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Exploring the 'Moment Of Knowing' and Double-Consciousness in Nella Larsen's Passing

Carina Lewis

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EXPLORING THE 'MOMENT OF KNOWING' AND DOUBLE-CONSCIOUSNESS

IN NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

By

Carina Yvonne Lewis

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
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for the Degree of Master of Arts
in English
in the Department of English

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This essay explores early twentieth century African American literature to investigate issues related to identity formation. It uses W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* and Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* to introduce and define the socio-psychological concept of the moment of knowing, an original component of this work. The concept is composed of two occurrences: alienation and self-alienation, which can be observed and examined in non-fictional and fictional texts. Within the framework of multicultural theory, the moment of knowing along with double-consciousness are explored in a close reading of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*. In conclusion, the moment of knowing is shown to be a significant part of African American identity formation, and the central characters in Larsen's work are revealed as psychologically and socially scarred as a result of their inability to cope with their African American identity.

DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this research to Clotee Lewis, Carmen Lewis, and Curtis Lewis. Thank you all for teaching me how to love me and others.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I offer sincere thanks to my thesis committee: Shirley Hanshaw, Tennyson O'Donnell, and Donald Schaffer. Thank you for your patience and encouragement. To fellow graduate student, Jessica Temple, thank you for being on call and ready to help at any moment's notice.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans were only a few generations removed from the barbaric institution of slavery. Although they were continually being re-endowed with basic rights and privileges, they still struggled to assimilate into society with these privileges. Despite their continually being elevated in society through legislation, there was still a great deal of prejudice to overcome. With the nation only a few years removed from slavery, many of the old, corrupting attitudes concerning race still prevailed in the minds of whites and blacks alike. This claim is supported by the account of a young African American intellectual, W.E. B. Du Bois, who, in his philosophical book, *The Souls of Black Folk*¹, writes “[T]he problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color line” (34). This color line Du Bois writes about is a metaphorical line dividing the black race from the white race. Even in the twentieth century, the black race was still considered inferior in that blacks were still being denied a great deal of advantages that their white counterparts had been enjoying for some time.

It is well documented that within the institution of slavery the color line was often trespassed. It was not an uncommon practice during that time for white slave owners to rape and impregnate their female slaves. The children from such unions were often

disregarded by their white fathers, and they grew up slaves. The immoral unions between masters and slaves created a new race category that came to be known as mulattos.² This new group of biracial people found themselves in a very awkward position, living on the color line; they belonged neither to the black race nor the white race. They were a product of two races during a time that society did not accept such dualities; it was a black/white world. It is necessary to note that not all mulattos possessed the same physical attributes. Some had darker skin, while others had skin so light that there was no obvious physical indication of African ancestry. Those with lighter skin were faced with the most tortuous decision: deciding whether to live as a black person or as a white person. In a society so divided by race there was no recognition of a gray area. Society demanded that light-skinned mulattos make a choice: black or white. Either choice required a permanence that the individual would have to live with for the rest of his or her life. For some light-skinned mulattos, the act of passing as white became a means to attain greater social standing and a way to conquer the color line, and the decision to pass simultaneously resulted in the decision to deny any African ancestry.

Before passing can be discussed, there must be some definition presented to provide some explicit understanding of the term. For all purposes of this discussion, the definition editor Elaine K. Ginsberg presents on the back cover of *Passing and the Fictions of Identity* is effective in presenting a clear explanation of the act of passing:

Passing refers to the process whereby a person of one race, gender, or sexual orientation adopts the guise of another. Historically, this has often involved black slaves passing as white in order to gain their freedom.

More generally, it has served as a way for women and people of color to access male or white privilege. (back cover)

In the following essay, passing, specifically, refers to the process of a black or mulatto individual adopting the guise of a white individual in order to receive status and/or privilege. However, Ginsberg's definition also functions as an adequate introduction to other complexities related to the term and act of passing that will also be briefly discussed in this essay.

Although Du Bois was writing of the African American race in general, including all shades, he eloquently captures this dilemma lighter skinned mulattos found themselves faced with when he notes, "One ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals" (38). Most American mulattos expressed this torn sentiment as a result of being raised by the African American community, while knowing that the white society offered many tempting advantages they could attain if they only chose to cross the color line. Yet crossing the color line often meant having no communication with those on the other side. These conditions add complexity to the situation Du Bois describes because, regardless of the choice a person makes, there would still be that other side of him or her that remains unfulfilled since there will be a part of his or her identity that he or she will always have to deny.

Du Bois argues further that African Americans strove to reconcile their dual identities. He articulates this striving as a "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self" (39). Bernard Bell echoes Du Bois's rhetoric, arguing that "the historical quest of black Americans...in short, is for life,

liberty, and wholeness—full development and unity of self and the black community—as a biracial, bicultural people, as American of African descent” (12). Mulattos were at the heart of both arguments, struggling to acknowledge and exist during a time when two racial spheres were recognized, but a person was only allowed access to one or the other, white or black, not both. Thus, it is no surprise that defining identity and capturing the struggles related to identity formation became the elusive goal for most late and early twentieth century African American writers.

The complex struggles that mulattos were faced with during the beginning of the twentieth century were introduced by Du Bois, but were eloquently divulged through the novels of the time that involved brave, conflicted characters who practiced passing as a means to upward mobility. Matthew Wilson describes this fascination with the color line and what authors were hoping to accomplish in writing about it:

[I]n the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the passing novel itself has been a genre that attempts to dismantle that racial binary. If the author can demonstrate that the passing ‘black’ character is no different from the white character in social and cultural attainments, and most importantly in feeling, then the writers of these texts hoped that they could begin to show that the racial binary was little more than a “social fiction.” (139)

Moreover, readers only fully appreciate the struggles of the color line, which Du Bois writes about, through the passing figures in literature. Their bi-racial identity allows readers to get a narrative that can convey the experience of white and black existence. According to John Sheehy, “he [the passing figure] articulates the margin, the veil, his is the only voice that can speak simultaneously from the ‘x axis’ of whiteness and the ‘y

axis' of blackness" (405). Those literary characters serve not only as evidence of Du Bois's and Bell's observations but also serve as important tools for exploring the issues of race and identity of people stuck on a harsh color line. The passing figures within early twentieth century novels, according to Sheehy, "articulate and give shape to the problem of the color line itself," (406) and readers find that the color line affects not only the passing figures but also the community of people surrounding them.

In addition to Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, a later French-Antillean philosopher, offers poignant discussions of what it means to be black in a world dominated by whiteness in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*.³ He discusses what racial consciousness entails and how it affects the person of African descent. Fanon rearticulates what Du Bois says and offers a more contemporary and scientific discussion of not only what it means to be black, but what it means to be black and to cope with one's blackness and the inferiority/dependency complexes that are present as a result of that race. Fanon's and Du Bois's texts are highly complementary and offer a framework for this essay. Together, their theories have set the foundation for the concept of the moment of knowing⁴ which is set forth as an original aspect of this essay. It is presented as a socio-psychological concept. This essay shows that this concept is an instance that can be observed in most twentieth century African-American texts; it is the occurrence whereby the central person or character comes to a certain awareness of the social implications of his or her race relative to whites or dominant society.

In the most concise terms, the moment of knowing is defined by two occurrences: alienation and self-alienation. Over the course of the two occurrences, repressed feelings, thoughts, and emotions rise to the consciousness. For mulattos, the experience often

involves an internally and/or externally destructive reaction. During the early twentieth century, being a mulatto was the same as being black. As outlined in Wendy Roth's article, "America's... 'one-drop rule'—codified legally as well as socially and culturally—designated how they [mulattos] should be identified. People with any known Black ancestry, or 'a single drop' of Black blood, were legally designated as Black" (36). Mulattos were therefore a subjective class of racial identity within the black community. Thus, being mulatto meant being a marginalized member of a collectively marginalized race.

The idea that the moment of knowing for mulatto characters involves destructive behavior is not original. In fact, that component of the concept of the moment of knowing has been confirmed repeatedly in fictional literature through the use of the trope of the tragic mulatto within passing novels. Even before Du Bois's influential work, the genre of the passing novel and sub genre of the tragic mulatto were already forming with the publication of a few dozen novels including most notably, William Wells Brown's *Clotel, or the President's Daughter* (1853); Frank Webb's *The Garies and their Friends* (1857); Frances Harper's *Iola Leroy* also known as *Shadows Uplifted* (1892); and Charles Chesnutt's *The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories of the Color-Line* (1899). In fact, it might be appropriate to say that Du Bois's work merely spurred a vast literary interest and exploration of the problems stemming from miscegenation. A wide collection of works including, James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912); Charles Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* (1900); Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928); and Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929).

