancement, for by publicly identifying as white, Clare is able to marry an affluent white man and thus secure her financial stability. After receiving a flamboyantly decorated letter from

[3] While scholars remain divided on the categorization of Clare as a modern embodiment the tragic mulatta trope, Claudia Tate ultimately concludes that Clare does not fully align with the expectations of the trope as she does not experience "pangs of anguish resulting" from "forsaking [her] Black identity." I agree with Tate's interpretation, as Clare's attempt to reunite with black culture is not representative of regret, but rather an attempt to escape the limitations of expression she faces as a result of her passing in both her public and private life.

Clare, Irene recalls Clare's contrastingly impoverished childhood. She notes that despite her father attending college, Mr. Kendry went on to become a janitor, "and a very inefficient one at that," subtly positioning Clare as an outsider to their social group due to her father's lack of education and inability to adequately contribute to the workforce (Larsen 14). Rather than remaining in a position of financial inequality after her father's death, Clare utilizes her physical appearance to her advantage, capturing the attention of a wealthy white man and presenting herself as a suitable partner by concealing her true racial identity. Clare's passing as a white woman allows her to escape the forces of racism and economic disparity associated with the color line. She bypasses the intersection of "natural certain categories" as a social norm through her successful degree of passing by recognizing how these racial categories "[privilege] some experiences and [exclude] others" (Crenshaw 1298).

When Clare later asks Irene if she ever considered passing, Irene indignantly suggests that she has no need to pass with the exception of wanting "a little more money, " causing Clare to reflect on the cost of passing as a white woman, asserting the risk of being discovered to be "worth the price" (20). Mary Helen Washington observes that Clare's passing throughout her marriage is a moment of feminist critique against the guiding structures of society, asserting that "she, like most other other black women of the 1920s, if she achieved middle-class status, did it by virtue of a man's presence in her life, by virtue of his status," presenting Larsen's underlying criticism about the inability of black women to acheive financial success due to the prioritization of patriarchal influence (354).

Clare's ability to better her social standing in society through marrying Jack Bellew parallels Clotel's experiences in William Wells Brown's *Clotel,* similarly exploring the means by

which women who can pass achieve financial agency through their husbands' education and established racial superiority despite the differing time periods. After the death of Clotel's master, Clotel and her sister attend a "negro ball" composed of "quadroon and mulatto girls, and white men" intended to introduce the enslaved women to potential affluent purchasers. The suggestion is that by gaining the attention of one of these men, Clotel could somewhat secure her own future stability through the transactional exchange of a relationship before the slave market even takes place (Brown 86). Through this party, Clotel meets Horatio Green, "the son of a wealthy gentleman of Richmond" who not only is college educated, but also provides Clotel with the ability to escape her position of racial inferiority by "[making] her mistress of her own dwelling" (Brown 86). Through Horatio's elevated social standing due to his family and educational background, Clotel subverts the conventional limitations on African American women during the nineteenth century, rendering Clotel somewhat less bound to the command of a white family but rather capable of establishing her own household within the circumscribed space.

Despite the shift in historical periods between the two literary works, Clare Kendry similarly uses her ability to pass as a means to establish her own agency in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, securing for herself a means out of financial instability through her marriage to Jack Bellew. Irene recounts Clare's childhood after their happenstance encounter, remembering the "pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together" while her alcoholic father worked as a janitor after dropping out of college (Larsen 5). When Irene sees Clare many years later, however, Clare no longer remains limited by financial inequality. Clare makes a notable entrance at the Drayton as "a sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress

chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths" not only remind Irene of the pleasantries of spring, but also seem to evoke a sense of abundance and vitality that Clare once did not possess (Larsen 11). Clare later informs Irene of her marriage to Jack, "a schoolboy acquaintance" who "turned up from South America with untold gold" (19). She has achieved financial elevation for herself by concealing her racial identity, allowing Clare to pass not only in her marriage but also among affluent spaces through her husband's respectable position in society. Just as Clotel achieves agency through her marriage to an educated white man, Clare Kendry establishes a new identity for herself through her elopement with a white man of similar background and financial standing. Here Larson reveals the lack of social progress and permanence of structural racism in society despite an entire century having passed.

