

“NOT DEFINITE OR TANGIBLE”: IMAGINING MULTIRACIAL IDENTITIES AND  
RECOGNIZING MULTIPLICITY IN PASSING NOVELS

A Thesis

by

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This thesis meets the standards for scope and quality of  
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## ABSTRACT

Scholars have long focused on the significance of race in passing novels of the Harlem Renaissance and have recently explored the intersections of gender in these texts. However, discussions about the characters of these novels lack significant focus on their identities as multiracial. Rather, scholars tend to analyze these novels through a binary lens, viewing black characters as “crossing over” to pass as white. Describing passing in this way perpetuates the simple, ideological binaries (black vs. white) that have formed in the racial imaginary. These imaginaries inform how we see race and encourage us to understand identity in terms of opposition. Looking at passing as unidirectional supports this racial imaginary as it ignores the experiences of multiracial individuals who neither fit in the binary nor move only in one direction.

To work against this problem, I draw from Michael Hames-García’s theory of multiplicity, Judith Butler’s performativity, and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s intersectionality. I use these theories to articulate the subversive frameworks in passing novels as they explore the multidirectional and often contradictory paths of passing and destabilize the racial imaginary. On the one hand, performativity establishes the pressures multiracial individuals experience to adhere to the standards of the racial imaginary which leads to racial erasure. On the other hand, however, characters use performativity to gain mobility and to subvert the racial imaginary. The lens of multiplicity builds on intersectionality to express the complexity of multiracial identities, revealing how passing is a multidirectional movement and how racial identification is often informed by gender inequity.

Thus, my project develops a lens to examine passing as multidirectional. I apply this lens to passing novels that actively critique the racial imaginary: Charles Chesnutt’s *The House*

*Behind the Cedars* (1900), Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1928) and *Comedy: American Style* (1933). These novels depict examples of how multiracial individuals reject the racial imaginary through multiplicity. Looking at how the novels expose this complex multiplicity reveals how the novels construct theoretical frames for understanding intersectional identities. Lastly, I explore how contemporary passing novels depict the way the racial imaginary persists, and, despite laws preventing racist segregation, racism still limits intersectional identity expression.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my parents, Amador and Frankie Ramirez. Without your unconditional love and passion, I wouldn't have been able to write this thesis. I love you both!

I have also dedicated this thesis to my siblings, Amanda, John, Mikayla, and Emma Ramirez. You always got my back!

Lastly, this thesis is dedicated to my loving husband, Nick Gentry. You helped make this idea of mine a reality by your constant encouragement and support. You're the best.

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Lastly, I want to acknowledge the people who attempted to discredit my heritage or the heritage of others like me; I am now able to embrace my multiplicity and hope this thesis will help others to do the same.

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## INTRODUCTION

“The biracials bended in both directions, moving between the groups, though always somewhat outside each.”

-Claudine Chiawei O’Hearn, *Half Half: Writers on Growing Up Biracial*

The Harlem Renaissance was a time during which African Americans actively challenged oppression and searched for new opportunities of success by questioning the structures of society. This era included the rise of the New Negro movement and the fight of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) against oppression and violence enacted upon black bodies.<sup>1</sup> To express their discontent, some African Americans turned to writing. In addition to the political writing of magazines and newspapers,<sup>2</sup> African American fiction increased in popularity, some of which included fiction focused on racial passing. Indeed, many novels in the 1920s-1930s began to include multiracial characters who would pass as white. Society’s fascination with the act of passing proved significant, for during this era, people viewed race as an essential category. Per the contemporary social construct, people were categorized as either black or white, not both. This racial dichotomy developed from the 1850s “one drop rule,” a construction which defined whites as those who had no black ancestry, while the definition of black could apply to anyone who has even one black ancestor (Kawash 132). While this “rule” seemed to be a scientific approach to classifying race, multiracial individuals complicated this definition, as many could pass between these categories unnoticed.<sup>3</sup> Thus, the

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<sup>1</sup> See Nathan Irvin Huggins’ *Harlem Renaissance* (18).

<sup>2</sup> Some writings included the NAACP’s *The Crisis*, a magazine that was “founded and edited by W.E.B. DuBois” (Huggins 27).

<sup>3</sup> Throughout this project I will use the term multiracial consistently as I believe the term demonstrates the divergence of multiracial individuals from the racial binary. However, as biracial, multi-ethnic, bi-ethnic, and mixed-race are used in the scholarship I refer to, I may occasionally use those terms when appropriate. Ultimately, all terms work to describe the identity of someone who does not fit the racial or ethnic binary.

reductive definition of racialized biology, hinging on people's "blood" violently separating them from one another, ultimately failed in defining whiteness and blackness. By invoking failure, I do not mean to suggest that this rule failed in creating the defining conditions for individual and institutional racism to flourish. On the contrary, this rule succeeded all too well. Rather, I am pointing out the faultiness of this definition that resulted in—and continues to result in—individuals constructing their own ideas of what it means to be white through developing a racial imaginary.

Many scholars have discussed what is meant by the racial imaginary. Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldivar, and Johannes Voelz point out that "[w]hatever is real is accessible to us only if it is *imagined as real*. It *becomes* real not as an individual act or as the result of an individual faculty—the imagination—but by drawing on already existing forms and patterns—imaginaries—that have an important social function" (xi). For instance, the phenotypical traits of skin color, facial features, or hair texture has been separated into categories and applied to different racial groups. Thus, if someone has the characteristics associated with whiteness, that person can be imagined as white. Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap write about what they call the "racial imaginary" as "something we all recognize quite easily: the way our culture has imagined over and over again the narrative opportunities, the feelings and attributes and situations, the subjects and metaphors and forms and voices, available both to characters of different races and their authors" (22). They draw on the way in which authors imagine race and explore how whiteness is not viewed as a racialized identity in our culture, but rather, absent of race. Everything but whiteness becomes imagined as a racial "other." This idea speaks to the racial imaginary that developed from the "one drop" rule of the nineteenth century as people drew on existing beliefs that blacks and whites were separate from each other. No

matter how inaccurate these binary beliefs were, they supported the social power dynamic to keep whites in power.

What this racial imaginary ultimately does is construct binaries which reinforce structures passed throughout history which work to maintain power dynamics. What I endeavor to accomplish in this project is to show how passing novels subvert these racial imaginaries through the perspectives of multiracial characters. Nella Larsen's Irene Redfield explains in *Passing*, "[t]here are ways. But they're not definite or tangible" (77) in reference to how one might tell the difference between whites and blacks. This idea of intangibility drives my analysis of passing novels, for these novels speak to the imperceptibility in distinguishing between individuals. Passing novels critiqued social hierarchies by transgressing the bounds of categories of racial identity. Building upon the cultural and political movements of the NAACP and the New Negro movement, passing novels brought attention to the fragility of social categories as well as questions about how African Americans can empower themselves in the face of oppression. In so doing, passing novels destabilize the racial imaginary that so many people held to be an essential truth.

### **What This Project Means to Me**

I first read Nella Larsen's *Passing* as an undergraduate in my senior capstone class. Before this class, I had little understanding of what a "passing novel" was and, in fact, I had read very little literature that depicted the experiences of multiracial or multi-ethnic individuals. Growing up with a Latino father and Caucasian mother, I always struggled with the feeling of in-betweenness. I questioned whether my whiteness prevented me from claiming my Mexican heritage. As Claudine Chiawei O'Hearn puts it, "[c]ould I be both, or did one trump the other?"

(xii). Reading *Passing* led me to what could be described as an epiphany—my intellectual and personal “aha!” moment. Though of course I always knew I was not the only person in the world experiencing this confusion over racial or ethnic identity, I couldn’t imagine other people like me. Having grown up constantly questioning my identity, the experience of reading about other women who lived between the binary affirmed my feelings of displacement. Multiracial and multi-ethnic people do exist, and our identities are valid. After *Passing*, I read Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* which became the subject of my senior capstone project. I then continued searching for more literature and scholarship that explored the struggle of multiracial people. What I found in the scholarship talking about these multiracial writers, though, confused me because it didn’t reflect my experiences. Scholars described multiracial characters like Irene and Clare from *Passing*, or Rena from *The House Behind the Cedars*, as singularly black who crossed over to appear white. Although I recognize the importance of analyzing the struggle of African Americans through the experiences depicted in passing novels, what was missing was the recognition of the struggle of the multiracial individual to feel as though they belong to any group at all.

This question of belonging permeates our culture as multiracial individuals are forced to defend their identities ceaselessly. In 2009, when Barack Obama became the first African American President of the United States of America, people questioned, “but is he *really* black?” A CNN article from 2008 noted that “[t]here are some who point out Obama is just as white as he is black. He may be the nation’s first black president, but he would also be the nation’s 44th white president” (Carroll par. 5). Some were irritated he claimed his blackness while they were simultaneously unable to accept him as a white man. Many diminished his black identity because they could not accept him as something “in-between.” The discussion of President Obama’s race

hinged largely on negativity—he was always “not something.” Therein lies the problem with examining passing texts without the recognition of the layer of complexity that multiracial individuals face. People may label us “black” or “white” or “Hispanic” or “Mexican American,” but that does not mean we will be allowed the agency to identify ourselves as such.

On multiple occasions I have claimed my Latina identity only to be told “But you’re only half,” or “You’re not *really* Latina.” These assertions caused me to question, for much of my life, “Would I be worthier to these people if my parents were the same race and ethnicity?” Now I see these questions were people’s attempts at diminishing or erasing my claim to my heritage because I did not easily fit into either end of the binary. The nineteenth century’s “one drop” rule had permeated within our cultural imaginary and created a default way for people to relate to others. Questioning the “amount” of Latina I am was really their way of telling me my biology separates me from belonging to my culture. Because of my experience, and the experiences of others who do not fit the racial or ethnic binary, I made the resolution to close the gap in the scholarship on passing novels by focusing on the complexity of multiracial individuals. I am in no way trying to compare my struggle in understanding my identity to the racial inequalities that multiracial individuals experienced during the Harlem Renaissance, nor am I comparing my struggle to the experiences of African Americans. I hope only to use my personal experiences instead to question why society finds the need to categorize people according to the standards of racial dichotomies while simultaneously refusing multiracial and multiethnic individuals the right to claim their own identities. These passing novels provide one way of answering these questions. I plan to explore the in-betweenness that these characters experience and represent for multiracial individuals to further destabilize the racial imaginary in which we exist.