Within the genre of the passing novel, there exists a sub-genre that has been coined the tragic mulatto. For example, *Passing* is classified as a passing novel and more specifically as a passing novel with a plot involving a tragic mulatto. Most often the tragic mulatto is a biracial character who chooses to pass in white society and whose African ancestry is eventually discovered by the end of the novel. The story is often tragic because that character suffers psychological, social, and/or physical death as a direct result of the ambiguity of their biological and social identity.

Nella Larsen's *Passing*⁵ stands apart as being one the most complex and multi-faceted novels within the passing novel genre. Similar to Larsen's first novel *Quicksand* (1928), *Passing*, in addition to its blatant focus on race, broaches and challenges the notion of the cult of domesticity, feminine manners and sexuality. *Passing* was written after W.E.B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, and the novel is structured in such a way as to suggest that it is almost a direct response to the issues of race and questions of the psychological effects of miscegenation raised in Du Bois's work.

Passing offers exciting, memorable characters who choose to find their ways as best they can as their quests to "merge [the] double self into a better and truer self" (Du Bois 39) take them on winding, violent journeys. Set sometime around the turn of the twentieth century, *Passing* presents a unique juxtaposition with central characters Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield. The two are friends, of sorts. Earlier in their lives, they attended school together. Even so, Irene chooses to live primarily within the black community. She marries Brian Redfield, a dark-skinned African American doctor, and they have a family together. On the contrary, Clare, who was raised by her white aunts,

chooses to conceal her African-American ancestry and marries John Bellew, a white man, with whom she has one child.

Larsen's intimate depiction of two very different female mulattos allows many avenues for scholarly investigation. Moreover, the intimate space that Larsen creates within her novel reveals that racial tensions go beyond simply black and white terms and that racial tension can extend to within racial categories, specifically amongst mulattos. The relationship between the central mulatta characters in *Passing* provides a personal look into how the choices mulattos make affect those within their same racial category. Thus, as a result, racial identity and categorization is presented as the most worthwhile avenue of study within the novel because it does present a vivid look into interracial relations and external race relations concerning an awkwardly placed group of individuals (i.e., mulattos) that had not quite been explored in the earlier works within the passing novel genre.

During the time that Larsen was writing and publishing her novels, there was a major literary and arts movement occurring within the African American community now most commonly referred to as the Harlem Renaissance. This period is placed roughly between 1919 and 1940 ("Harlem Renaissance" 953). It is considered as one of the most influential periods in African American history due to the large numbers of literary and artistic accomplishments achieved during the short period. Through writing and art, artists were able to expose, debunk, and rewrite many myths associated with prevailing perceptions of African Americans. Moreover, most of the accomplishments achieved during this period were a result of the intermingling of many African American intellectuals via various professional and social venues. Furthermore, Du Bois was

surrounded by other notable intellectuals, including historian Carter G. Woodson and philosopher and educator, Alain Locke. These African American intellectuals took on very different roles during the time. Carter G. Woodson was primarily concerned with preserving African American heritage and history, whereas Alain Locke was concerned with preserving African Americans' artistic works and defining the twentieth-century African American. Du Bois stands apart as being one of the few intellectuals who sought to raise and explore psychological issues stemming from the antebellum period.

Since there is considerable focus placed on Du Bois's work in relation to Larsen's text, some readers might find it of interest to know that the two authors did share a professional relationship. Their interaction includes most notably Du Bois's review of *Passing* in the 1929 issue of *The Crisis*. He explicitly addresses what sets Larsen's novel apart from other novels within the genre of the passing novel during the Harlem Renaissance: "Nella Larsen attempts quite a different thing. She explains just what 'passing' is: the psychology of the thing; the reaction of it on friend and enemy" (Du Bois, "Passing" 98). It is the clear and careful distinction that Du Bois presents that justifies the kind of psychoanalytical investigative discussion and approach that is taken in this paper. The fact that he elevates Larsen's novel above the work of other African American authors of the time suggests that he might have seen a common thread between the issues that he was confronting in his own writing and those issues which Larsen was also addressing in her fictional works. Moreover, to know that Du Bois was involved with and thought highly of the intricacy and complexity of the psychological issues presented in the novel offers logical justification for the Du Boisian approach that this paper largely employs.

Furthermore, this essay seeks to use the concept of the moment of knowing to fully divulge the complexities related to identity formation that marginalized people grapple with through an examination of Fanon's and Du Bois's non-fictional texts and a close reading of Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*. The concept of the moment of knowing is presented to isolate and explain the psychological processes involved in a character's or an individual's initial encounter with his or her blackness and what that experience means for a black individual or mulatto. Fanon's and Du Bois's texts discuss this experience but do not define it, and therefore, their texts will be used alongside Larsen's novel to explore the definition for the concept in the initial chapter of this essay.

Racial identity is a complex idea. Psychology typically regards racial identity as encompassing two components: biological and social. According to Alicia Fedelina Chávez and Florence Guido-DiBrito, biological identity is defined based on the genetically transferred physical characteristics of an individual while social identity relates to a sense of community and shared heritage based on an individual's identification with a particular racial group (40). More often than not, racial identity is based on socially rather than biologically constructed ideas. Individuals try to reconcile what they perceive their own genetic make up to mean socially with what society perceives their identity to mean. This tension between one's biological self, his or her perception of self, and society's perception of his or her self is at the heart of the complexity surrounding identity. This complex interaction between biological and social sits at the heart of this discussion, as it does Fanon's and Du Bois's texts, and it is that conflict that makes the concept of the moment of knowing an intriguing and complex concept to explore.

In his article, "On the Meaning of Alienation," Melvin Seeman outlines five major usages of the term alienation: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement. Seeman acknowledges that the five different uses can be merged to provide a more accurate assessment of a social situation. Thus, the merging of Seeman's definitions of powerlessness and normlessness create the foundation for the use and understanding of the term "alienation" within this essay. Seeman defines powerlessness as being "conceived" by the alienated individual "as the expectancy or probability held by the individual that his own behavior cannot determine the occurrence of the outcomes, or reinforcements, he seeks" (784). Then normlessness is described "from the individual point of view... [as] a high expectancy that socially unapproved behaviors are required to achieve given goals" (Seeman 788). These two definitions of alienation were chosen because they accurately express how the individual conceives his or her circumstance; whereas, other terms like ostracism are only descriptive of the act of exclusion. In addition to suggesting more psychological patterns of thought, "alienation" has legal denotations, which as the Rhineland case⁶ proves was a very real concern for bi-racial individuals who chose to pass. Furthermore, Seeman provides an accurate assessment of how the term self-alienation is to be understood: self-alienation is "generally characterized as the loss of intrinsic meaning or pride in work" (790). Thus, the individual withdraws from his or her self and society. For the individual, "To be self-alienated... means to be something less than one might ideally be if the circumstances in society were otherwise" (790). The feelings of inferiority are what drive the individual's decision to withdraw from what they see as society's unfair circumstances (i.e., racism).

Du Bois's philosophical concept of double consciousness⁷ is groundbreaking in terms of exploring the African American psyche concerning what it means to be black in a white world. However, double consciousness is, in fact, a condition dependent upon an individual's knowledge of his or her race. The effects of the condition can come into play only after an individual or character has become racially aware or conscious. In this essay, the concept of the moment of knowing is presented as that instance of becoming racially aware and all that new knowledge entails, especially for light-skinned mulatto characters. Thus, the moment of knowing can be viewed as preceding double consciousness.

Moreover, it is common among twentieth century mulatto characters in most African American literature to not only be a victim of double consciousness but to also experience at least one pivotal moment when it becomes obvious that they are restricted, by societal norms, to the black racial category and will not get to enjoy the twofold nature of their biological identity. This moment is crucial to identity formation and removes the individual from a state of innocence or, perhaps more accurately, a state of ignorance. For at that moment, the character realizes his or her dilemma as a biracial individual and must decide whether to accept the racial category (i.e., African American) assigned to him or her and the marginalized position that accompanies that category or to deny that assignment and seek reconciliation through alternative means.

The majority of the current scholarship on Larsen's novel can be classified into two major groups. One of the groups is a new collection of scholarship on *Passing* that is concerned with uncovering the homoerotic characteristics and tendencies evident in the central characters' relationship. Among those interested in exploring this theme in

Larsen's work are Corinne Blackmer, David Blackmore, and Jordan Landry. The majority of the criticism found in this group of scholarship stresses that the tension between the two central characters is a sexual tension that drives the storyline to its controversial climax.

The second group is more popular than the first and includes scholarship which is centered on analyzing the various themes concerning racial and class identity within Larsen's novel. In addition to exploring the homoerotic themes in the novel, scholar Corinne Blackmer also explores issues of racial identity. A host of scholars such as Bernard Bell, Matthew Wilson, Anthony Dawahare, Jonathan Little, Catherine Rottenberg, Jennifer Brody and George Hutchinson have also explored the same issues. Most of their scholarship focuses on the tenuous relationship between the two central characters, Clare and Irene. Both women are mulattas, but they have chosen to live two different lives. In addition to discussing issues related to racial identity, criticism in this school analyzes how issues of class are related to and affect racial relationships. Criticism on class, theoretically, can be classified as a separate school of scholarship. However, most scholars agree that racial identity and class are intertwined both within the novel and thus, within their criticism. Then, it is logical to classify criticism on class as a subcategory within the larger school of scholarship on the novel.

