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Security and Sacrifice in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Abstract

Nella Larsen's *Passing*, published in 1929, recounts the tumultuous reunion of childhood friends, Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield—two light-skinned Black women who have taken dramatically different paths in adulthood. While Irene has married Brian Redfield, a Black doctor and taken on an active role in Black upper-society, Clare has constructed a white identity by marrying, at the age of eighteen, a racist, white man. This article analyzes Larsen's novel as an exploration into the ways individuals pursue and relate to the concept of security in an unjust society. It argues that the text's central characters are each passing as a manufactured identity that holds more social capital than their underlying identity and examines the differences in what each character is willing to sacrifice for the security this social capital provides. The article investigates why Irene views Clare as a threat by considering Irene's marriage to Brian, her queer desire for Clare, and her deep need to access security by conforming to heterosexual expectations. Ultimately, Irene perceives Clare to be threatening because she fears her husband Brian's attraction to what Clare represents—a rejection of the social norms and expectations of the Black bourgeoisie.

Keywords

Nella Larsen; Passing; Black Bourgeoisie; Queer Studies; Black Studies

Peer Review

This work has undergone a double-blind review by a minimum of two faculty members from institutions of higher learning from around the world. The faculty reviewers have expertise in disciplines closely related to those represented by this work. If possible, the work was also reviewed by undergraduates in collaboration with the faculty reviewers.

Acknowledgments

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To live in a society built as an unjust social hierarchy is, often, to spend a lifetime looking to become unassailable. *Passing* by Nella Larsen explores the disparate ways members of such a society seek to do this through the characters Brian Redfield, Irene Redfield, and Clare Kendry. The novel, set in the Harlem Renaissance, recounts the tumultuous reunion of childhood friends Clare and Irene, who have taken dramatically different paths in adulthood. Clare, a light-skinned Black woman, has constructed a white identity by marrying at the age of eighteen a racist white man, who is unaware she is racially passing. Meanwhile, Irene, also a light-skinned Black woman, is married to Brian, a Black doctor, and has taken on an active role in Black upper-class society. These characters are each pursuing their own interpretations of what it means to be secure in a country that is fundamentally unsafe for anyone who is not white, male, cisgender, and straight. What each character is willing to sacrifice for this, as well as how they view others in relation to their security, differs. Ultimately, Irene perceives Clare as a threat to her sense of security and Brian as essential to it, and this perception is key to understanding Irene's unreliable narration. Some have pointed to Irene's view of Clare as a threat as being rooted in her attraction to Clare (Butler; Dean). However, I believe Irene sees Clare as threatening less because she is attracted to her, and more because she fears Brian's attraction to what Clare represents—a rejection of the social norms and expectations of the Black bourgeoisie. What I hope to do here is investigate how Clare presents a threat to Irene's security in relation to Brian by examining each of these characters' forms of "passing" in interaction with each other and in response to oppressive forces.

True to its title, Nella Larsen's *Passing* includes various instances of characters passing as a manufactured identity that holds more privilege than their underlying identity. The most obvious example of this is Clare Kendry. The extent to which passing for white provides her with upward mobility is described best by the character herself in a conversation with Irene Redfield. Clare says, "Then, too, I wanted things. I knew I wasn't bad-looking and that I could 'pass.' You can't know, 'Rene, how, when I used to go over to the south side, I used to hate all of you. You had all the things I wanted and never had had. It made me all the more determined to get them, and others. Do you, can you understand what I felt?" (Larsen 27). Clare, who had come from less money than Irene and been forced to live with her racist white aunts upon the death of her father, sought both the material and social capital she desired through passing. "All the things" she refers to Irene as having that she "wanted and never had had" are both tangible goods and the less tangible stability Irene was granted by way of her more privileged background.

Less conspicuous is the form of passing Irene is engaged in. Despite considering Clare's performance of whiteness an "abhorrent thing" (Larsen 29), Irene, herself, is passing, not as white, but as heterosexual. Irene's attraction to women is made especially clear in her attitudes toward and interactions with Clare. She frequently refers to Clare's appearance in a desiring fashion, deeming her "just a shade too good-looking" (Larsen 71) and speaking of her eyes as "hypnotic" (Larsen 82). Scholars such as Elizabeth Dean have made compelling arguments for the existence of Irene's queer identity. In her article "The Gaze, The Glance, The Mirror: Queer Desire and Panoptic Discipline in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," Dean points to the nature of Irene's form of passing, writing that:

Irene frequently dwells on the sacrifices she fears she must make for her family's comfort—and, more truthfully, to maintain her own position of social respectability in her and in others' eyes. She muses, "Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained? ... she was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life" (235). In the end, her desiring gaze is inextinguishable but her panoptic gaze produces crushing fear of insecurity (personal, moral, financial, familial) precisely because of the queer gaze's potential to disrupt her treasured security and respectable status through the "unknown ecstasy" of the queer attraction that she fears (235). (Dean 101)

Dean skillfully draws a connection between Irene's family and their central role in her performance of heterosexuality. Her security is dependent on a heterosexual lifestyle and, thus, demands the sacrifice of her queerness—of the “unknown ecstasy” Dean points to as being “of the queer attraction that she fears” (101).