Just as William Wells Brown's Clotel and Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry present marriage as an opportunity to subvert the inequalities of their respective time periods, both women's experiences remain limited due to the presence of virulently racist beliefs, ultimately resulting in their deaths. In *Clotel*, Brown illustrates the ideology of racial differences that Thomas Jefferson espouses on in *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Jefferson reinforces the notion of white supremacy by presenting African Americans as "possessing different qualifications," calling upon classical tradition by citing the establishment of slavery during the Roman empire and passages from the Bible to support his justification for the continued system of enslavement (341). Despite Jefferson's adamant articulation in favor of inherent differences as a defense for this racial hierarchy, however, Jefferson's non-consensual relationship with Sally Hemings instead reveals a dissonance between his published words and private actions, perpetuating a position of binary opposition in which Jefferson both condemns interracial relations while practicing one himself.

Jefferson's sexual exploitation of Hemings, an enslaved teenage girl, belies his professed belief in equality for all. Through the inherent lack of consent in Jefferson's involvement with Hemings, Jefferson exposes the many ways that enslaved women were exposed to forms of violence as a mode of repression, for Hemings' young age and Jefferson's ownership position positions Hemings as unable to escape this intersectional inferiority. Jefferson's theory about racial difference is rooted in anxiety towards individuals defying the color line through the mixing of racial groups, for the existence of mixed race or mulatto individuals belies the strict divisions guiding society. The very existence of Clotel serves as an unconventional mode of passing, for through Jefferson's transgression he in turn produces an individual capable of defying the systematic oppressions which seeks to keep her restrained.

Larsen similarly explores the tension between females who pass across social barriers and oblivious white male figures in *Passing*, expanding upon Jefferson's tension through Clare Kendry's marriage to John "Jack" Bellew. Irene's first encounter with Jack provides insight into the perpetuation of racial ideology over time, for after Jack jokingly refers to Clare as "nig," he goes on to assert that hates African Americans due to their tendencies for "robbing and killing people" despite admitting that he does not personally know any black people (30). Through Jack's oblivious mocking of Clare's darkening skin tone and presentation of African American men as brutish and inhumane, Jack espouses the view of African Americans as a lesser race that Jefferson articulates in *Notes on the State of Virginia*, presenting racial inequalities as an inherent and permanent quality of black experiences in society. Although both Thomas Jefferson and Jack Bellew perpetuate ignorant fallacies in defense of the color line, Brown and Larsen call into question the legitimacy of the men's positions through their explicit or oblivious involvement

with black women, creating parallels between the two works to expose the hypocrisy and preservation of racism over time.

Though Clare uses her ability to pass as a means to advance her social position into white society, Irene instead uses passing as a means of elevation above other African Americans, benefitting from both sides of the color line by passing in public settings while embracing her racial identity in closed environments. While in Chicago, Irene goes out shopping for presents that her sons have asked for, including a "mechanical aeroplane" and a "drawing-book," which is in such high demand that Irene overexerts herself through her numerous attempts to secure her sons' material desires (7-8). Jennifer DeVere Brody analyzes Larsen's emphasis on the acquisition of material goods through a Marxist lens, suggesting that the son's gifts represent "the inevitable material possessions which are the necessary symbols of wealth" (399). Brody adds that Irene's attempts to remove herself from the crowds of Chicago is also "evidence of her distaste for the working-classes," suggesting that Irene's experiences in Chicago evince unconscious class awareness (399). Irene becomes overwhelmed through the experience of having to shop among masses of other people, causing her to escape her discomfort in the autonomy of the crowd by taking a taxi to the Drayton Hotel, which provides Irene with the ability literally and metaphorically to elevate herself above everyone else through her positioning at the rooftop restaurant. She reflects that her entry into the segregated hotel results in the sensation of "being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one that she had left below" (8). The sensation of being physically raised above the chaos of regular society allows Irene to escape from the burden of societal norms and expectations. Irene's ability to pass further establishes her as metaphorically

superior above individuals of her own race, for unlike her husband and other dark-skinned African Americans, Irene remains unconcerned with the worry of being forcibly removed from the hotel due to her race, presenting her ambiguous racial identity as a mechanism to equate herself within white society.