Overall, the group of scholarship that complements the purpose of this essay is the latter. While sexuality is an issue that Larsen seems to be commenting on in *Passing*, I see it being more in terms of feminine domesticity rather than homosexuality. Moreover, racial identity is a very complex social issue, and its complexity is amplified within the plot of Larsen's novel. Essentially, there are two theories within this school of criticism

concerning the novel's climax that often surface in critical readings of Larsen's novel. The first theory is that Irene kills Clare by pushing her out of a window, and the second theory is that Clare's death is a suicide. Within these conflicting theories lies the beauty of Larsen's novel. It is not clear which of these circumstances is true. Thus, there is room to explore many possibilities and theories that could support either argument, and the ambiguous ending allows critics and scholars to explore the psychological issues that would produce either outcome. This essay will use the concepts of the moment of knowing and double-consciousness to show that the psyche of the African American, particularly the mulatto, is so complex that plausible arguments can be presented to support suicidal and homicidal readings of *Passing's* ending.

This essay solidifies through its application of multicultural theory the use of Fanon's and Du Bois's non-fictional texts to explain social and psychological realities related to passing and to show how those realities are manifested in literature. Because social identity formation is so closely tied to language and the role language plays in identity, there will also be an attempt to account for and explain the importance of language in the identity process and to link the duplicitous nature of language with the duplicitous nature of identity within the above texts. Language will be approached through the use of Henry Louis Gates, Jr's theory of signification. Moreover, Larsen's twofold use of language, particularly her use of the term "passing," amplifies the important role that language plays, in relation to the concept of the moment of knowing, and culturally.

The latter chapter will apply the concept of the moment of knowing to discuss Larsen's mulatta character, Clare Kendry, to make clear the circumstances that could

provoke Clare's plausible suicidal nature. Additionally, the latter chapter will explore Du Bois's concept of double consciousness through Larsen's narrator and other central mulatta character, Irene Redfield. The discussion will show Irene's struggles with identity and double consciousness are manifested through Clare's physical presence and how the frustration that arises from her constant confrontation with her own identity struggle through Clare's presence could drive her to murderous extremes.

CHAPTER II

THE MOMENT OF KNOWING

The concept of the moment of knowing is defined as the instance when a character or an individual comes to the full knowledge of his or her blackness and realizes the subjectivity and marginalization that exist because of his or her race. The instance in texts is framed by the occurrences of alienation, usually from white society and self-alienation from all of society. The order of the occurrences is difficult, if not impossible, to predict. The nature of identity formation is so varied and subjective, and the circumstances surrounding the moment of knowing are different for each character. Moreover, it is important to note that while the moment of knowing includes terminology which suggests temporality, research and readings of various texts show that this instance exceeds temporal and linear limitations. Thus, the instance can occur without any prescribed pattern, and its effects can linger for an unspecified period of time. There are common themes and a certain degree of universality that connect the non-fictional texts and the fictional text. There is also, paradoxically and most interestingly, an element within the occurrence of self-alienation that results in extreme unpredictability that ultimately ties narratives together.

It is appropriate to begin discussing the occurrences through Du Bois's text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, because it is the earliest of the three texts and also regarded as the

premier text concerning the African American psychological experience at the turn of the twentieth century. One of the most groundbreaking ideas that he discusses is the notion of double consciousness. Before Du Bois defines double consciousness, he prefaces it with a discussion of “the veil.” His metaphorical use this image vividly illustrates the occurrence of alienation. He describes it as specifically isolating African Americans:

After the Egyptian and Indian, the Greek and Roman, the Teuton and Mongolian, the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,---a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. (38)

Before Du Bois is able to truly articulate and define the veil, he experiences alienation even though, at the time, he is not old enough to truly understand the moment for what it truly is: the onset of his moment of knowing. This occurrence happens during his New England childhood:

In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys’ and girls’ heads to buy gorgeous visiting-cards—ten cents a package—and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, —refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others...shut out from their world by a vast veil. I had thereafter no desire to tear down

that veil, to creep through; I held all beyond it in common contempt, and lived above it in a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows. (38)

Du Bois essentially introduces the veil as a representation of the duality that is present within the African American psyche. However, the presence of the veil also represents division. The incident during his childhood initiates his understanding of racism and how it promotes isolation and disparity.

Du Bois's moment of knowing is initiated by a peremptory glance from a classmate, and his feelings of being "shut out" certainly suggest that Du Bois's alienation based upon his race, as it were, began for him the process of his forming an identity behind society's divisive veil. Thus, Du Bois's account illustrates that, conceptually, alienation is the point during which the African American's or mulatto's identity is defined by his or her not belonging. The occurrence of alienation, as one might imagine, is a major part of the marginalization process of an individual or race because it means there are opportunities that the alienated individual will never have the chance to receive. Du Bois recognizes this disparity as a result of the divisive veil: "Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade; for the worlds I longed for, and all their dazzling opportunities, were theirs, not mine" (38). Although individuals or characters may not fully understand the extent to which alienation affects personal growth, they immediately recognize alienation as society's means of marginalizing them and denying them access to opportunities for a better life.

According to Seeman's definition, alienation is understood as not being self-imposed. It represents the constraints that society has placed upon an individual or character, in this case, because of race. However, self-alienation reflects an individual's

or character's personal decision to withdraw from society. After Du Bois is thrust behind the veil as a result of his classmate's glance and rejection of him, he retreats to "a region of blue sky and great wandering shadows" (38). For Du Bois, his departure from being a socially active member of society is mingled with contempt. As far as self-alienation being a part of the concept of the moment of knowing is concerned, it is the most difficult to pinpoint for several different reasons. Most times readers are not given much insight into the inner workings of an individual's or character's psyche when he or she is in a state of withdrawal. That may be because the individual or the character is so overwhelmed by the magnitude of trying to reconcile biological identity and social identity that the world becomes an indistinguishable haze of "great wandering shadows," and thus impossible to fully articulate. Furthermore, there is just simply something implicitly mysterious about self-alienation. I would argue that it is when an individual or character alienates his or her self from society that he or she confronts the repressed emotions and feelings related to his or her racial identity.

Du Bois's narrative also illustrates the conclusion of self-alienation. This part of Du Bois's narrative is most important to the concept of the moment of knowing because it shows that the extremely mysterious inner workings of an individual during the period of self-alienation produce a varied range of reactions from different individuals and that some individuals are bound in a perpetual state of self-alienation, whether by force or choice. I would argue that individuals or characters who choose to exist in a perpetual state of detachment are really existing in an extreme state of denial because they know that to reconnect with society means that they must finalize the moment of knowing, which in turn means coping with all of those repressed emotions related to their identity

as member of a marginalized race. In his narrative, Du Bois suggests that for him there is a substantial amount of time between the commencement of self-alienation and the time he rejoins society: “Alas, with the years all this fine contempt began to fade” (38). When Du Bois finally emerges from his state of self-alienation, he contemplates how he is going to approach life now that he has a new understanding of his place in the world. He reconnects with all of society with a notion to counteract the oppression and social injustice that, particularly white society has put in place. He is adamant that “they should not keep these prizes...some, all, I would wrest from them. Just how I would do it I could never decide: by reading law, by healing the sick, by telling the wonderful tales that swam in my head, ---some way” (38). Du Bois’s reconnection with society and his declaration reveal that he has experienced the moment of knowing because he retaliates by rejecting those repressed emotions of inferiority that surface throughout the process. The fact that he rejects alienation and marginalization prove that he has had the opportunity to think about and cope with those issues. Furthermore, Du Bois’s narrative illustrates that the moment of knowing does not necessarily have to produce a violent or self-destructive reaction; for some individuals the experience can be empowering and motivate them to challenge their repressed feelings that surface over the course of alienation and self-alienation.