## Multidirectional vs. Unidirectional

To explore this racial imaginary, I will intervene within the existing conversation on passing novels. Scholars have viewed the term passing as unidirectional, as a person moving from black to white.<sup>4</sup> In this thesis, I focus on passing not as a movement from one category or identity to another, but rather, as a multilayered action that manifests in response to society's insistence upon strict categories. Many scholars, however, define passing as a form of crossing. Thadious Davis describes Clare and Irene from Larsen's *Passing* as crossing from one race to another. Werner Sollors asserts passing is an act that "may refer to the crossing of any line that divides social groups" (247). Martha Cutter adds to this definition, describing passing as "the crossing of any line that divides social groups that are conceptualized *as distinct from each other* and as *wielding differential social power*" ("As White as Most White Women" 75-6). Certainly, these scholars recognize the power of the socially constructed color line that I see as deeply influenced by the racial imaginary. However, Samira Kawash explains that the color line is inherently paradoxical: "[the color line] essentializes racial difference even as such difference can be shown to have no essence" (14).

I do recognize and agree that the color line and the idea that passing requires one to cross from one side of the color line to the other does make sense in terms of the treatment and privileges individuals gain when passing for white in a racist society. However, to imagine race as an act of crossing from black to white does not fully acknowledge the complexity of multiracial individuals. Rather, it continues to support the normative notion that race is a concrete and essential truth. In short, it supports the racial imaginary. By seeing passing as a

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<sup>4</sup> See Youman's "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Study in Irony" for her argument on Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Clare's literal movement from white to black and Irene's loss of black identity "into white inhumanity" (342).

movement that requires crossing, the individual doing the movement can only be on one side of the racial binary or the other—they cannot be both. Pushing against this notion, I contend that these individuals do not only pass for white but also pass for black—hence, passing is multidirectional. Further, passing is not a one-time action, but something that can be repeated over time.

### **Intersectionality, Performativity, and Multiplicity**

To deconstruct this idea of the racial imaginary and show how passing works multidirectionally, I will take some time to explain the theories that will support this project. Firstly, I turn to intersectionality as this theory works as the basis for the two theories that support this thesis. As Kimberlé Crenshaw explains, intersectionality is not about removing categories completely but recognizing where categories and systems of oppression intersect (1299). Thus, intersectionality works as a better model for looking at passing than crossing does as it does not limit the multiple aspects of identity, but looks at their intersections. Rather than ignoring that society categorizes people, intersectionality shows how these categories—man, woman, black, white—blend together and compound one another for many. Crenshaw notes the problem is not in the categories themselves, “but rather the particular values attached to them and the way those values foster and create social hierarchies” (1297). I agree with Crenshaw’s claim that categories exist and create hierarchies. In addition to the social hierarchies, though, I see another problem: categories are limiting. The characters in the novels I examine must perform in specific situations to meet the standards of society’s definitions of white and black which, in turn, impacts their expression of other parts of their identity such as their gender and sexuality. The other side of this is also true as the characters’ gender and sexuality impacts their racial



expression. Thus, multiracial characters are in a constant state of performance when existing in society since society will only accept that they are part of an established racial imaginary.

To explore this performance, I draw from Judith Butler's theory of performativity, particularly in Chapter 3 in which I examine Jessie Fauset's novels *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style*. Butler asserts gender is neither inherent nor essential, but that gender performance manifests itself "through a *stylized repetition of acts*" ("Performative Acts" 519; emphasis original). Though Butler refers directly to gender, I draw on Crenshaw's idea of intersectionality to examine how multiple categories take part in this performance which also intersects with the racial imaginary. People learn to perform and act as the appropriate racial identity depending on what is expected of that specific identity. In Chapter 3, Joseph Roach's examination of performance in relation to the term "surrogation" helps me to further explore how performativity can restructure and reimagine individuals' racial identities throughout generations. Roach claims performance involves "'restored behavior' or 'twice behaved behavior' ... that 'is always subject to revision,' behavior that must be reinvented the second time or 'the nth time' because it cannot happen exactly the same way twice" (3). Hence, the history and performance of racial imaginaries work as a type of surrogacy which defuses the idea of intersectionality. For instance, because different racial groups become viewed as all the same, they begin to fit into the racial imaginary. However, surrogacy can be reimaged to push against the racial imaginary. In looking at the way race is reimaged by the characters in the passing novels, I show how passing novels interpret the multiplicity of multiracial individuals.

Michael Hames-García's theoretical concept of multiplicity explains "how social identities take shape through processes of racial and gender formation, mutually constituting one another" (ix). Hames-García examines how established categories and identities are formed and

the consequences of these formations, rather than asserting that categories have no meaning or that they do not exist. Ultimately, Hames-García asserts that we cannot separate race from other aspects of social identities such as gender, sexuality, or class (ix). He recognizes the significance of Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality but points out that intersectionality is not enough to "cover sometimes radically different projects and contexts" (Hames-García 12). In other words, to continuously use the term "intersectionality" to refer to the complexity of different kinds of identities presumes that there exists separate, essential or "pure essences" of different aspects of identities that may intersect (Hames-García 11). This understanding does not account for the fact that the identities themselves, whether race or gender or sexuality, may not be essential or clearly defined. Hames-García asserts that "[p]eople understood exclusively in terms of their race, gender, or sexuality ... come to be understood only in terms of the most dominant construction of that identity—that identity understood in a way that ignores variation and multiplicity" (8). This concept directly addresses the complexity of multiracial identities as not belonging to a single binary since binaries—and the racial imaginary—constrict variation and focus on dominant constructions.

The way I implement multiplicity in my project comes from my endeavor to examine how those with multiracial identities experience erasure. Historically, the existence of multiracial or biracial individuals is complex in its connection to interracial sex whether through rape or forbidden, consensual relationships. During the Harlem and Southern Renaissances, when a white woman took part in consensual sex with a black man, this "challenged notions of white superiority and indicated that the women and men involved were not content with their roles in society" (Leiter 30). Hence, the idea that black men were predators of white women needed to be

imagined so that the racist status quo would remain unscathed.<sup>5</sup> Historically, “legal control of interracial relations was ... biased in favor of white men” (Sollors 45). Thus, white men could have sex with enslaved, black women and bear multiracial children, but would face no punishment, instead leaving the children to be “classified as belonging to a different ‘race’ from that of the father, and therefore not to his ‘family’” (Sollors 44). Indeed, the instance of white men having sex with black women and producing multiracial children who remain in slavery has been represented in literature, for instance, William Wells Brown’s *Clotel* and Harriet Jacobs’s *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*. This pattern exhibits the “one drop” rule as designating how the children were to be classified. What this classification ultimately achieved was a repeating occurrence of imagining multiracial individuals within categories that supported the racial dichotomy, erasing the multiracial individual as they threatened the existing power dynamics. Multiplicity, though, resists this erasure and exposes the flaws in the racial imaginary.

### **The Scope of this Project and the Power of Passing Novels**

I would be remiss if I did not conclude this Introduction by explaining exactly how the passing novels themselves expose the fragility of the racial imaginary. As I work with the theories of performativity and multiplicity to read these texts, it is the novels themselves that construct subversive frameworks that disrupt the racial imaginary. Though of course, like Crenshaw and Hames-García point out, the racial experience is real, but the racial imaginary that permeates within our culture ignores the multiplicity of identity. It is because of this racial imaginary that people lose the ability to construct identities for themselves. This imaginary is

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<sup>5</sup>Andrew B. Leiter explores this asymmetrical black/white relationship to slavery: “Whereas white southerners had been reluctant to discuss the rape of black women in the slave South, they turned eagerly to the image of the black rapist in the late nineteenth century and aggressively cultivated it...” (13)

why people questioned President Obama's racial identity, why I felt disempowered by those who called me "only half" of whatever construction of my identity on which they chose to focus. The novels in this thesis provide me with the examples and experiences to explore this racial imaginary in a way that pays attention to these complexities that have been so often ignored.

In Chapter 1, I look at how Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* introduces us to the intersectionality of this racial imaginary by following Rena Walden's experience passing. Rena does not choose her own identity. Rather, the men in her life imagine her racial identity—as white and later as black—as a form of control and power. In this way, Chesnutt relies on one of the most important tropes of the passing novel in that the "tragic mulatta" must die. She cannot exist since her multiracial identity flouts the expectations of the racial imaginary. He, thus, implements this trope to play on the imaginaries. In Chapter 2, I focus on Nella Larsen's *Passing* which complicates the racial imaginary and trope of the "tragic mulatta" evident in Chesnutt's text, as the characters express their multiplicity to gain mobility. Although Clare dies at the end of the novel, her death is ambiguous. Further, Clare and Irene both choose to pass out of convenience or simply because they want to in specific instances—they hold agency in their construction of the racial imaginary which destabilizes the gender binaries Chesnutt's characters abide by. Similarly, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style*, which I examine in Chapter 3, depict characters who pass for white, or, refuse to pass for white and instead embrace their black identity to push against racial erasure. I conclude my examination of these passing novels by looking briefly at how contemporary work addresses the passing experience. Heidi W. Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* (2010), Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* (1998), and Mat Johnson's *Loving Day* (2015) show how the racial imaginary

continues to disempower multiracial individuals and how passing—as well as the refusal to pass—continues to manifest in our culture through individuals desperate to escape racial erasure.

These novels speak, almost paradoxically, to the power and control of the racial imaginary to determine identity and of its fragility in being challenged. On the one hand, multiracial individuals are able move beyond the racial and gender binaries they are supposed to exist within. But, on the other hand, they are only able to do so through performativity or an emphasis on one binary over the other. If these individuals let slip their multiplicity, they experience punishment, sometimes in the form of death. Ultimately the racial imaginary becomes a reality, only because we believe in it and abide by it. I hope to show through this project that the novels' discussion of race exposes how, despite the effort of the "one drop rule" to determine racial identities, whiteness cannot simply be the absence of race, but rather, a performance and racial imaginary as well, which is why we cannot assume passing to be the unidirectional act of a black individual crossing over and performing whiteness. Instead, the novels prod us to recognize the complexity of multiple racial identities and performances that compete to be accepted within bodies that shift the racial imaginary by transgressing the existing belief that race exists within a rigid dichotomy. I return again to Irene's statement in *Passing*: "There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible" (77). In reading passing novels as speaking to this intangibility of the racial imaginary, not definite or tangible, they show how we can address the construction of race—and gender—that limits and hinders the mobility and freedom of those who exist beyond the imagined construct.

## CHAPTER 1: Rena's Imagined Identity as a Trope in *The House Behind the Cedars*

"You are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black."