In addition to using passing to her advantage by establishing a position within an established space of white superiority, Irene uses passing to improve her status among the African American community, using her social involvement as an opportunity to display her family's wealth. After reuniting with Clare at the Drayton, Irene implicitly invites Clare to a weekend trip to Idlewild, an affluent black summer resort. Irene immediately regrets her invitation, lamenting that Clare's presence as her guest would result in "the curiosity, and the talk, and the lifted eyebrows" and that Clare would incite negative publicity or attention to Irene's family and threaten their comfortable position within the upper social circle (17). Adam Nemmers interprets the invitation as an automatic assertion of Irene's social dominance from having achieved economic stability as a black woman. Nemmers cites Clare's use of passing to gain financial power while noting Clare's inability to fit in with black culture as a result of her passing. As Clare's presence would "jeopardize the status of a black woman passing as white," Irene presents Clare with this "strategic volley," suggesting that by refusing to cross the boundary of passing in her private life, Irene maintains a sense of superiority in her racial identity (Nemmers 270). Nemmers suggests that this allows Irene to "retain the authenticity of blackness" that Clare so desperately yearns to return to later in the novel (270).

By anticipating the criticism that would result from bringing Clare, who publicly identifies as white, to an African American resort, Irene exposes Clare to the judgment of the

female gaze as seen in *Clotel*, also rendering Clare defenseless through her positioning under the gaze of internalized racism. In William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, Clotel experiences the implications of being judged through the female gaze due to her prior relationship with Horatio, revealing that women who pass serve as a threat to the sanctity of marriage due to their disruption of a once "pure" racial lineage. As a result, Horatio's new wife forces Clotel's daughter to endure hours of difficult manual labor, thus darkening Mary's pale skin to provide a physical reminder of the continued enforcement of skin tone as representative of the strict racial divisions enforced by the color line. By positioning Clare as unable to reunite with African American culture through her abandonment of her true racial identity, Irene metaphorically darkens Clare's pale skin through passing judgment, artfully shaming Clare for her previous attempts at disguising her blackness.

In addition to undermining Clare through exposing her to the female gaze, Irene's aversion towards Clare's passing as the grounds for her identity further render Clare susceptible to the gaze of internalized racism, revealing Irene herself to be a subtle proponent of the color line. After attending a party at Clare's house, Irene reflects on her discomfort at being the only outwardly presenting African American in attendance. She describes her irritation "[arising] from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well" (Larsen 24-5). Through Irene's internal desire to categorize Clare as being either black or white, Larsen explores the means by which the enforcement of the color line affected not only the white gaze upon black experiences, but also the black gaze on those who attempted to assert agency through positioning themselves on the white side of the color line.

Through her relationship with Clare, Irene experiences repeated tension as a result of basing her life upon the dualities of white and black. Irene also struggles with how to compromise the notions of Irene's allegiance to her black authenticity, her simultaneous envy and disgust towards Clare's passing, and Irene's positioning of Clare as her friend and her enemy. Irene's encounter with Clare at the Drayton brings to light Irene's own disloyalties to her identity as a black woman, inciting a sense of jealousy within Irene and causing her to call into question the decision not to pass throughout her private life. As Irene and Clare's meeting at the Drayton come to an end, Irene finds herself interested in the idea of passing on a daily basis, questioning "this breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly to take one's chance in another environment, not entirely strange, perhaps, but certainly not entirely friendly" while failing to recognize that she herself had also been using passing to her advantage by gaining access to the segregated hotel in the first place (17). Irene denies herself the ability to consider how her life might be different if she had allowed herself to pass more frequently, instead questioning how someone who passes feels "when one [comes] into contact with other Negroes" (17). Irene subconsciously identifies her own cognitive dissonance through her sense of uneasiness about being seen while passing in a place which would typically allow her racial disloyalty to go unnoticed.

After Clare attempts to reincorporate herself into African American society by returning to her black heritage, Irene's discomfort at the fluidity of Clare's racial identity increases. This unease causes Irene to analyze the consequences of passing:

> She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or

> if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three. Nothing, she imagined, was ever more completely sardonic. (Larsen 69)

Clare's attempts at reclaiming her previously abandoned identity as a black woman reveal Irene's underlying reliance upon the color line as a system of establishing her own social order: by transitioning from passing into the open acceptance of her blackness, Clare subverts the clear cut categorization of racial groups, challenging the very bounds by which Irene defines her own identity. As a response to Irene's anxieties about Clare's ability to freely pass without experiencing repercussions, Jennifer L. Hayes suggests that Irene's discomfort stems from internalized racism due to the established racial system. Hayes argues that the unstable regulations of the color line cause not only a "rejection of whiteness and white values" but also an "internalization of racist sentiments resulting in a 'white is right' mindset" (247). Through this notion, Larsen suggests that the consequences of perpetuating the racist dogma results in more than just social inequalities for African Americans— it results in a skewed valuation of black culture as a source of valid identity.