In his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, a well-educated philosopher and scientist of French-African descent born in the Caribbean, Frantz Fanon, shares his experience of coming to the knowledge of his blackness. Interestingly, Fanon (born in the French Antilles over fifty years after Du Bois) comes from a different background than Du Bois. Despite their obvious differences, Du Bois’s and Fanon’s stories are strikingly similar,

suggesting that the experience of the moment of knowing for people of color with a history of being colonized is almost interchangeable and that the conceptual base remains true when applied to different situations. While Du Bois is concerned with a more philosophical approach to race, Fanon is very direct and precise:

“Dirty nigger!” Or simply, “Look, a Negro!” I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the world, and then I found that I was an object in the midst of other objects. Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others. Their attention was a liberation, running over my body suddenly abraded into nonbeing, endowing me once more with an agility that I had thought lost, and by taking me out of the world, restoring me to it. But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there, in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye. I was indignant; I demanded an explanation. Nothing happened. I burst apart. Now the fragments have been put together again by another self. (109)

Unlike Du Bois, whose alienation was prompted by a look of absolute rejection, Fanon’s alienation is initiated by way of a racial slur. From that moment, he is relentless in his quest to understand how blacks are essentially branded and ever-transformed by the utterance or encounter with a member of a different race, usually white. Fanon, at the moment of his alienation, which he describes as a state of objecthood, knows that the social structures in place have secured his position as a marginalized member amongst a marginalized race. As he describes, he was “an object in the midst of other objects”

(109). Unlike Du Bois, who responds to alienation with immediate acceptance and withdrawal, Fanon fights the alienation; in Du Boisian terms, he sought and fought to thrust himself beyond the veil by practically demanding attention.

Despite Fanon having the desire to essentially slip through the veil, he trips over it, signaling the commencement of the second occurrence associated with the moment of knowing: self-alienation. When the glances fix him and essentially reinforce his alienation, he withdraws. Similar to Du Bois, Fanon withdraws with very strong emotions of anger; he is “indignant.” The next thing that Fanon describes truly expresses how powerfully destructive the state of self-alienation can be for an individual, even to the point of self-destructive behavior as the later discussion of Larsen’s characters will show. Whereas Du Bois emerges from the moment of knowing determined and motivated to reconcile his marginalized status by exploring a wide range of talents, Fanon’s unanswered demands cause him to “burst apart” when, in his self-alienated state he is only answered by the other’s silence and his own rage.

Fanon’s experience exposes the transformative intensity of the moment of knowing. After Fanon experiences alienation and self-alienation, he is ever split. He even insinuates that he has to put the fragments of his identity back together by another self. After fully experiencing both alienation and self-alienation, Fanon’s second self emerges, which is the self he constructs as a result of seeing himself through another’s eyes. The appearance of two selves is what Du Bois articulates as double consciousness, but Fanon’s narrative illustrates that the moment of knowing, or first encounter with the other, causes the self to burst in two.

Essentially, Du Bois and Fanon are confronted with the same choice: to either accept the conditions before them or to deny those conditions and try to reconcile their identities through alternative, innovative measures. Although neither Fanon nor Du Bois is mulatto, they both experience a moment of knowing that produces very strong emotions and force them to acknowledge that their racial classification groups them with a race with a long history of inferiority and oppression. Fanon and Du Bois discuss how difficult, if not impossible, it is to accept and reconcile and their inferior roles assigned to them by society. As double consciousness suggests, racial reconciliation tortures individuals of color psychologically and may take a lifetime to reconcile, if reconciliation is achieved at all.

Fanon offers discussion in his book that may give more insight into what actually occurs when an individual experiences the moment of knowing. He describes a very simple scenario:

A normal Negro child, having grown up within a normal family, will become abnormal on the slightest contact with the white world...for the Negro there is a myth to be faced. A solidly established myth. The Negro is unaware of it as long as his existence is limited to his own environment; but the first encounter with a white man oppresses him with the whole weight of his blackness. (143,150)

Later, Fanon describes this moment in more scientific, psychological terms:

When the Negro makes contact with the white world, a certain sensitizing action takes place. If his psychic structure is weak, one observes a collapse of the ego. The black man stops behaving as an actional person. The goal

of his behavior will be The Other (in the guise of the white man), for The Other alone can give him worth. That is on the ethical level: self-esteem.

(154)

For Fanon, the moment of knowing is so pivotal because it removes the colored or bi-racial person from a state of ignorance. The experience is momentous because now an individual who has been taught and who knows how to exist in his or her own limited world must now redefine and restructure himself or herself in order to exist in this newfound larger world of multiple races, ideas, and boundaries. Faced with so many new, different, restrictive circumstances, the individual is appropriately described by Fanon as being crushed by his or her own blackness as he or she experiences the moment of knowing. Furthermore, Fanon looks beyond the experience and articulates the motivations an individual experiences that entices him or her to pass:

If he is overwhelmed to such a degree by the wish to be white, it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race; to the identical degree to which that society creates difficulties for him, he will find himself thrust into a neurotic situation. (100)

It is reasonable to suggest that the neurotic situation that Fanon discusses is equivalent to the double consciousness that Du Bois discusses in his book. In relation to double consciousness, the moment of knowing should be defined as the singular point in time when an individual becomes aware of and afflicted by double consciousness. Without that moment, the individual never has to grapple with double consciousness because the

individual is never confronted by or made aware of the social expectations of the other world, or more specifically, the community of people in power that define social expectations. For example, extremely isolated communities that have no contact with other civilizations do not question their own practices because those communities have not been confronted with any alternatives. However, after they are confronted with other civilizations, those natives are generally never the same. As Fanon explains, it is when the individual of color is put in contact with restrictive social structures that he or she begins to suffer from identity crises. In other words, to be suddenly black in a white world is to be, as Du Bois eloquently states, a problem.

Du Bois and Fanon illustrate how intense the moment of knowing can be for darker-skinned African Americans. Both are usually described as brown-skinned individuals. They, in a way, represent those who were not light enough to pass but still experience the moment of knowing or experience the realization of their blackness. When confronted with this intense moment, individuals with darker-colored skin immediately acquire a sense of racial consciousness. Those individuals become aware that they are not only shut behind a veil, but that they are also marginalized because of their race. However, I am convinced that the moment of knowing is much more intense for very light-skinned bi-racial individuals, which leads to a more heightened racial consciousness because not only are mulattos black and white, they are also not black and not white. This problem of being and not being essentially leads to knowing and not knowing what one is, which in turn creates the intensity and awkwardness that occurs for the light-skinned mulatto at the moment of knowing. Fanon eloquently explains such a circumstance: “There is a zone of nonbeing, an extraordinarily sterile and arid region, an utterly naked

declivity where an authentic upheaval can be born” (8). I would argue that the region which Fanon refers to is the moment of knowing. Furthermore, passing characters of the twentieth century are affected by intense upheaval. Such stringent racial conditions mixed with the complexities of identity formation during the early twentieth century resulted in duplicitous, often tortuous, passing identities among many twentieth century mulatto literary characters.

This experience of enlightenment (i.e., the moment of knowing) can be observed in a range of texts and other literary forms, such as poetry. Harlem Renaissance writer Countee Cullen published a volume of poetry in 1925 titled *Color*. “Incident” was published in the volume and offers a striking account of a speaker’s encounter with his first knowledge of his blackness as defined by whiteness:

Once riding in old Baltimore,
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,
I saw a Baltimorean
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,
And he was no whit bigger,
And so I smiled, but he poked out
His tongue, and called me, "Nigger."

I saw the whole of Baltimore
From May until December;
Of all the things that happened there
That's all that I remember. (1342)

Whether readers assume that the “I” is fictional or not is irrelevant. Cullen’s short poem illustrates the immense transformative effect that the “incident” has on the speaker. Similar to Du Bois’s and Fanon’s non-fictional accounts, the speaker in the poem is unable to forget. The experience in Baltimore becomes a part of how he defines himself throughout his life. He is essentially haunted by his experience because it is the only thing he remembers from his trip and is reliving it in the poem. Although readers do not get a direct description of the speaker’s transformation, the fact that this poem is presented as a reflection attests to the powerful nature of the experience.

A major component of the moment of knowing is usually language. Regardless of whether it is verbal or non-verbal, language plays a vital role in making the moment life-changing for those who experience it. As illustrated through Du Bois’s account, the rejection and/or realization that happens during the moment may occur as a result of body language, in Du Bois’s case, a glance. However, it could be through racial slurs like those experienced by Fanon. Du Bois shows that the moment of knowing is not confined to being stimulated by merely a verbal exchange. However, words tend to carry a lot of emotional triggers. A verbal exchange is usually the most powerful and most common stimulus for prompting any of the two occurrences (i.e., alienation and self-alienation) which compose the moment of knowing. Regardless of whether it is verbal or nonverbal, the message communicated through language can be equally powerful and condemning. In addition to language playing a vital role in identity formation, it plays an equally vital role in explaining, or at least attempting to explain, the passing character. To pass, one must not only look white but also be able to act the part as well. Speaking the right

dialect and communicating in ways that are socially acceptable are integral parts of passing successfully.