-Rena, *The House Behind the Cedars*

Published in 1900, Charles W. Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* represents for many an archetypal passing novel. Archetypal, in part because of his use of the "tragic mulatta" trope. Chesnutt's use of the trope, though, is complex. The trope developed from white writers, such as Lydia Maria Child who implemented it in "antislavery tracts published from 1845 to 1856" (Zackodnik xiv). However, before the "tragic mulatta" trope, white writers, both abolitionists and anti-abolitionists, used the "mulatto" in literature as a trope (McLendon 13). Despite this trope developing through white writers, Chesnutt uses it to challenge the racial imaginary. Chesnutt employs the "tragic mulatta" trope as Rena Walden, a light-skinned multiracial woman, passes for white and falls in love with a white man only to be rejected after he learns of her multiracial background. Her eventual death culminates her existence and representation in the novel as the "tragic mulatta." Rather than seeing the tragic mulatta as a description for what Rena is, though, I use it as a critical term in the text for understanding how race and gender intersect as Rena's racial identity is constructed, or imagined, for her by the men in her life. Although Rena passes as white, she does so because her brother John wants her to pass—in fact, he instructs her to. Further, because of John's encouragement for Rena to pass as white, she ends up falling in love with a white man, George Tryon, his name playing on the idea of him trying on fabricated identities on Rena, as he ultimately rejects her once his imagined identity of her collapses. As the men construct Rena's identity, Chesnutt shows not only how race is pliable, but also that gender abides by strict man/woman binaries. Through this

intersection between racial passing and male control over Rena, *The House Behind the Cedars* challenges racial binaries by presenting multiracial characters that move between these constructed racial binaries, while simultaneously affirming gender binaries.

Scholars have explored the intersection of race/gender and its relationship to agency within *The House Behind the Cedars*. Kerstin Rudolph, for example, describes the way in which George, upon learning of Rena's multiracial identity, rejects her, but on the other hand continues to view John—though multiracial as well—as white. In a letter to John after learning about Rena's multiracial background, George tells John “I shall never be able to think of you as other than a white man” (Chesnutt 104). Rudolph points to this passage and explains, “light-skinned African American men, such as John, [are allowed] to establish a white identity through and at the expense of mixed-race women who must remain marked as such” (27). Hence, because of John's connection to George based on their intersecting racial and gender experience, they share a sense of brotherhood that allows John to remain white in George's eyes. Rena, as a woman, will not be granted the same respect or power that her brother and George experience (Rudolph 29). Furthering this intersecting notion of white and male power, Melissa Ryan explains that Rena,

is a product of white male sexual privilege both in an immediate sense--her father a white citizen of Patesville, her mother a sexually and economically vulnerable mixed-race woman--and as a historical artifact, her present-day status as a light-skinned colored woman testifying to, and legally shaped by, a long tradition of sexual power imbalance. (42)

This connection to Rena's mother, Molly Walden, and her experience in a sexually imbalanced power dynamic, speaks to Rena's imbalance with her brother and her lover as she repeats her

mother's experience, to an extent, in the way the men in her life both control her body and imagine it as something specific to what they desire from her. Thus, this sexual or gendered power imbalance "at the core of the narrative's outcome, is also at the core of the novel's representation of gender difference" (Ryan 45). Here, I point out that the gender inequality exposes the fabrication of racial distinctions. Though John and Rena are siblings, their perceived racial identities differ depending on who is gazing upon them. This novel shows that John's intersecting racial and gender identity grants him power and agency, while Rena's identity hinges on men's interpretation and construction of her appearance. As this project is focused on the ways in which multiracial individuals experience exclusion in a society that cannot cope with their complexity, Chesnutt's novel offers a look at one strategy for exploring the multifaceted identity of the "tragic mulatta."

### **The "Tragic Mulatta" and the Racial Imaginary**

In the Introduction I discussed the concept of the racial imaginary. I referred to Claudia Rankine, Beth Loffreda, and Max King Cap's discussion that the racial imaginary is something "our culture has imagined over and over again" (22). In this chapter I will theorize racial imaginaries to describe the way in which the men in Rena's life construct her identity which results in her representation as the "tragic mulatta" trope. As Michael Hames-García asserts that people who are categorized "exclusively in terms of their race, gender, or sexuality ... come to be understood only in terms of the most dominant construction of that identity" (8), I will explore how *The House Behind the Cedars* shows how the racial imaginary prevents individuals from expressing their multiple identities. Instead, the racial imaginary Rena exists within emphasizes the dominant construction of her identity, i.e., the construction that John or George create for her.



In order to illustrate these phenomena, I analyze the novel within three major sections: Before Rena passes as white, while Rena passes, and after Rena passes. Looking at these stages of Rena's passing exemplifies the trajectory of Rena's existence as the "tragic mulatta." Whether passing or not, Rena cannot find the freedom to express herself as she wants. Rena's appearance as a racially ambiguous yet light-skinned multiracial woman prompts her brother to use this appearance to imagine an identity that he finds appropriate for her and that supports his power. As she passes, she experiences further objectification and the construction of racial imaginaries at the gaze of powerful men. Finally, after she is exposed as being multiracial, George reimagines her as black and she finds herself within another binary category. Thus, the rigidity of the gender binaries exposes the fluidity of race since the men of the novel seemingly control the racial construct around them. Because Rena's identity exists at the intersection of race and gender, she cannot obtain agency. Therefore, the "tragic mulatta" trope becomes a quintessential intersectional identity of the racial imaginary. Rena's existence isn't inherently a trope but rather, the men in her life make her the trope.

### **Before Passing**

The opening pages of the novel provide the first instance of Rena's loss of agency and inability to construct her identity for herself both in terms of her gender and her race. This inability to construct her own identity comes firstly in the form of the male gaze which focuses predominantly on objectifying Rena. The first chapter, which takes place in Rena and John's hometown, Patesville, includes a lengthy passage describing John's focus on her attractive appearance:

Warwick's first glance had revealed the fact that the young woman was strikingly handsome, with a stately beauty seldom encountered. As he walked along behind her at a measured distance, he could not help noting the details that made up this pleasing impression, for his mind was singularly alive to beauty, in whatever embodiment. The girl's figure, he perceived, was admirably proportioned she was evidently at the period when the angles of childhood were rounding into the promising curves of adolescence. Her abundant hair, of a dark and glossy brown, was neatly plaited and coiled above an ivory column that rose straight from a pair of gently sloping shoulders, clearly outlined beneath the light muslin frock that covered them. (5)

By indicating that John walks behind Rena, she remains the focus and object of his attention. John, on the contrary, does not allow himself to become the object of anyone's gaze, but acts as the one *actively* gazing. The words "he walked" and "he perceived" build upon John's position as the one doing the actions. The text describes Rena, on the other hand, not in terms of action or doing but in terms of being: "the young woman was strikingly handsome." As the character representing the "tragic mulatta" figure, Rena becomes the object for not only John to gaze upon, but for readers to gaze upon as well through John's eyes. John's perception places Rena within the role of the passive, "tragic mulatta." Though Rena's part in this section is passive, both Rena and John's identities are unclear.

Chesnutt manipulates readers' interpretation of Rena and John through levels of misrecognition. The first level of this misrecognition comes from the lack of description as to who John is. Chesnutt provides a physical description within the first page of the novel: "tall, dark, with straight, black hair, and very clean-cut, high-bred features" (1). This description,

though, does not reveal anything about John's race. Additionally, a section of the text refers to John's name: "A two minutes' walk brought Warwick—the name he had registered under, and as we shall call him—to the market-house" (2). The narrator makes no definitive assertion that Warwick is John's name, but says it is the name "he had registered under" and, thus, the name he will be called. This excerpt grants John secrecy and agency as the words "he had" describes him as performing an action rather than acting passively. The second level of misrecognition manifests in Rena's description through John's eyes. Before readers know these two are siblings, John focuses on Rena's body as something both childish, yet sexual. John refers to her as a "girl," which infantilizes Rena. At the same time, he admires her "promising curves of adolescence" (5). Melissa Asher Rauterkus calls John's gaze "seemingly illicit" and "lustful" (131). Indeed, to describe this interaction as lustful lends into the trope of the "tragic mulatta" as being desirable. Teresa C. Zackodnik explains how "[w]hite Americans sexualized mulattas to an even greater degree than they did 'pure Africans'" (16). Although this attention to Rena's body may not be an indication of incestuous desire, it works as a form of misrecognition and highlights John's role as the active onlooker who objectifies her.

Through these misrecognitions, Chesnutt conveys the idea that race is not so easily defined by the established binaries. While John is looking upon Rena, Chesnutt describes Rena's beauty through John's lustful eyes, but makes no definite assertion to readers as to what her race is. Rauterkus asserts that "[John] sees enough of [Rena's] neck to determine that her skin is the color of 'ivory,' which compels him to take for granted her whiteness" (131). Although her skin is "ivory," and her hair is brown, these features may apply to multiple races. Further, readers are drawn into confusion as John watches Rena walk into "a neighborhood so uninviting" and interacts with a "negro child" (6). This is when John starts to realize that the woman he has been

watching is not white, but black—or, as I put it, multiracial—and is his sister. Margaret A. Toth claims that Chesnutt uses this introduction to Rena and John to disrupt readers' views of race as something concrete:

[Chesnutt's] depictions of protagonists John and Rena Walden, African Americans who pass for white, challenge the reliability of the body as evidence of race, for we are reminded at every turn that race is not securely imprinted in or on the body. Furthermore, Chesnutt's visual discourse requires us, ultimately, to move beyond the materiality of the body in our understanding of race. By overdetermining a cluster of interrelated visual terms—passing, masquerade, performance, imitation, and theatricality—he works to detach race from the body, exposing race as artifice, a social construct. (72)

The visual discourse then works through John's perspective, allowing readers to experience confusion and destabilization at the uncertainty of Rena's racial identification. As readers eventually learn of Rena's racial multiplicity, Chesnutt upends previous notions of race. Further, as the beautiful "tragic mulatta" of the novel, Rena's gender works complexly here as her beauty first entices her brother. After Rena begins to pass as a white woman, her body is soon noticed by a white man. The trope then, transcends racial bounds to adhere to heteronormative sexual desires.

### **The "Act" of Passing**

Chesnutt emphasizes that Rena must learn to perform and act as a white woman before she can effectively pass. After Rena agrees to leave her mother and Patesville to pass for white with John, John keeps Rena hidden: "When the steamer tied up at the wharf at Wilmington, in

the early morning, the young lawyer and a veiled lady passenger drove in the same carriage to a hotel” (28). This moment marks out their transition from Rena’s home into John’s new life but, in this transition, Rena is “veiled.” Though this may simply be reference to the fashion, Rena’s being veiled connects to her performativity and the veiling of her multiplicity or multiracial identity. Rena must be hidden before she can learn how to properly perform whiteness:

“Warwick explained to his sister the plan he had formed for her future. Henceforth she must be known as Miss Warwick, dropping the old name with the old life. He would place her for a year in a boarding-school at Charleston, after which she would take her place as the mistress of his house” (28). Here, Chesnutt demonstrates that John imagines for Rena the identity she is to take on and perform. John forms his sister’s future, erasing her old life by having her take on his name, and sends her to a boarding school to learn how to be a domestic middle to upper-class white woman. It is not until after Rena attends this boarding school—learns how to play her part—that she may begin to pass as white in society. Contrasting to Rena’s experience, when John first decides to pass for white, he simply proclaims “[f]rom this time on ... I am white” (116). Although he cannot pass until he leaves to somewhere “no one [knows his] origin” (116), he does not train for it in the same way that Rena does, but rather, relies on “the features of a white man” (116). While John can stand outside of his race and create his own imagined identity, Rena must learn how to pass as white and perform through the guidance of others.