Perhaps even clearer than Irene's queer desires is her desire for security. While scholars like Dean have pointed to Irene's sexuality as an “inextinguishable” threat to her security—a threat embodied by Clare Kendry—I argue that Irene's security was never legitimately threatened by her attraction to Clare or to women generally (Dean 101). Arguments like Dean's carry with them the credence of historical context, as being openly (or found out as) queer was a significant danger in 1920s America, especially for queer Black women, who “sat at the bottom of the hierarchy of respectability” (Dean 99). However, I remain convinced that Irene's longing for safety, obsession with respectability optics, and skill for convincing herself of more socially acceptable falsities would dominate any impulse to act on her queer feelings, making such feelings essentially unthreatening. Irene's pull towards Clare may create cognitive dissonance and discomfort, but ultimately her need to be safe and respectable is greater than anything else. The part of Larsen's text that Dean adeptly utilizes in arguing Irene is queer also shows that Irene would never sacrifice her social standing and the security it brings. In this passage, Larsen writes that to Irene, “security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for any of the others, or for all of them would she exchange it” (112). Irene would not have been willing to “exchange” the security that passing for straight provided her with for any kind of exploration into her sexuality.

Nevertheless, Irene still faces an obstacle to her security, not in the form of her own queer feelings, but in the possibility of Brian Redfield's. David L. Blackmore thoroughly explores evidence that Brian, Irene's husband and the father of her children, is passing for heterosexual in his article, “‘That Unreasonable Restless Feeling’: The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen's *Passing*.” Blackmore especially points to Brian's desire to move to Brazil, a “more permissive environment for homosexual activity” as indicative of his queerness (Blackmore 477). Indeed, one of the first impressions readers are given of Brian is when Irene expresses that, “Brian doesn't care for ladies, especially sick ones. I sometimes wish he did. It's South America that attracts him” (Larsen 43). It is notable that Brian's attraction to South America is framed as being in opposition to attraction to women.

Moreover, Brian's queer identity presents less of a threat to Irene's security than his pull toward a rejection of oppressive, American social norms and heterosexist expectations. After all, Irene would have no reason to be concerned if Brian were just as drawn to the security of meeting New Negro respectability standards as she is. Indeed, Brian appears to be far less attracted to the kind of security and stability Irene craves. Larsen makes this tension clear quite early in the text, writing that:

[Irene] hoped that [Brian] had been comfortable and not too lonely without her and the boys. Not so lonely that that old, queer, unhappy restlessness had begun again within him, that craving for some place strange and different, which at the beginning of her marriage she had had to make such strenuous efforts to repress, and which yet faintly alarmed her, though it now sprang up at gradually lessening intervals. (48)

Irene and Brian's relationship is depicted from the start as a struggle in which Irene consistently tries to suppress Brian's desire to move away from American upper-class society and expectations. This desire is even named as being of a queer nature—as “that old, queer, unhappy restlessness” (Larsen 48). It is worth mentioning here that the word queer has been used as a term for homosexual since the late 19th century, well before *Passing* was published in 1929 (“queer”).

When Clare enters the lives of the Redfields, she brings with her the possibility of a life lived in rejection of repression and self-sacrifice. Clare is portrayed by Irene as being intent on following

her desires with little regard for the thoughts of others or potential consequences of her actions. She pursues an entry into the Black community through Irene, despite the threat it poses to her should her dangerously racist white husband discover her activities; she crosses the boundaries of class in Irene's home by interacting with Irene's servants, Zulena and Sadie, on a personable level (Larsen 81; Wilson 997); and she openly expresses her dissatisfaction with being a mother (Larsen 69). Irene has constructed a life for herself and her family based around the idea that suppressing one's unsafe inclinations and leaving the uncomfortable unsaid is unavoidable, and Clare brings this into question by acting so unapologetically on her desires. In doing so, she debases the shared social facts of the Redfield home. This very well could lead Irene to have concerns about what a connection between Clare and Brian could bring, considering Brian is already amenable to rejecting the repression that upper-class status entails.