Moreover, for the passing character, language functions as a sign of their whiteness. Thus, in order to truly grasp the importance of language as it relates to the passing character, readers must understand how language systems can be manipulated. Henry Louis Gates, Jr.'s Signifyin/Signification theory attempts to explain how language functions as a sign and how sign systems are subverted by blacks:

Thinking about the black concept of Signifyin(g) is a bit like stumbling unaware into a hall of mirrors: the sign itself appears to be doubled, at the very least, and (re)doubled upon ever close examination. It is not the sign itself, however, which has multiplied. If orientation prevails over madness, we soon realize that only the signifier has been doubled....Their complex act of language Signifies upon both formal language use and its conventions, conventions established, at least officially, by middle-class white people. (44, 47)

Sheehy discusses the importance of Gates's theory as it relates to the passing novel:

To 'Signify,' according to Gates, is to engage in a manipulation of signs, armed with an awareness that these signs are always already embedded within a social power structure: The Signifyin(g) subject seizes the received sign, the received self—or, in the case of the 'passing' figure, the received self—and 'repeats it with a difference.'...In his theory of Signification, Gates might be said to repeat Lacan with a difference: Gates' theory, like Lacan's, is an attempt to examine the constructed

nature of the sign—and thus the constructed nature of the self, the sign from which all other signs proceed. (404,405)

In line with Gates's theory, the moment at which individuals or characters become aware that the world is defined by skin color, that individual also, knowingly or unknowingly, becomes aware that "signs are always already embedded within a social power structure" (Sheehy 404). More importantly, that individual becomes aware that his or her skin color is the most defining sign. Light-skinned mulattos are placed in a position of power when they realize their skin tone allows them to construct a self that is acceptable for the society that they exist in. Sheehy goes further to specifically discuss the passing character in reference to Gates's theory: "When a reader encounters, or a writer imagines, a 'passing' figure, he or she is thrust, perhaps unwillingly, into Gates's 'hall of mirrors,' forced to confront a sign that doubles and (re)doubles itself, shifting in meaning and challenging all received racial categories" (405). Thus, the passing figure is the ultimate signifier or, according to Gates, the ultimate trickster; he or she can manipulate the language and the system of signs that whites rely upon to distinguish blacks from themselves.

Larsen's *Passing* opens with a scene of the two central characters, Irene and Clare, passing at the Drayton hotel. While Irene contemplates her position as the passer, she criticizes the superficiality of the system of signs that white society rely on to distinguish blacks from white:

White people were so stupid about such things [i.e., passing] for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other

equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. (178)

Passing presents a clever example of precisely what Sheehy discusses. Not only do Larsen's passing figures double and redouble, but she constructs the novel in such a way that the term and title of the novel, "passing," doubles and redoubles in meaning and, as a result, challenges preconceived notions of racial identification. Moreover, the central character in James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* also criticizes and is amused by the system of signs, which he easily manipulates and supplants, living undetected as a white man:

I began to mingle in the social circles of the men with whom I came in contact; and gradually, by a process of elimination, I reached a grade of society of no small degree of culture. My appearance was always good and my ability to play piano, especially ragtime, which was then at the height of its vogue, made me a welcome guest. The anomaly of my social position often appealed strongly to my sense of humor...Many a night when I returned to my room after an enjoyable evening, I laughed heartily over what struck me as the capital joke I was playing. (251)

Both Larsen and Johnson show the system of signs, which whites relied on, to be very convoluted. In an effort to understand the term "passing," which the literature shows to be complex and subject to various connotations, readers should stop and ask themselves a series of questions: "passing for what?" and "passing to where?" Careful consideration of these seemingly simple questions leads to intricate answers which offer no real

solutions for the mulatto character(s) regardless of whether they are passing or not, as a later discussion of Larsen's character, Irene will show. However, the answers are great place to start for readers to begin to understand how the term "passing" functions within the system of language and essentially how its vagueness as a term enables passing.

While there has been a lot of research conducted on language and how language functions in our society, there is very little research on the significance of particular words within particular communities. One common colloquial use for the term "passing" within the African American community indicates death, usually the death of an individual. For example, instead of saying that a recently deceased individual has died, a person within the African American community is more likely to say that that individual has passed or passed away. The word "passing" embodies as many complexities as the passing characters it is used to describe. While it is understood that passing characters such as Irene and Clare embody duality, it may not be obvious to all audiences that the term "passing" correlates to the characters' condition, for the result of their dubious position on the color line is typically death, whether metaphorical or physical.

Gates's theory only begins to explain the complexity found within the passing novels and passing characters. In the intricate, complex world of identity formation within the passing novel, the passing figure transcends racial boundaries and passes into a realm where racial categorization dies or passes away. In her article on Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Martha Cutter acknowledges that the term "passing" becomes just as complicated as the characters' lives who try to manipulate the color line through the act of passing: "Through Clare, Larsen creates a character with multiple significations and a text that resists containment; one that, with its plural sexualities and identities, remains

mysteriously enigmatic to the end” (84). Larsen uses dialogue to reveal other levels of complexity of passing when Irene and Clare are in conversation about passing. Clare explains to Irene how she used her white heritage to her advantage in order to pass:

‘There were my aunts, you see, and authentic enough for anything or anybody.’

‘I see. They were passing too.’

‘No. They weren’t. They were white.’ (Larsen 187)

In this brief exchange within a world of manipulation, Larsen shows how muddled and complex the term passing and the act of passing can become. Surrounded by and separated by a world of appearances where things and people are never completely what they seem, Irene and Clare are disconnected. The worlds that they live in are completely different, not allowing them to even fully comprehend one another, especially when it comes to issues of race. During the exchange with Clare, Irene becomes confused as to who is passing for what. This exchange between Irene and Clare shows how Clare is consumed by the world of passing. The entire process can be so ambiguous that the mulatto character is never sure of another character’s status. As a result of this constant uncertainty revolving around authenticity of others’ identity, the passing character feels threatened and is always unsure of his or her status. Thus, the term takes on a life of its own. Meanings surrounding the word and act double and redouble so often that even the characters who are the master manipulators do not have a hold on it.

CHAPTER III
PSYCHOLOGICAL TURMOIL IN *PASSING*

Nella Larsen's Clare Kendry is one of many fictional characters who experiences what it is to be a problem and has to face her moment of knowing. Unlike Du Bois and Fanon, Clare's moment of knowing happens much later in life. Clare's story is interesting because she knows she is bi-racial and is made aware of the social restrictions she faces by her white aunts, who treat her as a servant. Nevertheless, unlike Fanon and Du Bois and the other central character, Irene, Clare refuses to accept her position; she is determined to step beyond the veil. Larsen presents readers with an ambiguous ending; as Miriam Thaggert states, "The reader never learns explicitly the reason for Clare's fall out of a window...this indeterminacy extends to the racial identity of Larsen's characters, an identity not always easily discernible because of the characters' mixed racial background and their inclination to 'pass'" (507-508). Furthermore, by not attributing Clare's death explicitly to suicide or homicide, Larsen's ambiguous ending allows readers to fully examine the societal pressures and psychological turmoil they face as a result of their bi-racial heritage.

Nevertheless, Clare is a near-perfect illustration of the dilemma that Du Bois articulates. Du Bois notes that he was often asked, "[H]ow does it feel to be a problem?" and noted that "...being a problem is a strange experience" (37). Like him, Clare Kendry

found herself being a “problem” early in life while she was being raised by her two white aunts who treated her more like a servant than family, making her do tedious housework and constantly reminding her of her inferiority because of her bi-racial heritage. Clare not only mirrors Du Bois’s sentiment, but explains her choice to elevate herself above the color line when she says, “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem...I wanted things. I knew I wasn’t bad-looking and that I could ‘pass’” (Larsen 188). Although Clare expresses appreciation for her aunts, saying, “If it hadn’t been for them [aunts] I shouldn’t have had a home in the world... I had a roof over my head, and food, and clothes—such as they were,” she still experiences her initial alienation (188). Clare’s aunts are adamant about alienating Clare and forcing her into a subservient role because she has Negro blood and, according to them, are amongst “the sons and daughters of Ham” (188). Thus, Clare sees passing as the only way to escape the negative treatment and ridicule. Jonathan Little believes “Clare’s background of grinding oppression and physical abuse shaped her decision to pass for white and improve her circumstances” (176).

Most readers and critics might assume that Clare’s moment of knowing occurs during her adolescent years when she was forced to live with her aunts. However, that time in her life only signals the initiation of her moment of knowing. Surrounded by her aunts and their racist rhetoric, Clare becomes not only alienated from the white community, but also envious of, and possibly alienated from, the black community as well, a sentiment she shares with Irene at one point during their unexpected reunion at the Drayton hotel: “I used almost to hate all of you. You had the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others” (Larsen 188). It is

possible that Clare hated people like Irene because they seemingly belonged to one race that embraced them and provided them with security, which are things Clare was not familiar with while living with her aunts. Although appreciative of her aunts' taking her in, Clare realizes that she has been alienated as a result of her biological identity and their prejudice. However, even after passing, Clare is not granted security in white society because not only does she continually struggle with her unreconciled identity, but she also suffers from paranoia, fearing that her secret might be exposed. Her paranoia essentially reinforces her state of alienation. Ironically, instead of society alienating her behind the veil among the black race, Clare chooses to alienate herself from the black race by passing and living within the white community. Instead of transcending the color line, Clare becomes a prisoner of the color line.