After attending her boarding school, Rena first passes at the tournament in the novel where her body becomes visually coded as white through multiple layers of performance. The tournament occurs as an annual event hosted by the Clarence Social Club in honor of Sir Walter Scott’s *Ivanhoe* (30). Scholars have focused on the performativity of the tournament in terms of the costumes and literal acting out of being knights on horses. Earle V. Bryant notes “the mock

tournament at Clarence is staged in avowed imitation of the spectacular tournament at Ashby-de-la-Zouch that Sir Walter Scott describes so graphically in his classic romance *Ivanhoe*” (15). The knights in Chesnutt’s novel do not wear the authentic heavy armor, but simply take on the appearance of knights: “For an iron-headed lance we use a wooden substitute, with which we transfix rings instead of hearts; while our trusty blades hew their way through wooden blocks instead of through flesh and blood” (Chesnutt 31). With this added layer of performativity and fantasy, the attention George gives Rena becomes complex. At this time, Rena goes by the name Rowena Warwick, thus, her very name becomes cloaked by the fabrication, Warwick from Walden—her brother’s construction. The name Rowena refers again to Scott’s *Ivanhoe*, which ties her to another form of performativity as she holds the name of a character created by a famous white author. Scott’s Lady Rowena, though, marries Ivanhoe which contrasts starkly with Chesnutt’s Rowena’s fate as the “tragic mulatta.”

As the “tragic mulatta,” though, Rena must become marked as white through a romantic interaction. George Tryon catches Rena’s handkerchief which immediately links them. Rena asks John who George is and John tells her:

[He] is my good friend and client, George Tryon, of North Carolina. If he had been a stranger, I should have said that he took a liberty; but as things stand, we ought to regard it as a compliment. The incident is quite in accord with the customs of customs of chivalry. If George were but masked and you were veiled, we should have a romantic situation,—you the mysterious damsel in distress, he the unknown champion. (35)

John’s attention to the customs of chivalry indicate an understanding of the performance of the heterosexual flirtation and courting. Further, John explains it would be romantic if George were

masked and Rena veiled thus placing them not only in the roles of damsel and rescuer, but also as cloaked behind a performance. John, it seems, recognizes the necessity for this possible relationship to remain within a performance. After catching Rena's handkerchief and winning the tournament, George chooses Rena to be the Queen of Love and Beauty. The title means George has coded Rena's race as white and has constructed an identity for her both inwardly—his initial opinions while looking at her—as well as outwardly since he verbally proclaims her as his Queen. George tells Rena, "I know John so well that you seemed like an old acquaintance; and when I saw you, and recalled your name, which your brother had mentioned more than once, I felt instinctively that you ought to be the queen" (37). Here, Rena's identity experiences a double construction as George says he heard about Rena from John since he had mentioned her name multiple times. The name John mentions, however, is the name he constructed for Rena. Warwick, being the name John "registers under" and makes for himself (2), is given to Rena as her own. Furthermore, George assumes that he knows Rena based on the fabrication of her identity which John also has created. All of John's influence in combination with George's own imaging of Rena based on her appearance create in his mind who he believes Rena to be.

Chesnutt shows how as George's attraction to Rena's fabricated identity moves him to fall in love with her, George's desire for control and possession over Rena grows stronger. It takes only "a few weeks" after the tournament as the two begin to court before George expresses his desire to marry Rena (45). In response to this proposal, Rena asks George, "[c]an we not love each other for a while? ... To be engaged is a pleasure that comes but once; it would be a pity to cut it too short" (49). To this request, George responds, "[i]t is a pleasure that I would cheerfully dispense with ... for the certainty of possession. I want you all to myself, and all the time" (49). Although George moves into a seemingly romantic notion of hating to die before he marries

Rena, this assertion that he wants her all to himself for the sake of possession indicates the way in which he views gender and marriage: Rena is to be his property. What Rena wants is not important; it is her pleasure that he sacrifices for the sake of his desire to officially own her. What is significant about this example of selfishness on George's part is that his desire to own her continues from the initial fabrication of her own identity. George wants to own Rena as his property due to his desire for her seemingly white body. This white body, though, has been imagined for her by her brother initially and further imagined by George, shows that George is in love with his own fabrication and continues this fantasy by the desire to make her his wife. By making Rena his wife, he would be taking the name her brother has given her—Rowena Warwick—and give her a new name through marriage which would result in layers of a performative, imagined identity built upon by George's power as a white male.

Chesnutt disrupts the power of George as a white man, however, by drawing attention to Rena's recognition of the racial imaginary. After the proposal, Rena begins to worry about her secret. Rena thinks on the fact that it was not "difficult for [her] to conform her speech, her manners, and in a measure her modes of thought, to those of the people around her" (49). Here, Rena acknowledges her ability to perform race according to the expectations of the people around her and the expectations of the racial imaginary; however, she cannot marry George with an ease of mind because she wonders if he would marry her with the knowledge of her multiracial identity. When she confides in John about her fear, he does not disregard the lie of the racial imaginary, but rather, reaffirms gender expectations as a performance: "The fiction of chivalry made man serve woman; the fact of human nature makes woman happiest when serving where she loves" (54). Gender performance may be a "fiction," but John describes this performance as something that must exist to maintain happiness—fiction makes fact. Because of



this fictionality of gendered performances, John says “suppose we should tell [George] our secret and put ourselves in his power, and that he should then conclude that he couldn’t marry you? Do you imagine he would be any happier than he is now, or than if he should never know?” (54). Here, John tells Rena that the fictionality of her relationship with George must continue in order to maintain this idea of happiness. Implicitly, this line indicates that John believes they must continue living within the racial imaginary, ignoring their multiracial identities, to maintain the happiness of George. Further, this line is also self-serving as John needs Rena to remain white so he may also remain white. Rena must not expose her racial identity, or it would also expose John’s.

In this interaction between John and Rena, Chesnutt illustrates that George acts as the catalyst to expose the tragedy of Rena’s fate in the novel as he is a part of the social systems that support and require the racial imaginary. Although George holds power and privilege, this power hinges on the belief in the racial imaginary—he needs the racial imaginary to maintain his power. Right before George learns of Rena’s multiracial identity, he visits Patesville. While visiting, George reads an article from a medical journal that discusses racist ideas about black people and the problem with racial mixing:

The writer maintained that owing to a special tendency of the negro blood, however, diluted, to revert back to the African type, any future amalgamation of the white and black races, which foolish and wicked Northern negrophiles predicted as the ultimate result of the new conditions confronting the South, would therefore be an ethnological impossibility; for the smallest trace of negro blood would inevitably drag down the superior race to the level of the inferior.

(71)

The description of “negro blood” as dragging down the “superior race” points to the fear white supremacists held over the thought of racial mixing. Interracial relationships disrupted the racial imaginary. Zackodnik speaks to this saying “[d]espite repeated and complicated attempts to codify the mulatta’s identity as black, individuals who were neither white nor black, but both, continued to threaten ‘cultural equilibrium’ by unsettling the authority and stability of whiteness” (13). Though George finds this article to be an effective and well-crafted argument, revealing his own ideals that black and whites should remain separate to keep whites “pure” and “superior,” readers know Rena is multiracial. Thus, this insight into George’s mind reveals him to be invested within the racial imaginary. The article supports his values, but at the same time Chesnutt exposes the contradiction of George’s reality since Rena is not “white” as he believes. He has coded Rena’s body as white during the tournament and fallen in love with her without realizing that the woman he loves is in fact the “amalgamation” he so despises. George’s belief in the imaginary continues while he stays in Patesville and overhears other men discussing Rena’s appearance.

The novel demonstrates that racial meaning is often imagined and constructed based on individuals’ appearances. George sits through a discussion between two white men who talk about Rena—though George doesn’t know this woman is Rena—and their opinion that it was such a tragedy that she was born multiracial rather than being born white as she “has the manners of a lady ... a beautiful woman, if she is a nigger!” (76). This racial slur in conjunction with the words “beautiful woman” introduces readers to a new perspective of Rena through the eyes of more men. This imaginary, though, seems to show how these men recognize the uncertainties of race since they view Rena as a beautiful even though this does not coincide with their assumptions of what black people are. The men also discuss that she is “passing for white” and

“[s]he’ll probably marry a Yankee; he won’t know any better and it will serve him right – she’s only too white for them” (75-6), indicating her appearance will fool the man she marries. To this George does not say much but thinks, “[h]e could not possibly have been interested in a colored girl, under any circumstances, and he was engaged to be married to the most beautiful white woman on earth” (76). This glimpse of George’s inner dialogue in the context of the conversation about Rena passing and marrying a white man mocks George’s certainty in Rena as a “white woman.” Supporting this point, Rauterkus explains that “[b]ecause race is not always visible, the white-skinned if socially/legally black person has the uncanny ability to manipulate the cultural fictions of race to change the way that identity is perceived, pointing to the very constructedness of racial classifications” (132). Thus, Chesnutt breaks through the racial imaginary in this section, showing us the opinions of Rena through multiple men, all of who see Rena as something different. Because Rena is constrained by the racial imaginary, she is perceived as black by the two men and white by George. However, the reason Rena is viewed as white is not only because she has performed as a white woman, but because George and John have imagined Rena to be white and created for her the identity of the “tragic mulatta.”

### **After Passing**

After George sees Rena in Patesville and realizes she is multiracial, George rejects her immediately, which solidifies her place as the trope of the “tragic mulatta.” George views himself as a “victim” because a “negro girl had been foisted upon him for a white woman, and he had almost committed the unpardonable sin against his race of marrying her” (97). By calling Rena a “negro girl” (97) where he had before described her as the “most beautiful white woman” (76), George reveals precisely how his interpretation of Rena hinges on his own understanding of

race. If at one point Rena can be the “most beautiful white woman” in the world, and the next she is a “negro girl,” then George clearly does not view Rena as a person of her own being, but that he views race as the thing that conditions her person, her status, and her independence. Indeed, this reimagined identity is further elaborated on as George asserts her being multiracial is “worse than [her being] dead to him” for “he could at least have cherished her memory” (98). To wish her dead shows how George’s love for Rena depended on his assumption that she is white. Further, he thinks “[i]f Rena had been white, pure white (for in his creed there was no compromise), he would have braved any danger for her sake” (98). Even this notion of braving danger for Rena plays on an idea of fantasy and performance—the knight saving his lady. Thus, Chesnutt establishes the contradiction of white ideals of racial purity. White men can never know for sure whether the women they are in love with are “pure,” but rather must imagine them that way. John imagines Rena as white— after first mistaking her for white—so that she may exist in white society. George imagines her as white reactively to how he reads her physicality and codes her body. By reimagining her as black after learning about her multiracial identity, George moves Rena from a “white woman” to the “tragic mulatta.” It is George’s rejection that ultimately leads to the isolation of Rena as the “tragic mulatta” figure in the novel – Rena is caught between appearance and being.