In *Passing*, Nella Larsen expands upon the struggles of racial tensions portrayed in William Wells Brown's *Clotel*, modernizing the racial tensions in America due to the perpetuation of the color line over one hundred years. Through the relationship between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry and their differing perspectives on the use of passing as a means to subvert their racial limitations, Larsen represents a larger social argument about the formation of racial identity in the midst of segregation. Larsen explores the repercussions of the persistence of white supremacy as a valuation system over time, ultimately emphasizing the mutability of the

color line through the women's use of passing to achieve some measure of upward mobility. However, through the unresolved death of Clare Kendry at the end of *Passing*, Larsen subverts the convention of the tragic mulatta trope itself, rewriting the terms of Clare's death by emphasizing the ambiguity of the circumstances in which Clare died. As the reader cannot clearly identify whether Clare committed suicide or Irene pushed her out of the open apartment window, Larsen rewrites the terms of the tragic mulatta death scene, challenging the notion that the death of the passing female character must be tragic through self-sacrificial circumstances. It is through Larsen's rendering of Irene's repression throughout *Passing* that Larsen herself rejects this stock figure of the tragic mulatta. Through Larsen's mode of narrative strategy which does not allow readers to easily classify Clare's mode of death, Larsen defies the pattern of the categorization of black women's deaths as the consequence of their continued repression. Through this subversion, Larsen distances herself from the conventions established by William Wells Brown, situating *Passing* as a modernization of *Clotel* through the persistence of racial tension experienced by African Americans during the twentieth century.

CONCLUSION

Although Samira Kawash defines the color line through the zones of separation that render "blackness and whiteness" as separate experiences of American society, both William Wells Brown and Nella Larsen assert the mutability and inefficiency of the color line through the presence of mixed-race characters in their literary works (1). While most critics limit passing through restricting their criticism of the trope to solely racial terms, Juda Bennett's definition of passing as the "phenomenon of light-skinned blacks allowing and even encouraging people to mistake them for white" suggests that passing can extend beyond the subversion of racial restrictions, allowing African Americans to subvert other forms of social structures (36). As Brown and Larsen explore the perpetuation of the color line across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, *Clotel* and *Passing* address passing as a means for African Americans— and more specifically African American women— to achieve forms of agency over social limitations that seek to position black culture as subordinate to white experiences in America.

Through *Clotel* and *Passing's* depictions of female characters' racial ambiguity as a beneficial quality that allows the women to pass across racial, gender, and class structures, Brown and Larsen explore the means by which passing allows the women to achieve different forms of agency over the repressive structures of their periods. While Brown explores Clotel's use of passing to subvert the oppressive system of slavery in the United States to acheive control over her lack of freedom, Larsen contrastingly depicts Clare's use of passing to better her social standing despite the structures of segregation. These two differing perspectives on the passing as a form of agency reveal both the freedoms and constraints experienced by those who pass. While passing allows individuals to exert some form of control over the social constraints that

limit black experiences in society, those who pass experience personal limitations through the resulting fear that their true racial identity will be discovered. The consequences for those who pass would be far worse than being conscripted back into the system of racial inequality in the United States— the discovery of this deception could result in individuals being outcast from society or physically punished due to the perceived overthrowal of the racial hierarchy imposed throughout centuries.

Through Brown's early representation of the notion of passing in contrast to Larsen's later representation, both writers comment on the experience of passing as a tragic exercise in the black experience in American history. From the ideology of "separate but equal" established through *Plessy v. Ferguson* to the landmark decision for equality in *Brown v. Board of Education*, African American experiences have been limited throughout history, contrasting the ideals of freedom permeating throughout the Declaration of Independence. Through Brown and Larsen's success in representing African American narratives about racial experiences in the United States, *Clotel* and *Passing* serve as representations of the repressive culture maintained throughout American society.

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