Following Clare's entry into their lives, Brian grows more irritable. It is worth asking if his change in temperament is the result of Clare awakening his desire to stop living by the confines of respectability optics. Even if this is not the case, it certainly seems this would be an easy conclusion for Irene to draw. In response to Brian's growing ire, she thinks, "if I could only be sure that at bottom it's just Brazil" (Larsen 88). This suggests Irene suspects Brian's foul mood to be rooted in a yearning for Brazil, but that she also holds concerns that Brazil is only part of a bigger picture. The bigger picture may be Brian's queerness and pull to stop passing for heterosexual in a society permeated with homophobia. Blackmore explores this passage in Larsen's text in his article, writing that, "This passage late in the novel confirms that all along Irene has used her fears about Brazil to mask deeper concerns about her husband. Just as Irene refuses to name her own attraction to Clare, she will not name Brian's same-sex desire either—except to call it 'Brazil'" (Blackmore 478). Blackmore is effective in pointing to Irene's inability to name what brings her uneasiness. Additionally, Blackmore's analysis of "Brazil" as being synonymous with same-sex attraction is worth noting when examining other times Larsen references it, which add credence to the possibility that Brian is, in fact, queer and that his frustration late in the novel is related to his sexuality.

Irene remains incapable of naming her true concerns for the rest of the novel. This inability becomes clearest when she concludes that Brian and Clare are having an affair. Scholars, such as Dean, have posited the alleged affair is Irene's way to "rationalize Clare's disruptive desirability according to the respectability gaze of bourgeois New Negro ideology" and has no ground in reality (Dean 100). Indeed, Irene is unreliable in narrating the premise of the alleged affair and readers are given no concrete evidence of it actually transpiring. However, in a way, Irene is closer to naming her true suspicions than she ever has been before, for what Irene truly fears is that Brian is having an affair with Clare's disregard for security. Subconsciously, she worries he is attracted not to Clare herself, but to what she represents—a rejection of the expectations and oppressive structures of New Negro upper society. Because Irene is unable to contend fully with the prospect of her husband being queer, she can only name her concerns as an affair of a heterosexual nature.

In the final chapter of *Passing*, Irene asks Clare what she would do if her husband discovered she was not white. Larsen writes, "Clare, who was sunk in a deep chair, her eyes far away, seemed wrapped in some pleasant impenetrable reflection. To Irene, sitting expectantly upright, it was an interminable time before she dragged herself back to the present to say calmly: "I'd do what I want to do more than anything else right now. I'd come up to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I'd be able to do as I please, when I please" (111). To Irene, this is the epitome of Clare's recklessness. While Irene found Clare's rejection of her race to be distasteful, she could respect it, because she considered it to be in the name of the soundness of status Irene, herself, was chasing. Passing for white, like Clare, and passing for straight, like Irene and Brian, are both means to an end Irene sees value in. For Clare to stop passing is once again to turn Irene's reality on its head. If Clare does so, and is happy about it, she opens up the possibility that Brian could do the same. Thus, it follows that

this is the moment Irene names as “the first time that she had allowed herself to admit to herself that everything had happened” (Larsen 112), as this is the moment Irene identifies Clare, and the option to reject passing that she represents, as a complete and immediate threat. After this admission, Irene returns to the prospect of Brazil: “Now that she had relieved herself of what was almost like a guilty knowledge, admitted that which by some sixth sense she had long known, she could again reach out for plans. Could think again of ways to keep Brian by her side, and in New York. For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in the land of rising towers. She was an American” (Larsen 112). It feels almost as if Irene plainly says here she will not choose to come out as queer and reject passing, as she believes Clare and Brian both yearn to. If we extend Blackmore’s interpretation of “Brazil” to be code for “same-sex desire” in Irene’s thinking, this seems even more plausible. Irene is asserting that she will not forgo the security that performing heterosexuality provides her, and she will do whatever she can to make sure Brian does not either. She will not “go to Brazil” (Larsen 112).

Irene Redfield’s unreliability as a narrator leaves many questions unanswered and many questions left to be asked. What is clear is that she views Clare Kendry as a threat and views both self-sacrifice and her husband, Brian as integral to her security. While Irene seems to be attracted to Clare, her need to access security by conforming to heteronormative expectations blocks her from any action that might jeopardize her social standing, and this essentially overrides the threat associated with Irene’s queer feelings. Since there is little to no reason to believe Clare and Brian are actually having an affair, one must then ask why Clare is seen as so threatening. Perhaps it is because Brian, the key to Irene’s identity as a straight, respectable New Negro Woman, is drawn to the same rejection of sacrificing behavior that Clare emulates.

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