Before the novel addresses the extent of Rena’s isolation, Chesnutt provides readers a glimpse into the way in which multiracial individuals experience isolation and erasure in terms of their categorization alone, a topic that I explore in more detail in Chapter 3. Years before John decides to pass for white, the Judge in Patesville talks to John about what it means to be mixed: “you need not be black, away from Patesville. You have the somewhat unusual privilege, it seems, of choosing between two races” (116). Though the Judge claims having the choice to

choose between two races is a privilege, this assertion is not so simple. If John were to choose to embrace his blackness, he would experience the social rejection and mistreatment of whites. On the other hand, by embracing his whiteness and passing, he erases a part of himself. This erasure occurs when Rena passes. She experiences the guilt and worry that her fiancé will not love her for the parts of her she has erased to pass for white. But when George finds out she is multiracial, he instead focuses on her black identity and erases her whiteness. He reimagines her. Zackodnik explains that “[h]istorically, whites have worked to blacken biracial individuals in order to ensure white ‘purity’ by assigning everything ‘other’ to ‘blackness’” (xiv). Rena indeed experiences an “othering” and emphasis of “blackness” by George so that he may push her away and make an excuse as to why she is not white enough for him.

In her reaction to George’s rejection, Rena wallows in her discrimination and “othering” as she seems to recognize how she has been made into the “tragic mulatta.” She exclaims to her brother after learning that George will not marry her, “*He* spoke of my beauty, my grace, my sweetness! I looked into his eyes and believed him. And yet he left me without a word!” (120). With the italics on “he,” Chesnutt evokes an emphasis on the part of Rena that it was George that encouraged and led this relationship from the start. More than George’s rejection, though, Rena expresses a frustration with the social implications which other her: “The law, you said, made us white; but the law, nor even love, can conquer prejudice” (120). Regardless of their ability to pass within society as white, society’s ideas about black people as inferior prevents Rena from gaining acceptance. The description of prejudice in this context refers to the racial imaginary since Rena expresses that neither law nor love can overcome the existing racial imaginary. Despite her imagined identity as a white woman by John and George, once her race becomes

exposed, her very existence becomes othered, and George makes her into the “tragic mulatta” figure within white society.

This “tragic mulatta” exists beyond white society, though, as Chesnutt also indicates an isolation that Rena experiences from black individuals and black social circles. As Zackodnik explains how white individuals “other” multiracial individuals, she notes “African Americans also have a history of regarding people of white American and African American descent as ‘not black enough’ at times” (xiv). This concept exemplifies the power of racial imaginaries to influence exclusion within all racial groups. Reginald Watson has examined the alienation as a “characteristic of the tragic mulatto motif” in relation to this novel as well as Larsen’s *Passing* (64). Watson notes that Rena’s alienation is not only from whites but also from the black society (65). Watson explicates the following passage from the novel in which Rena reflects on this particular isolation: “Her early training had not directed her thoughts to the darker people with whose fate her own was bound up so closely, but rather away from them. She had been taught to despise them because they were not so white as she was, and had been slaves while she was free” (Chesnutt 131). While Watson explains that this passage shows how Rena has been influenced by her family to look at other black people as white society does, with prejudice, this example takes readers further into the psyche of a multiracial individual. Due to the privilege of having lighter skin in a world that favors light skin, Rena’s mother and brother encourage her to embrace her whiteness. After her rejection from white society, Rena experiences a renewed appreciation for black individuals, realizing she is categorized as one of them by whites. Despite her return home, she cannot fit in completely. For instance, during her mother’s party, racial distinction between multiracial people becomes evident: “There were dark mulattoes and bright mulattoes. Mis’ Molly’s guests were mostly of the bright class, most of them more than half

white, and few of them less” (142). This quotation distinguishes how the imagining of racial identities and discrimination exist within the groups people of color. Rather than accepting each other as equals with an understanding that they share experiences of discrimination, they perpetuate discrimination among each other by categorizing light skinned individuals from dark skinned individuals which continues a pattern of isolation.

Rena’s isolation from whites and blacks eventually culminates in her ability to assert vocally to George that his construction of her identity has led to this isolation. She tells him, “[y]ou are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black” (174). This assertion not only indicates that he is white and male and therefore has taken on the power to imagine for her an identity as “black”— i.e., not white enough for him—but it also speaks to the notion that this classification prevents them from intermingling simply because they are on opposite sides of a binary. Rena ultimately tells George that society will not allow them to intermingle and “[a]s a white man, this might not mean a great deal to you; as a woman, shut out already by my color from much that is desirable, my good name remains my most valuable possession” (175). Rena indicates the intersectionality of her inferiority in relation to George by noting both her color and her gender prevent her from moving as she wishes in society, but that her name is the only aspect of agency she has left. Thus, she signs her name Rowena Walden, removing the cloak of Warwick, and embracing the piece of her identity she finds authentic. Some scholars view Rena’s actions here as an act of agency. Rauterkus claims that Rena’s rejection “registers as the ultimate act of agency for a woman whose behavior is circumscribed by both her race and her gender. While it remains true that her ending is indeed tragic, her story is dramatically different from that of most nineteenth-century fictional mulattas” (141). Further, Watson notes that Rena’s letter shows Rena as “a more complex and more powerful tragic mulatto figure than most earlier

representations” (55). While I do agree Rena pushes back against the racial and gender binaries that have controlled her throughout the novel’s duration, this is an example of a very short-lived agency, for the novel ultimately reaffirms the gender and racial structures.

Chesnutt knowingly reaffirms the structures of society through the implementation of the “tragic mulatta” trope by ending the novel with the notion that Rena as a multiracial woman cannot exist beyond the binaries. Right before she dies she cries “dear George, do you love me? How much do you love me? Ah, you don’t love me! ... I’m black; you don’t love me; you despise me!” (195). This assertion before her death does two things. Firstly, by proclaiming “I’m black” Rena accepts the identity she has been given by George. Even though George is coming back to her, she holds onto the identification he has constructed for her. Secondly though, her proclamation almost undercuts this reimagination for Rena cannot exist within the black/white binary. During this encounter, Frank, a black man who has loved her throughout the entire novel, stands at her death bed. She brings up love once more but within a gentle context: “my good friend—my best friend—you loved me best of all” (198). Rena reflects on the white man that did not love her and the black man that does, but she ends up with neither, indicating she cannot exist on either side of the binary and can never truly construct for herself an identity apart from the influence of the imaginaries she has existed in throughout her life. Rauterkus speaks to my assertion:

In many respects, [Rena’s] death is the most realistic option considering the dearth of viable alternatives in Southern society. As a woman on the color line, Rena occupies a liminal space that puts her at a cultural and social disadvantage. There really is no place for her, given that *she is neither black, nor white*, but



both. Because her identity depends upon the racial views of others, she has very little agency in determining her life's course. (141; emphasis added)

Indeed, Chesnutt expresses that Rena cannot end up with a black man or a white man since Rena is “neither black, nor white, but both.” Although her identity has been imagined for her by John and George first as a white woman and then as a black woman, she could not exist within the confines of these binaries for her multiracial identity prevented such categorization. Her death represents the ultimate isolation as she cannot end up with any man since she would not be fully accepted into either's social context.

### **Rena's Isolation and Erasure**

Rena tells George at the end of the novel, “[y]ou are white, and you have given me to understand that I am black” (174). She explains, “I accept the classification, however unfair, and the consequences, however unjust” (174). I bring us to this line once more to conclude Chapter 1 because it depicts the struggle Rena faced throughout the novel as a multiracial woman. She attempts to gain agency by standing up to George and expressing the unfairness of the classification—the racial imaginary—to which she is held. What is most prominent in this line is Rena's assertion that George is white which means he holds the power to determine her identity as black. He determines the racial imaginary, the imaginary that prevents Rena from deciding who she is on her own, but rather, whatever those around her decide to call her. *The House Behind the Cedars* draws readers into the complexity of multiracial individuals who struggle with fitting into a world that draws harsh lines between categories and force them into constructed imaginaries. As individuals labeled as white by society reject people of color, people of color simultaneously draw lines between their own people to establish a hierarchy of control

as well, which shows how all people simultaneously create and reaffirm racial imaginaries.

Rena's light skin allows her to pass as white, which grants her the privilege of respect and love in white society, but Chesnutt shows that this privilege comes at a price because Rena cannot live within the society nor marry George while hiding a part of her identity. Another problem with Rena's passing is that the act was fabricated by her brother and perpetuated by George. Men view Rena as white and, therefore, decide she must be white. While Chesnutt destabilizes readers' views of what it means to be white and black by showing them a multiracial protagonist who can pass for white, he does so by highlighting the way in which John and George imagine and control Rena, preventing her in obtaining any agency in the construction of her identity.

By affirming the gender binary, Chesnutt exposes the power of social constructions to prevail despite the way in which racial binaries may be manipulated. Rena holds little agency over her life under the control of male power and cannot continue existing as a multiracial woman within a society that chooses to label, isolate, and exclude her. At the same time, Chesnutt uses this trope to show how Rena is not inherently a "tragic mulatta," but that the men construct her identity which makes her the trope. Chesnutt uses the "tragic mulatta" trope to play on the political imaginaries; to show what people expect to happen and to also challenge these expectations. Looking at *The House Behind the Cedars* at the beginning of this project allows me to show how Nella Larsen's *Passing* and Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style* speak to the struggle for women to obtain agency. *Passing* follows a similar trope of the "tragic mulatta" in concluding with the death of a multiracial woman, Clare Kendry. The difference, though, lies in the fact that Clare has attempted to construct an identity for herself against the pressures of society and frequently experiences and lives within multiplicity. Fauset's novels, on the other hand, move away from death altogether and present characters that attempt to live life

in a world that still attempts to create and maintain their social identities. *The House Behind the Cedars* offers readers a look into the existences that multiracial individuals will continue to experience throughout the 1900s, revealing the power of gender and racial imaginaries. Therefore, Rena initiates the conversation about the isolation and erasure of multiracial individuals that later passing novels in the Harlem Renaissance depict and theorize.

## CHAPTER 2: Multiplicity and Mobility in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

"There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible."