When choosing which side of the color line or veil she will live on, Clare acknowledges the struggle she faced, but her decision became final when she found a white man who offered her an invitation to all the advantages of white society. Despite her choice, she still expresses a feeling of being torn between two worlds. Clare acknowledges, "After he came, I stopped slipping off to the South Side and slipped off to meet him instead. I couldn't manage both" (Larsen 189). So, she decides to take an approach similar to the approach that Fanon takes. She goes on and attempts to rebel against that veil that has alienated her from the opportunity to actualize her full social and biological identity by passing as white and marrying a white man. Initially, Clare is successful at her attempt to thrust herself beyond the veil. However, what she soon learns is that although society had initially alienated her because of her race, when she chose to pass, she had then alienated herself. Her unexpected reunion with Irene at the Drayton

triggers something within Clare that causes her to withdraw from society's expectations and compels her to try to reconcile her identity by trying to reestablish ties with the black community while still passing in the white community. It is when Clare attempts to cross the veil back into the black community that she trips over it, and thus begins the occurrence of self-alienation for her. Throughout most of the novel, she exists in a state of ignorance, fully accepting neither the social responsibilities that come with being white nor black at that time. Clare does not realize that she is black and what it means to be black until the "Finale" and thus, does not fully experience the moment of knowing until the very end of the novel.

If the suicide theory is believed to be true at the conclusion of the novel, then Clare's situation is the perfect illustration of the most extreme reaction an individual can have after fully experiencing the moment of knowing. Clare's black heritage is exposed to her white husband, John Bellew, who has no idea that his wife is a mulatto during a party. He is outraged: "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (Larsen 271) In the next instance, in a haze of confusion, Clare Kendry is dead. After the haze clears, what is certain is that Clare falls out of a window to her death. However, what is unclear is whether she is pushed or she jumps out the window. Nevertheless, this moment is pivotal for exploring Clare's character. It is the first time that she has been confronted with the reality of what her blackness truly means in society. Even though her aunts treated her unfairly, they never used any racial slurs and generally kept her quite protected from the outside society. When readers consider that Clare lived the majority of her life in denial and alienation, never having to fully confront and reconcile the duality of her racial identity as a mulatta, it becomes quite easy to understand how Clare could feel

overwhelmed and become unable to cope with her true racial identity. Clare acknowledging the full scope of her racial identity involving African ancestry would automatically subject her to a different racial categorization and instantly transform the lifestyle that she had become accustomed to while living as a white woman. At the moment that John Bellew categorizes Clare with racial slurs, much like Fanon she feels the weight of her own blackness that she has repressed crush her, and a state of self-alienation takes over: “Clare stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full red lips and in her shining eyes” (Larsen 271).

Since she was a young girl, the aim of Clare’s life had been to distance herself from the African American race as much as she could. All the while, she had been pushing feelings of intense emotional hurt (guilt, betrayal, unworthiness, etc. for accepting privileges based on her Euro-American heritage) from her conscious awareness. When Clare tries to reconcile those emotions by trying to reconnect with the African American community, the result is self-destruction. Once the repressed emotions and memories have been brought back into awareness (conscious) by an encounter in which her skin color did not yield the expected outcome, she is confronted with seemingly quiet confusion. At that moment, Clare has fully experienced the moment of knowing. She not only knows what her position in society will be from that moment on, but also that of her child. Clare knows that the revelation of her blackness means not only that her child will be deemed the illegitimate offspring of an unlawful union⁸, but consequently she will be an illegitimate wife. Like Fanon, under the weight of such an

overwhelming realization, Clare bursts apart; but instead of choosing to cope with the double consciousness confronting her, Clare rejects belonging wholly to the black community and chooses self-destruction. I would argue Clare's amused smile is suggestive of her knowing that her attempts to escape the repercussions of her biological identity have been futile, but Clare knows that she still has a choice. Instead of being thrust behind the veil once again, Clare chooses to jump to her death.

In addition to the moment of knowing, Du Bois's, Fanon's, and Gates's texts present support for a plausible argument that suggests that Clare commits suicide. All of the authors present theories or discussions that show how important identity construction is for individuals. Manipulation of signs and language may offer temporary acceptance and relief from societal pressures, but the individuals must still cope with the internal struggles that come with not fully embracing the whole of one's identity. As a mulatta, Clare and her very light skin are the ultimate manipulation of the society's systems of signs. However, in her game of doubling and redoubling, Clare does successfully create a socially acceptable and affluent self, but she neglects to truly reconcile her dual identity. By never truly accepting or even acknowledging her African American heritage, Clare becomes a victim to the very system which she sought to control. In line with Fanon's own experimental observations, Clare's whole life is based upon her feeling inferior, and she is faced with neurotic impulses that even she seems unable to control. At once, Clare both wants to be in touch with the African American race through her connection to Irene, and at the same time she does not want to be connected to the African American race because of the inferiority factor attached to such an association. Clare is caught in between and tries to negotiate the color line by creating her own system of signs. Yet,

Clare is violently thrust back into a position of inferiority when her husband asserts his position of power in the social system. He establishes and asserts his position of power through labeling Clare as a “nigger...a dirty nigger” (Larsen 271). At that point, Clare is no longer able to negotiate or manipulate. Her inferiority is confirmed, and after living a life of denial and disassociation her biological identity overcomes the identity or the socially acceptable self that she has constructed.

Clare is just one example of how traumatic and intense the moment of knowing can be for mulattos. While passing for most of their lives and living in a seemingly perfect white world, mulattos live with many more repressed feelings because they did not accept their blackness. Thus, the sustained and significant period of denial that most mulattos who choose to pass experience causes the weight of their blackness to fall upon them with unbearable pressure, essentially crushing them. Being suddenly black in a white world is unbearable. Thus, suicide becomes a viable and real option for those mulattos faced with similar circumstances as Clare.

Nella Larsen’s Irene Redfield is a mulatto like Clare Kendry, but is under completely different circumstances. While Clare experiences the moment of knowing over the course of the novel, Irene is presented as a character who already understands the fact of her blackness.⁹ When both Clare and Irene encounter one another at the Drayton passing, readers are immediately made aware that Irene understands her position as a mulatto and the consequences of passing. She only chooses to pass when prompted by the cab driver who stops and suggests that she go to the Drayton to cool off (Larsen 175). Nevertheless, readers know that Irene does not choose passing as a way of life because she is deeply connected to the black community; she is married to a black man and

they have a child together. Throughout the novel, it is very clear that Irene knows that she is black and struggles with being loyal to her race throughout the novel (Larsen 258). When she refers to her loyalty to her race, readers assume that she is referring to the black community, but there is ambiguity there since her race is a combination of black and white. Thus, she is ultimately torn between her blackness and whiteness. Irene's inability to reconcile her bi-racial identity can ultimately be diagnosed as double consciousness. Her unstable existence is agitated and threatened when Clare enters the scene.

The novel opens with Clare and Irene awkwardly meeting each other after several years of separation. It is significant that at the beginning of the novel Clare and Irene are reunited at the Drayton, an elegant, segregated Chicago hotel, while both of them are passing. The circumstances of their meeting becomes ironic after readers become familiar with Irene's displeasure with Clare for choosing to pass and marry into white society, although readers learn that Irene "occasionally passes [as white] for convenience" (Bell 110). Throughout the novel, Irene is always in reluctant opposition with Clare, not truly knowing how to react to her on their many encounters. Donald Petesch offers, "To Irene Redfield, security is the most precious quality....Order, balance, control are achieved, in part, by the exclusion of unpleasant, potentially disruptive topics" (192-93). Thus, Irene has suppressed her double-consciousness and settled for a singular identity that denies her white ancestry in exchange for a peaceful life. However, when she is confronted by Clare, who she finds disagreeable but cannot elude, she then begins to manifest her displeasure with her life through strong ambivalent emotions. Michael Cooke observes that after Clare's arrival "[Irene] is prone to feelings of anger that she does not know how

to express or correct, and these feelings increase in frequency and force as the novel goes on, as Irene becom[es] paranoid and little short of murderous..." (66). Clare's presence threatens Irene's comfortable existence because up until Clare's arrival, Irene has never been intimately confronted with the side of society that she chose to suppress. However, it can be argued that Irene sees Clare as a mirror image of herself under different circumstances, and thus, Irene's identity and sense of security within black society is uprooted in Clare's presence because she is constantly reminded of the unresolved complexities (duality) of her own existence.