-Nella Larsen, *Passing*

I argued in Chapter 1 that gender and racial binaries are affirmed as Rena's multiracial identity cannot be accommodated within the early twentieth century racial imaginary. In this chapter, I turn to Nella Larsen's *Passing*, the inciting novel of this thesis, to show the way in which these binaries are destabilized. While Chesnutt's *The House Behind the Cedars* plays with the trope of the "tragic mulatta" to show how the racial imaginary divides individuals, *Passing* takes this trope and manipulates it to show the evolution of multiracial individuals' experiences in living within their multiplicity. As I mentioned in the Introduction, the concept of multiplicity comes from Michael Hames-García's theory that "[t]he multiplicity of the self in relation to social identities lies in the inadequacy of understanding the self as the sum of so many discrete parts" (5). While Hames-García shows that multiplicity relates to intersectionality by examining how race and gender intersect, I want to push a bit further to emphasize how race itself is composed of multiple parts. A person can be black and white simultaneously through multiplicity because multiplicity disputes the erasure of racial identity.

By asserting that the characters in Nella Larsen's *Passing* experience multiplicity, I push against scholarship that tends to view these characters as crossing a color line, or, moving from one race to another. Larsen's *Passing* complicates the notion of passing as unidirectional, as her multiracial characters, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, destabilize the racial imaginary by passing as both white *and* black. Larsen's *Passing* demonstrates that race cannot be viewed as an essential category and how multiracial people threaten the black/white dichotomy. Samira

Kawash discusses the ways in which the very existence of multiracial individuals threatens this dichotomy:

While the mulatto challenges the myth of racial purity, the figure of the passing body goes a step further, challenging the stability of racial knowledge and therefore implicitly the stability of the order that has been constructed on that knowledge. The mulatto body transgresses the boundedness of whiteness and blackness, illustrating the arbitrariness of the boundary. But the passing body is even more threatening, putting whiteness, blackness, and boundary—in short, the entire basis of social order—into question. (131-2)

Kawash's social order directly connects to the racial imaginary for the racial imaginary constructs the social order. I want to add further though that passing disrupts the social order by exposing the imaginary construction of racial identity and thereby challenging its reality. While the multiracial body threatens the binaries and standards of society, this body also encompasses the difficulties and complexities that multiracial individuals experience due to not adhering to these standards. Rather, the multiracial individual's body proves that bodies exist beyond the essential ideas of race; they exist in a state of multiplicity. Thus, building upon the theory of multiplicity, I show how Nella Larsen's *Passing* depicts the complexity of multiracial individuals as they must adhere to society's expectations by passing/performing while, simultaneously, contradicting these expectations by experiencing the multiplicity of their identity. Scholars have assumed passing requires one stable identity from which an individual may move. However, Irene and Clare show that the idea of a coherent self is a fantasy. Both women strategically choose which pieces of their identities to perform.

## Crossing to Multiplicity

As I mentioned in the Introduction, scholars often view passing as a form of crossing or as a unidirectional movement. Thadious Davis, Werner Sollors, and Martha Cutter, for example, describe passing as something that involves crossing from one side to another. Thadious Davis explicitly argues “[s]ome individuals, like Clare Kendry, crossed over the color line permanently into the social privileges, protections, and entitlements of whiteness in all facets of their daily existence” (xi). However, my contention with this statement is that Clare’s passing is not something permanent. Clare does not simply pass as white; she passes for black as well when she visits Harlem. Clare exists, simultaneously, as a white woman *and* a black woman, and must suppress one or the other to be accepted within specific social settings. Hence, Clare appears to pass for one race or the other, but she is always multiple races. Kathleen Pfeiffer does recognize that while Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* “focuses explicitly on Angela’s attempts to pass from black to white, [Larsen’s *Passing*] examines Clare Kendry’s return from white to black” (*Race Passing* 130). However, Pfeiffer refers to the movement from black to white as passing, while white to black is “returning” as if to her authentic or essential identity. Because these definitions depict passing as a movement from one category to another, they prove troublesome as they lead to binary thinking about categories which further solidifies essentialist ideologies of viewing people as simply black or white—it supports the racial imaginary. To pass for white in this scenario means that blacks and whites can be distinguished, and therefore the categories remain. The concept of intersectionality helps remedy this problem and to provides a more effective description for the way in which multiracial people experience their identity.

Certainly, *Passing* shows us Clare Kendry’s identities intersect so frequently throughout the novel that singular labels of “white” or “black” cannot fully account for the entirety of her

identity. The same complexity can be applied to describe Irene in her attempt to maintain singular categorizations for herself. The characters in these novels must perform in specific situations to meet the standards of society's definitions of white and black which, in turn, impacts their expression of other parts of their identity such as their gender and sexuality. As Kimberlé Crenshaw argues, "the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (1244). Thus, intersectionality allows me to read *Passing* for the way in which characters fluidly experience and navigate various intersections of identities. Although I mentioned Cutter among scholars who have described passing as a form of crossing, Cutter has described Clare as more intersectional: "Clare chooses to have both a black and white identity. Or rather, Clare chooses not to be constrained by either a black or white identity; she chooses to slide back and forth between these identities" ("Sliding Significations" 92). Similarly, Cutter points out that Clare does not only refuse to be constrained by race but also sexuality and class through performance ("Sliding Significations" 75). Hence, Clare seems to gain mobility through her experience of "multiple identities" ("Sliding Significations" 92). The term "multiple identities" does seem to work to describe Clare based on her behavior in *Passing* as she flirts with men and women, passes as white and black, and moves beyond traditional gender roles. Taking this concept further, I show how Irene also experiences this struggle with "multiple identities" and multiplicity as she attempts to gain mobility.

### **Structures and Identifications**

To begin examining Clare and Irene's experiences with multiplicity, I point first to the structure of the novel and the emphasis on how the characters identify themselves. *Passing* is

categorized within three major sections that establish the importance of Clare and Irene's relationship in the novel and the way in which their experiences intertwine: "Encounter," "Re-Encounter," and "Finale." These sections center around Clare Kendry's re-entering Irene Redfield's life after having not seen each other for a while. From there, the novel follows their experiences together and, ultimately, their separation in "Finale" as Clare dies. Hence, the novel, though presented through Irene's first-person perspective, focuses not simply on Irene's life, but how her life is shifted due to Clare, or rather, how Irene's self-identification becomes shaken due to Clare. Irene identifies strongly with her African American heritage and identifies as black primarily throughout the novel. Clare on the other hand, lives primarily as a white woman—she identifies as white. Nonetheless, both women let go of these primary identifications from time to time and pass as the other side of the socially constructed binary.

While many scholars have focused on Clare's fluidity with race,<sup>6</sup> I point out here, that though Irene may not seem as fluid as Clare in terms of her race and gender roles, she too experiences multiplicity and uses passing to gain mobility. As many scholars focus on Clare's moving from living as white and black, Irene switches between passing for white and black as well. The difference here is that Irene, more so than Clare, cannot accept the multiplicity of her identity as she attempts to maintain clear and separate identifying categories in order to adhere to the racial imaginary. Irene thinks to herself while she is passing as white during her first interaction with Clare, "[d]id that woman ... somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (16). This thought reveals that despite passing as white within certain contexts, Irene views herself as black. When Clare and Irene meet up in New York

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<sup>6</sup> See Martha Cutter's "Sliding Significations: Passing as a Narrative and Textual Strategy in Nella Larsen's Fiction" and Sami Schalk's "Transing: Resistance to Eugenic Ideology in Nella Larsen's *Passing*."



in the section “Encounter,” after having not seen each other since their childhood, Clare disrupts Irene’s attempt to maintain clear categorizations. Irene fixates on Clare’s physical characteristics, her choice to pass, and her behavior with men—particularly her behavior with Irene’s husband, Brian, as Irene begins to believe the two of them are having an affair.

Larsen uses this alleged affair between Clare and Brian to further build on the instability of Irene’s understanding of her own racial identification. Before the idea of an affair ever comes to be, Irene and Brian argue about living in America as Brian believes Brazil will be more accepting of him and his racial identification. As George Hutchinson puts it, Brian’s desire to leave the United States to live in Brazil stems from the conception that Brazil contains “no color line” (297). Throughout the novel, Larsen makes clear that Brian’s appearance as a black man makes him susceptible to judgement and mistreatment, while Irene’s light skin allows her more mobility. For instance, Irene’s multiracial identity allows her to move within white spaces, while Brian’s “deep copper” skin (54) prevents him from doing similarly. Indeed, while passing at the Drayton, waiters take Irene’s orders and do not refuse her service for being black—they assume she is white because of her white appearance. Thus, Irene’s identification as black and her physical appearance as white cause tension within the novel and show how she cannot cope with instability in her understanding of her race. Ultimately, Irene’s belief that Brian is having an affair with Clare is not the source of her problems with identity. Rather, the destabilization of Irene’s life stems largely from Clare.

As scholars have pointed out, Clare clearly moves beyond the lines of race, gender, and sexuality fluidly and performs. Davis notes that the three sections of the novel (Encounter, Re-Encounter, and Finale) may be compared to “a theatrical performance” (x). I wish to point out, however, that Clare is not *only* performing, she is expressing multiple aspects of her identity.

Although she does perform within certain contexts to adhere to society's standards of what is appropriate for a white woman or a black woman, her behavior looks so fluid because she moves beyond the binary. Further, this expression is why Irene has such a problem with Clare. Because Clare expresses multiple aspects of herself while Irene attempts to keep herself within specific racial and gender confines, Irene must face the fact that she, too, experiences multiplicity.

### **Initial Interaction**

The introduction to Clare's multiplicity in terms of both her race and sexuality occurs during the section "Encounter." Clare and Irene are both passing as white on the rooftop of The Drayton, a "whites only" hotel. This initial interaction introduces Clare's refusal to remain within certain and essential categorizations through Irene's repetitious internal dialogue as Irene attempts to classify Clare. Others have focused on the repetition of extreme eye contact of this scene. For instance, Deborah Grayson discusses the power in Clare's gaze as "[u]nder the gaze Irene literally becomes more visible and therefore feels more easily detectable and knowable as a black woman" (32-3). While this is an important point as Clare's gaze seems to expose Irene's vulnerability and the importance of her appearance as a white woman, I want to add to this by focusing specifically on Irene's repetitious attention to Clare's mouth. The first description Irene makes of Clare is about her "slightly husky" voice (14). As Irene later repeats the same description, "slightly husky voice" (17), to describe Clare, this description implicitly reveals Clare's voice sets her apart to Irene. In addition to her voice, but still connected to Clare's mouth, Irene focuses on Clare's flirtatious smile to a waiter, which Irene describes as "a shade too provocative for a waiter" (15). Once Clare sits down with Irene, Irene later repeats this description of Clare's smile as she "was sure that it was too provocative for a waiter" (18) as

though she was able to verify Clare's interaction with the waiter as inappropriate. Thus, it seems Irene makes a connection between Clare's mouth and sexuality. Irene's focus on Clare's mouth reveals she is aware of Clare's fluid sexuality, as she does not reserve her sexual appeal within the home for her husband but expresses it in public as well. While Irene makes it clear this behavior is "too provocative," her extreme focus on Clare's fluid sexuality brings into question Irene's stability in her own sexuality and behaviors. The multiplicity in this scene comes through the shifting examples of desire—Clare to the waiter, the waiter to Clare, and Irene to Clare as she stares at her mouth.

While this example of Irene's focus on Clare's mouth depicts Irene's fixation on Clare's sexual multiplicity, it also represents Irene's attempt to maintain clear categories for herself and avoid expressing her own multiplicity. Many scholars have read this interaction as a representation of Clare and Irene's homosexual attraction to each other.<sup>7</sup> Undeniably, the scene blurs the lines of sexual attraction as Andrew Radford notes that "[d]uring their exchange of intensely prolonged glances Larsen draws impishly ironic attention to the visual clichés and conventions of white heterosexual romantic fictions" (38). This attraction between Irene and Clare destabilizes Irene's established sexual identity, as she is a married woman and mother, but suddenly experiences repeating thoughts about another woman, Clare, and her behaviors with the waiter. To push against this destabilization, Irene sets herself apart from Clare. For instance, in judging Clare as "too provocative" (18), Irene insinuates that she knows the difference between right and wrong behavior—right behavior is adhering to the binary while wrong is to engage in multiplicity. Furthermore, as Clare stares at Irene, Irene begins to worry that Clare "somehow" knew that she was a "Negro" (14). In focusing on Clare's mouth and provocativeness, Irene

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<sup>7</sup> See Deborah E. McDowell's "Black Female Sexuality in *Passing*."

seems to view her own transgressions within Clare and exposes the intersectionality between sexuality, gender, and race. Cutter states, “[a]lthough I do not disagree with Deborah McDowell’s reading of a homosexual subtext in *Passing*, Larsen emphasizes that Clare insists on being an object of attraction to *both* sexes” (“Sliding Significations” 90). I do not simply see Clare’s flirtation with men and women as a performance for attention or even simple manipulation, though, but an expression of a nonbinary and multiple identity.

Scholars have often viewed Clare’s behavior in relation to performativity. Clare’s behavior does include multiple aspects of performance for she performs to be accepted as the race she wishes to be viewed as depending on the setting. Judith Butler, whose work on gender has been instrumental in defining performativity as defining race and gender as “act[s] which [have] been rehearsed” (526) asserts that gender is not a stable or essential category but is “the *appearance of substance* ... a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment” (“Performative Acts” 520). Christopher Hanlon’s own analysis depicts “an understanding of ‘race’ as a biologically sustained and impermeable boundary gives way to the performative process of passing” (24). Additionally, Hanlon describes Clare’s passing as a performance, a “mimetic flawlessness of her simulation of a white woman” (26). But in looking at Clare’s passing as a simulation, Hanlon does not account for the fact that Clare *is* in fact multiracial. Clare is not simply simulating a white woman, she *is* a white woman; simultaneously, she is also a black woman (Hutchinson 294). Because these two categories do not account for the entirety of Clare’s identity, simply looking at passing as *only* a performance does not encompass the complexity or intersectionality of the categories.

Larsen presents Clare as a complex figure with multiple desires to show this intersectionality and her multiplicity. Clare immediately tells Irene that her decision to leave her family, to pass,

was her choice to make: “I was determined to get away, to be a person and not a charity or a problem” (26). However, although Irene views Clare’s decision to pass as something final, a “breaking away from all that was familiar and friendly” (24), Clare does not enact passing in such a definite, singular way, but rather, experiences life fluidly, which is reflected in Clare’s sexuality in this section. As Irene continually focuses on “the seduction of Clare Kendry’s smile” (30), emphasizing the way in which she feels a “sense of being petted and caressed” while looking at Clare’s eyes and smile (29), this flirtation shows Clare’s refusal—as well as Irene’s inability—to remain within the category of a heterosexual woman. Sami Schalk refers to this example as “Clare’s *both/and desire*: her refusal to stay on one side of any binary and her attempt instead to exist on both sides at once” (154). This idea of existing on both sides epitomizes Clare’s desire to experience life as both black and white. She speaks to Irene about passing for white saying, “[i]t’s such a frightfully easy thing to do” (25). At the same time, she visits Harlem and experiences life as a black woman. Thus, the color line is not essential, but complex as the characters attempt live beyond the racial imaginary.

### **Inconsistent Definitions of Race**

Larsen portrays the various ways in which multiracial women choose to live beyond their social categorizations in attempt to gain freedom and opportunity. While Clare is living as a white woman with her white husband, she and Irene have a second meeting at Clare’s home, along with another multiracial woman named Gertrude, which leads to the characters’ discussion of skin color and race. Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moore discuss that to live in society, multiracial people exist “within ... across or between” categories (13). While they use the term “transing” to describe this behavior, I see it as an example of these characters’

multiplicity of identity. Hames-García notes, “[m]odern society tends to conceive of a person’s complexity in a way that fractures it” (7). Only living as white fractures Gertrude’s identity. For instance, Gertrude married a white man, just like Clare. Irene notes, though, that “it couldn’t be truthfully said that Gertrude was ‘passing.’ Her husband ... had been quite well aware, as had his family and most of his friends, that she was a Negro” (33). But regardless of Gertrude’s husband knowing her racial background, Gertrude expresses her fear that her twins would “turn out dark” despite her and her husband’s light skin (36). While Gertrude and her family are aware of her multiracial identity and they seem to be accepting of her, the possibility of having a dark child still fractures her identity, for it is a part of her she is not able to embrace as she fears the consequences of society’s racial imaginary. This example shows how passing does not offer the characters in this novel inherent freedom, but that it is more of a temporary freedom. At this very movement in the novel, all three women sit in the apartment of Clare and her white husband, which *compels* them to pass as white and reject their multiracial identities. Gertrude may be able to express her identity with her white husband, but she, as do the other women, relies on passing/performing to be accepted within society.

In this example of passing, Clare and Gertrude’s fear of having black children draws on the inconsistency of categorical definitions since these multiracial women know that reality and society’s racial imaginary do not align. They know their children’s heritage is “mixed,” thus, even if they are light skinned, they are not truly white according to society’s racial imaginary which adheres to the “one drop rule.”<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, if the children *look* white, they will be accepted as white in society, revealing that the racial imaginary can be manipulated into allowing whiteness to be skin deep. On the other hand, the opposite of this inconsistency comes from the

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<sup>8</sup> See Introduction for examination of the “one drop rule” in connection to the racial imaginary.

introduction of Clare's husband, John Bellew. Bellew's attention to Clare's skin reveals the inconsistency of racial categories through his emphasis that there is no possibility that Clare contains any African American bloodlines. Bellew's first words in the novel are "Hello, Nig" (39). These words immediately instigate the tension between Clare's multiracial identity and Bellew's hatred for African Americans. Bellew calls Clare "Nig" because he notices the darkening of her skin tone throughout the duration of their marriage. Clare asks her husband if it would make any difference to him if she was "one or two per cent coloured" to which he replies with "[y]ou can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned since I know you're no nigger" (40). Through Bellew's upsetting racial slurs, Larsen exposes that racial categories are unstable, because Clare can appear black but remain white.

Larsen uses Bellew's interaction with Clare to reflect on the significance in the way in which performance and coded complexions effect social categorizations. Because Bellew holds stereotypes about what it means to be a black person—or a multiracial person—and Clare does not fit these stereotypes, he assumes she is white despite her darkening complexion. Butler explains this is because "[b]lackness is not primarily a visible marking" in *Passing* and "what qualifies as a visible marking, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness" (*Bodies* 125). Relating Butler's discussion of visible markings Clare's situation means that because Clare is not "marked" or recognized as black by society, her skin color does not matter since her husband simply assumes she is white. Further, because Clare "refuses to introduce her blackness into conversation" she in turn "withholds the conversational marker which would counter the hegemonic presumption that she is white" (Butler, *Bodies* 125). Consequently, because Clare has not indicated her multiracial background to her husband, Bellew simply

assumes Clare is white, no matter how dark her skin, which reveals racial categorization is inconsistent since the determining factors of one's race rely on people's perspectives of skin color and/or visible markings. Whether relying on the complexion of one's body or other visible markings, both Gertrude and Clare's fear of having dark children along with Bellew's insistence that Clare is white because she has never indicated otherwise reveals the racial imaginary is unstable yet permeates their lives as they have to abide by it. The racial imaginary, or the definition of what race is, does not account for people who do not fit into the black/white binary.

Furthering this instability of racial definitions, Larsen sets up tension between Irene and her husband, Brian, as they contemplate what race is. One example of this tension occurs after Irene explains what happened at Clare's to Brian to which he asserts, "the man, her husband, didn't call *you* a nigger. There's a difference, you know" (54, emphasis mine). In this quotation Brian explains to Irene that Bellew did not call her the racial slur because he did not recognize her as black, which implies Irene does not experience the discrimination that Brian faces because he cannot pass as white like she can. Additionally, Brian claims he does not "know what race is" (55). Thus, Brian challenges Irene's opinions on race along with her decision to stay in the United States even though he wishes to go to Brazil (57). Hutchinson explains that Brian's desire to go to Brazil, the place where he believes "there is no color line," threatens "Irene's psychological security and social mores—in short, her identity—" (297). Brian may not see Irene as completely African American as she sees herself. Further, Irene struggles internally with whether she was wrong about Brazil as well as why she did not speak up to Bellew: "Why had she allowed him to make his assertions and express his misconceptions undisputed? Why ... had she failed to take up the defense of the race to which she belonged?" (52). It is in these questions that Larsen reveals Irene does not actually have a strong grasp on the definition of race though



she attempts to. Although she is proud to uplift the black race within her own social circles, she blends into white society occasionally for ease of mobility. In this, however, as Irene passes as white, she too passes as black, which is why Clare's mobility threatens her. Viewing Clare's movement causes her to reflect on her own insecurity in her black identity.