From the outset of their reunion, Irene is both condescending and oddly curious about Clare. During their reunion, Irene reasons passing to be "rather dangerous and...abhorrent," and yet she views Clare with "fascination," seeing her as "strange and compelling" (Larsen 190). It can be argued that Irene is also in a quest to merge her two identities into a truer self, which fuels both her anger and curiosity towards Clare, who has chosen a different path to seek the reconciliation of her selves.

Furthermore, the novel becomes just as much about Irene's "double-consciousness" as it is about Clare's struggle to come to terms with her blackness. The importance of Irene's story is confirmed by the fact that the majority of the novel is told through a limited omniscient narrator that reveals Irene's most intimate thoughts. Paradoxically, while Irene ridicules Clare's decisions, she too faces many of the same identity issues and struggles with trying to establish a place within one race while denying the duality of herself. While readers may view Irene as a character who has attained a successful merging of her two selves, it can be argued that Irene displays deep insecurity throughout the novel, as a result of her struggling with her unacknowledged

desire to have more interaction with acceptance from white society. Little also suggests Irene's displeasure within herself noting, "We [readers] are asked to recognize the self-delusion and misreadings which are related from Irene's consciousness" (181). Irene's passing at the Drayton alludes to her self-deluded state. Her choosing to pass occasionally serves as plausible evidence of her attempts to fulfill the desires stemming from her "double-consciousness," desiring total acceptance and fluidity in black and white society.

Readers are also introduced to another mulatta, Gertrude Martin, when Irene visits Clare at her home for tea. Gertrude is a light-skinned mulatto with a white husband who was aware of her racial heritage. One could argue that Gertrude is the only character in the novel that comes close to reconciling her two selves into a truer self, which explains why Irene receives her with such disdain. Although Gertrude did not live a life that could be considered passing, "her presence there annoyed Irene, roused in her a defensive and resentful feeling" (Larsen 195). Irene later admits that her annoyance "arose from a feeling of being outnumbered, a sense of aloneness" because her choice to live in black society has cut her off from the consciousness of other races. However, her annoyance is reasonably explained by her desire to interact with the other side of the color line without fully denying her black society. It is only in the presence of Gertrude, who has seemingly conquered the color line, that Irene's frustration begins to peak. Therefore, in one scene, Larsen eloquently offers a meeting of all three perspectives of the race problem facing mulattos: Clare, representing those who choose to pass into white society, denying their blackness while simultaneously longing to be in touch with it; Gertrude, representing those few successfully living on the color line; and Irene, representing those who choose

to live in black society but unknowingly long to be more in tune with their white consciousness.

Larsen goes further by implying that the three women and mulattos in general are granted a different level of self-consciousness that their counterparts are denied. Gertrude explains, “They don’t know like we do,” (Larsen 197) making it reasonable to infer that Gertrude is referring to people who are not mulattos. Gertrude’s statement also echoes Du Bois when he discusses a sort of special knowledge the Negro is born with: “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world” (38). Thus, Gertrude is possibly invoking the same imagery of a kind of special knowledge which is acquired only by way of race, with those of bi-racial ancestry having a unique perspective. Yet, while the three characters may share the same condition of being mulattos, their choices have shaped who they are and make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to identify with each other due to their residing in different worlds on opposite sides of the color line. Irene illustrates the distance that the color line has put between her and Clare, when after meeting Clare’s white husband (who expressed a deep hatred for blacks), she struggles to understand Clare’s decision. When Clare bid her farewell, Irene searched her face for answers and found herself later “puzzling again over that look on Clare’s incredibly beautiful face. She couldn’t, however come to any conclusion about its meaning, try as she might. It was unfathomable, utterly beyond any experience or comprehension of hers” (Larsen 206). Irene cannot understand or relate to Clare because she has chosen to live on the black side of the color line, and thus, suppressed her consciousness of her white side, which would allow her to identify with Clare, who lives within white society.

Later the narrator explains that while Irene could not identify with Clare, she, like Clare, understood how strong the divide was between the color line, noting that “their lives had never really touched. Actually, they were strangers. Strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness” (Larsen 222). In addition, Irene is more conscious of how the color line works and how great a divide separates her and Clare, despite Clare’s wanting to conquer the color line by maintaining her ties to the black community while preserving her secret and living in white society. The narrator goes beyond acknowledging Irene’s recognition of the color line, by exploring how it materializes: “[B]etween them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm...it was high, broader, and firmer; because for her there were perils not known or imagined by those others who had no such secrets to alarm or endanger them” (Larsen 223).

Despite being separated by the color line, Larsen implies Clare and Irene still share a connection because both are mulattos. Paradoxically, Irene expresses that “She has toward Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever” (Larsen 213). Conversely, Clare is also bound to Irene, which is supported by her continued desire to maintain a connection to Irene. Thus, what readers are offered in Clare and Irene are two characters who try to choose a side of the color line but are continually reminded by each other of the equally unfulfilling and unreconciled identities they possess; essentially, they serve as mirror images of each other. Their awkward position on the color line binds them to each other regardless of what they would want for themselves, and they can only escape their struggles if they are successfully able to reconcile their “double-

consciousness,” or if their mirror images no longer exist to remind them of their suppressed selves. Since their society does not allow either of them to acknowledge the full scope of their racial identity, the latter seems more plausible. This point is further supported by a conversation that occurs between Irene and her husband Brian, who is aware of her bi-racial heritage, when Irene notes, “It’s funny about passing. We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet we protect it” (Larsen 216). It can be argued that the black community, to which Irene is referring, defends passing because many blacks, to a certain extent, have an identity that is plagued with numerous ambiguities, and can also relate to the yearning of attaining a higher social standing. Although Clare appears the most torn of the three, at the conclusion of the novel Irene is the most conflicted character, torn between maintaining a peaceful, secure existence on the black side of the color line, and constantly encountering her mirror image (Clare) that exposes all of the ambiguities related to her own identity and uproots her false sense of security.

Clare’s and Irene’s strained relationship and struggles with identity and race reach a peak as Irene becomes more insecure with her own race and identity. Clare’s presence threatens Irene’s comfortable existence on the black side of the color line, especially when Irene starts to question her husband’s fidelity and suspects that he and Clare might be having an affair. This may be because Irene’s insecurity is rooted in her frustrating quest to satisfy both the black and white worlds, her fear that in satisfying one she is neglecting the other, and that in satisfying both Irene is neglecting herself. The narrator says that “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 [Clare] or the race....Or, it might be, all three [Clare, the race, and Irene]" (Larsen 258). The conclusion of the novel suggests that all is crushed; Clare, Irene, Irene's sense of security, and both of their notions of race and identity. Throughout the novel, Irene constantly perceives Clare as a threat to her established false identity since:

The superficiality of [Irene's] domestic and social tranquility, which she imagines threatened by Clare, reflects the distorted values of her class and the larger, white male-dominated society. Her desire to kill Clare in the dramatic last scene of the novel further underscores the depth of her insecurity. (Bell 110)

Nonetheless, Irene is not the only character that illustrates the insecurity. Clare is torn apart as a result of her attempt to reside on both sides of the color line. Her husband discovers her bi-racial racial heritage, and the narrator describes how she "stood at the window, as composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder" (Larsen 271). Clare's actions may not be the most pleasant, but they are understandable as scholar and critic Corinne Blackmer notes, "While the strategies of self-disguise and masquerade Clare employs are far from ideal, they represent viable means of survival and self-transformation under conditions that temporarily limit her moral agency as she fashions an identity that allows her greater autonomy and self-determination" (63,64). At her moment of exposure, Clare seems to have finally transcended the color line as she stands before her ridiculing crowd with "a faint smile on her full red lips and in her shining eyes" (Larsen 271). In his book *A Spy in the Enemy's Country: The Emergence of Modern Black Literature*, Petesch notes, "Clare Kendry smiles as in acknowledgement of

the end of her masquerade, Irene Redfield's reaching out to her becomes the unseen shove that pushes her [Clare] through the window to her death" (194). Perhaps Irene was so tortured by her inability to attain true self consciousness that she "reinforces her identity as an 'American' by destroying an African-American woman much like herself in outward appearance" (Blackmer 59). Unfortunately for Clare, both the white and black communities policed and maintained the color line and would not allow her attempts to live on both sides: thus, "Clare Kendry finds no peace, rest, loyalty—or any real security" (Little 174). Yet, Irene's actions have no clear morally justifiable end. Therefore, Irene chooses to destroy Clare so that she will no longer be confronted with a mirror image of herself or constantly reminded of her unfulfilled longings and desires which she has suppressed as a result of denying her "double-consciousness."

Irene is completely torn apart at the end of the novel. She longs to experience the consciousness of being in white society but refuses to give up the false security that she has achieved within the black community. Her dead end feelings drive her to push Clare out of the window. The narrator explains that Irene "couldn't have her [Clare] free" (Larsen 271). Irene felt Clare had attained a level of consciousness that she would never be able to reach. Through her deluded reasoning Irene felt that Clare had in some way transcended the color line. It is plausible that Irene could not have Clare free of the color line because she was still struggling to conquer her "double-consciousness." The struggle motivates Irene to murderous means when she pushes Clare out of the window because she no longer wishes to be continually confronted with the duality of her own identity through Clare's presence. Thus, in *Passing*, readers are presented with Irene being more disturbed and consumed with issues of race and identity than Clare, the passing character.

CHAPTER IV

CONCLUSION

Larsen's Clare Kendry is a perfect illustration of the often tragic outcome passing characters experience. However, she elevates her novel to a more disturbing level with Irene Redfield's psychological turmoil as a character coping with her decision to live within the black community. Both characters show that the turmoil mulattos experience can be particularly intense. Irene's bitter anger is the mechanism she uses to disguise her insecurities; whereas, Clare is simply too fragile and too invested in the enterprise of passing to accept the consequences of her moment of knowing. Regardless of whether readers believe that Clare commits suicide or that Irene commits murder, it is clear that mulattos' awkward position on the color line can produce very strong and destructive emotions that not only torture them but also eventually have disastrous effects for those associated with them.

Interestingly, in one scene, Larsen eloquently offers a meeting of three different perspectives of the race problem facing mulattos by introducing Gertrude Martin, a light-skinned mulatto with a white husband who was aware of her racial heritage. She along with Clare and Irene represent the options available to mulattos during that time: Clare represents those who choose to pass into white society, denying their blackness while simultaneously longing to be in touch with it; Gertrude represents those few who seem to

successfully live on the color line; and Irene represents those who choose to live in black society but unknowingly long to be more in tune with white society.

While at a tea with the two central characters, Gertrude is presented as the only one who comes close to reconciling her two selves into a truer self. However, readers should not entirely view Gertrude as Larsen's way of making a positive statement about passing. As Miriam Thaggert notes, Gertrude still has her own issues to conquer:

“Although she does not pass with her husband, Gertrude, in both her speech and actions, maintains a ‘dutiful eagerness’ to be perceived as white (516). Thus, she is still struggling to overcome the racist society she lives in and to reconcile her identity. Larsen's strategic inclusion of Gertrude in the novel allows readers to speculate that she believes that the merging of selves is elusive in a society that is plagued with racism and prejudice.

Larsen uses the encounter between the three to make a thought-provoking commentary on mulattos' societal situation and the act of passing. She implies that the three women and blacks in general are granted a different level of self-consciousness that their white counterparts are denied. In the provocative meeting, Gertrude explains, “They don't know like we do,” (Larsen 197) making it reasonable to infer that Gertrude is referring to people who do not have African ancestry. Gertrude's statement also echoes Du Bois when he discusses a sort of special knowledge the Negro is born with: “the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world” (38). Thus, Gertrude is possibly invoking the same imagery of a kind of special knowledge which is acquired only by way of race, specifically with individuals with African ancestry having a unique perspective.

The scene which Larsen crafts presents an interesting and what might be considered a positive view of double consciousness. Larsen seems to suggest that although double consciousness has adverse psychological effects which she and Du Bois highlight, there is some positive aspect of double consciousness. The tone and nature of the conversation between Larsen's three characters considered in relation to Du Bois's statements concerning double consciousness insinuate that the special knowledge or second sight that the characters have because of their bi-racial identity is advantageous in some way. Nevertheless, like most of the novel, there are two sides to Gertrude's enigmatic statement. The other interpretation of her statement suggests that "they" do not know the pain and upheaval those afflicted with double consciousness experience.

While Larsen highlights the dual functions of double consciousness, she clearly situates the act of passing as an unhealthy means to an end. It is portrayed as offering no real solutions related to reconciling the psychological effects of a biological identity that is a direct result of a history of institutions created and dominated by whites. Thus, from the beginning, characters because of their bi-racial identity are not given a choice. Essentially, by limiting blacks access to certain opportunities and privileges, white society makes the choice obvious for the bi-racial individual who can pass. The moment of knowing is fundamental in solidifying the character's decision. As Larsen's novel shows, the encounter with the other (i.e., white society) is a wholly derogatory and degrading experience for the black individual; he or she is violently thrust into a subservient position within the social structure. Passing becomes an opportunity for social acceptance and affluence, even if only enjoyed temporarily. However, the cost that the passing figure must pay (i.e., death) attests to the highly unfulfilling and dangerous

nature of the act. Larsen's choice to perpetuate the image of the tragic mulatta hints that she sees some accuracy in the fatal depiction. Ironically, the character is punished for a choice that is not really a choice. Consequently, the individual views passing as his or her only chance to acquire a better lot in life.

This is a dilemma that Larsen was very familiar with. She was bi-racial and lived somewhat of a unstable life. Her mother was Danish and her father was a Negro who died a few years after she was born. According to Charles Larson, later in life, Larsen, much like the occurrence of self-alienation that her characters experience, withdrew from society the last thirty years of her life (xiv). During that time that she "disappeared," it is suspected that she was passing (Larson xii). Thus, it is no surprise that she explores these themes and is able to create such an intimate psychological profile of her characters.

Larsen's understanding of the importance of one coming to terms with his or her blackness is demonstrated in Clare's husband's confrontation. Clare's moment of knowing is structured in such a way that it is undeniable and clearly signifies upon this significant instance which most blacks cite as an essential occurrence in their lives. Thus, by allowing Clare to experience that instance very similar to the way it is described in other works by blacks, Larsen allows her novel to transcend the world of the novel and joins this kind of coming-of-age discourse that is exclusive to the black community. In addition to Larsen highlighting and privileging the moment of knowing in her text, she accurately portrays the interconnectedness of the instance and double consciousness which no other text of the time had accomplished. Through her portrayal of Clare and Irene as equally psychologically damaged but for different reasons, she is able to

privilege the individual's experience as both separate from and connected to other narratives.

Ultimately, the concept of the moment of knowing begins a new conversation about and approach to exploring the passing individual. It is a way of understanding and mediating what may be seen as grey area within the concept of double-consciousness; it bridges the gap between a character's initial confrontation with their blackness, which is usually initiated by an encounter with white society, and the process of reconciliation that follows. This essay reengages the scholarly community in the conversation about double consciousness, a concept which still has much more to teach society. Together, these two concepts offer an insightful way for scholars to think critically about older passing narratives and more contemporary passing narratives, such as Philip Roth's *The Human Stain* (2000), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), and Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress* (1990). Larsen's *Passing* not only joins other narratives which retell and emphasize the impact of experiencing the moment of knowing or double consciousness but also dominates the conversations because of the level of skill which she is able to execute the telling. While Du Bois, Fanon, and other twentieth century writers were able to recognize and articulate these conditions separately, Larsen ties them together in a novel filled with love, hate, and despair.

NOTES

1. W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; rpt. Boston: Bedford, 1997). Subsequent references from this edition will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
2. Mulatto or mulatta (feminine): One who is the offspring of a European and a Black; also used loosely for anyone of mixed race resembling a mulatto. See Werner Sollors "A Miscegenation Vocabulary" in *Interracialism: Black-White Inter-marriage in American History, Literature, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 211-219.
3. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; rpt. New York: Grove, 1982). Subsequent references from this edition will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.
4. Not related to Jane Mathison's and Paul Tosey's "moments of knowing" that deals with information processing during interviews. See their article "Exploring Moments of Knowing: Neuro-Linguistic Programming and Enquiry into Inner Landscapes." *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 16.10-12 (2009), pp. 189-216.
5. Nella Larsen, *Passing* (1929; rpt. New York: Anchor, 1992). Subsequent references will be indicated by page numbers in parentheses.

6. See Miriam Thaggert's article "Nella Larsen's *Passing* and the Rhinelander Case," (2005; rpt. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2007), pp. 507-532. The Rhinelander case occurred in New York in 1925: "Leonard Kip Rhinelander sued his wife, Alice Beatrice Jones, wife for fraud. Leonard claimed he did not know that his light-skinned wife was 'colored,' the daughter of a white woman and dark-skinned cab driver" (Thaggert 508). Although Alice won the case and a substantial amount of money, she was humiliated throughout the process, forced to expose her body in front of the judge to prove her blackness as being discernible. Larsen cites the case in *Passing*. In doing so, she connects her work to contemporary social issues and further supports the idea of the black body as a subject of ambiguity and exploitation. Furthermore, the case represents the legal dangers and repercussions associated with passing.
7. Double consciousness is a concept that seeks to explain the African-American's psychological state of being. Du Bois describes it as being the "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (38) and later uses the term "two-ness" (38) "double self" (39).
8. See Charles Chesnut's "What Is a White Man?" (1899) reprinted in Werner Sollors' *Interracialism: Black-White Inter-marriage in American History, Literature, and Law* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), pp. 37-42.
9. See Frantz Fanon's "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952; rpt. New York: Grove, 1982), pp. 89-119.

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