We can trace Larsen's emphasis on Clare's insecurity throughout the novel. At the beginning when Irene passes as white at the Drayton, she does so because she initially passed by omission and reliance on her appearance. When Irene feels overheated, a man suggests she go to the Drayton for tea. By this man's mere suggestion to go to the Drayton, Larsen reveals Irene's white-passing appearance without plainly describing it since the Drayton is a hotel—though fictional—for whites only. After this suggestion from a stranger to go to the Drayton, Irene does not assert that she is black. Instead, she notes "I think the Drayton'll do nicely" (13). Thus, she accepts her white appearance and uses it to her advantage. Indeed, in the cab and on the way to the Drayton, Irene "made some small attempts to repair the damage that the heat and crowds had done to her appearance" (13). This attention to appearance, shows how Irene knows it is important and must maintain it. Further, although Irene appears as though she feels strongly about her race, Mary Mabel Youman asserts that Irene, even more than Clare, "has lost her Black heritage" even though she rarely passes (337). More than losing her heritage, I claim Irene is desperately trying to grasp her race. As I mentioned before, Irene experiences a disconnect with Brian in terms of their racial experiences that prevents her from understanding his draw to leaving the United States. In her constant focus on being tied to race and her attempt to uplift the black community, Irene confirms her black identity. Thus, Irene, just like Clare, passes as *both* black and white. Irene's split identity speaks to the experience of many multiracial individuals in passing novels as she cannot seem to claim one racial identity or the other fully without feeling

the need to overcompensate in order to be accepted. Thus, she maintains that she is a black woman who only passes as white occasionally, rather than a multiracial woman who may be black *and* white.

### **Imposed Categories**

Despite Irene's attempts to maintain the separation between her identity as a black woman and her identity while passing as white, Clare begins to blur the lines of her racial identities openly as she experiences multiple aspects of her identity. Although Irene believes Clare to be "free" and "happy," Clare asserts "I'm beginning to believe ... no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe" (67). This shows that Clare realizes she cannot simply exist as a white woman without feeling the pressure of the possibility of being found out by her husband and the draw of her African heritage. She cannot reach this "completely" because her identity is always fractured. Clare tells Irene that she misses African Americans: "You don't know, you can't realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh" (71). In this description, Clare seems to express an essentializing concept that African Americans are different from white society in articulating her longing to spend time with them; however, I argue this actually proves the separations between whites and blacks as inherently problematic, since Clare identifies within both categories and must perform, to an extent, to fit into either. She cannot easily fit into Harlem because of her appearance, and she cannot simply exist in a marriage to a man whose racism aids in the erasure of her black identity. As Schalk says, "Clare does not align herself strictly or primarily with any racial group" (154). Clare's inability to fit into binary categories shows why essentialist categorizing of multiracial

individuals cannot fully explore the significance of *Passing*/passing. Viewing passing as unidirectional does not account for Clare's identity as multidirectional and multiple.

This multidirectional movement becomes evident as Clare begins to spend time with Irene and Brian. One instance in the novel that highlights this occurs during the Negro Welfare League dance in which Clare danced "sometimes with a white man, more often with a Negro, frequently with Brian" (75). This line shows how Clare holds no qualms in interacting with black or white men, but dances with whomever she likes. Additionally, this behavior continues as Clare visits Irene and Brian frequently, moving back and forth between her life with her husband and Harlem. Notably, even when Irene cannot spend time with her, Clare would go "alone with Brian to some bridge party or benefit dance" (80) which furthers the notion that Clare desires to spend time with both black and white men. Donovan Ramon supports the idea that Clare's interaction with Brian represents her multi-directional movement:

Keeping company with Brian allows her to maintain a multitude of dualities: she is, at once, a friend to Irene and a traitor to her; and while a lover of the ideals of whiteness, she cannot travel to Harlem fast enough to observe blackness, as her close friendship with Brian suggests. (51)

Because the novel remains ambiguous as to whether Clare and Brian did have an affair and whether Clare truly was a traitor to Irene, I do not assert that Clare takes part in dualities in that way. I do, however, view Clare's love for living as a white woman and her fascination with Harlem and the black experience as an example of Clare's attempt to experience the multiplicity of her identity since, as Hutchinson notes, "Clare Kendry is, literally, both a black white woman and a white black woman" (294).

Although Irene, too, is both white and black, in viewing Clare's ability to move between social categories, Irene makes continued attempts to categorize everything in her life, including Clare. At the Negro Welfare League dance, Irene watches Clare as she dances with both white and black men and categorizes the different kinds of people attending the dance such as "youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women" (75). In recognizing these different categories of people, Irene recites a nursery rhyme she suddenly remembers aloud to Hugh Wentworth<sup>9</sup>:

Rich man, poor man,  
Beggar man, thief,  
Doctor, lawyer,  
Indian chief. (75)

In this moment, Irene voices the differences between individuals which highlights her focus on categories and separations. I believe this nursery rhyme to be a representation of the societal structure of binaries and categories as it designates labels to different kinds of people and separates them by lines and commas in the poem. Nevertheless, Larsen undercuts the categorical separations by having Irene recite it as Clare fluidly transgresses the binaries by dancing with black and white men at that very moment in the novel.

Despite Clare's transgressions of binaries, Irene continues to search for ways in which to categorize, even noting to Wentworth "[i]t's easy for a Negro to 'pass' for white. But I don't think it would be so simple for a white person to 'pass' for coloured" (78). This is a particularly interesting assertion to make for Irene is clearly distinguishing the difference between whites and blacks by claiming that whites could not pass as black and henceforth, affirming her own black

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<sup>9</sup> Hugh Wentworth, a white character in *Passing* who often attends parties in Harlem with African Americans.

identity; however, this assertion is unstable. Although she tells Wentworth, “[t]here are ways. But they’re not definite or tangible” (77), this is not a concrete explanation for how she can categorize blacks from whites. Further, Irene was not able to distinguish Clare as a black woman at the beginning of the novel in the Drayton. Grayson explains that “[i]n *Passing*/passing ... Clare’s bod(ies) suggest that when it comes to reading bodies (physical or written) there are no definite either/or answers ... we can never assume or accept that what we see is ‘real’ or ‘true’” (29). Irene seems to want to hold onto essentialist ideologies so that she may maintain an understanding of her identity as black, as a woman, as a wife, and as a mother. Nevertheless, Clare’s overt multiplicity “violates the law and logic of ‘race’ and ‘race’ ideology” (Grayson 30), which, in turn, destabilizes Irene’s assertions that she fits within the binary category of a black woman.

Clare’s movement between social categories and expression of multiplicity further destabilizes Irene’s ideas about race once Irene begins to believe Clare and Brian are having an affair. After Brian invites Clare to Irene and Brian’s “private party” (88) at their home, Irene begins to imagine they are having a secret relationship. Though she has “no facts or proofs” (96), this idea about Clare and Brian causes Irene to reject her race:

Irene Redfield wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro. For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race. It was, she cried silently, enough to suffer as a woman, an individual, on one’s own account, without having to suffer for the race as well. (98)

These lines reveal Irene’s desire to simply be “an individual” rather than deal with the label of racial identification which she has attempted to hold onto tightly throughout the entirety of the

novel. Catherine Rottenberg asserts that Irene's feelings over the burden of race show that "[r]ace identification is ultimately described as something imposed" ("Passing" 499). Further, "[l]ike norms of gender identification, race norms operate by compelling subjects to assume or identify with certain identity categories" (Rottenberg, "Passing" 489). Because Irene is torn between the binary categories of white and black, she cannot simply exist within either one without feeling torn between "two allegiances ... Herself [and] Her race" (98). This line, thus, begins to more explicitly reveal Irene as experiencing multiplicity. Irene is, just as Clare is, "a black white woman and a white black woman" (Hutchinson 294) and, accordingly, this pull between two allegiances represents her fractured identity (Hames-García 7). Irene experiences dualities due to society's adherence to the racial imaginary that does not fully represent all individuals.

### **Ambiguous Death**

Irene's dualities and inability to fit into one single binary comes to a climax in the final section of the novel in which Clare dies. Further, this climax also twists the traditional ending for the "tragic mulatta" trope as it offers the possibility that one multiracial woman is the culprit of the other's death. When Clare's husband Bellew enters their party, in a fit of "rage and pain" at the realization of Clare's racial background, Irene takes this moment to run to Clare:

It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free.  
(111)

This description marks Irene's merging of feelings and categories for the verb "ran" paired with "laid" seem to contradict each other. The image of Irene running with "terror" and "ferocity" only to lay her hand down on Clare breaks the initial chaotic image of running and terror with something soft. Further, describing Clare's arm as "bare" draws us back to their initial flirtation and Irene's insistence upon maintaining barriers and categories between her feelings for Clare and her identity as a heterosexual woman, indicating that sexuality moves fluidly in this novel too. The major complication though comes as Irene realizes that she does not want Bellew to throw Clare aside, but at the same time, she does not want Clare free, which refers to Irene's connection to Clare because of her allegiance to her race—the race that she and Clare share (98). She, thus, cannot have Bellew hurt Clare, but the thought that Clare cannot be free reveals that Irene cannot have peace until Clare is gone. On the other hand, this may be a reference to Irene's understanding that Clare cannot exist freely now that her multiple identities have merged, the binary disrupted, and she is found out. Abruptly though, with no answers, Clare is out the window:

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. (111)

This excerpt draws again on Irene's previous fascination with Clare's mouth and smile, along with Irene's desire for Clare as she describes her as a "torturing loveliness" that disrupted her life and everything she held as evident and essential truths.

Although Clare dies, these disruptions linger within Irene as the novel closes in ambiguity as to how Clare fell out the window. Irene worries "[w]hat if Clare was not dead?" (113) which suggests that Irene is the culprit. Some scholars, like Youman, believe Irene pushed

Clare out the window to preserve her “security” (340). Even if this is the case, Larsen leaves the death uncertain. Hutchinson explains that Larsen could have written the ending with Irene relaying exactly what happened to Clare, but this “would not fulfill Larsen’s design; indeed, it would fold the novel within a predictable pattern and abandon the theme of disavowal” (308-9). Other scholars such as Schalk focus more on the reason Clare died rather than who is responsible for her death: “Within a realist novel such as *Passing*, there is nowhere for Clare to go ... She cannot exist on both sides of multiple identity binaries without the text slipping into a utopian or magical realist form” (157). I agree Clare’s death establishes the struggle people face in trying to combat or elude the oppressive racial imaginary. I find significance in the uncertainty of Irene’s part in the death, though, to directly connect to why Clare had to die. By not telling readers exactly what happened, Larsen places readers into the position of Irene at the beginning of the novel when she cannot determine that Clare is passing. The conclusion may seem to obviously suggest that Irene kills Clare, but the reality is that readers are left with uncertainty. The text sets readers up for knowing something is true—Irene kills Clare—but when that truth is uncertain, we are left with multiplicity.

As Larsen leaves readers uncertain, she critiques the trope of the “tragic mulatta.” She reveals that we do not know what the answer is to Clare’s death and, hence, can never know who the “tragic mulatta” is—Clare or Irene. Just as Bellew asserts in the novel that he knows who Clare is, knows her racial identity, readers may think they know Irene killed Clare, but can never be certain either. Further, as Clare used her multiplicity of identity and her ability to move fluidly in social settings, Clare’s death shows us that passing itself cannot grant multiracial individuals’ mobility while society pushes against accepting identities that do not fit within its racial imaginary. In her death, Clare does not embody the “tragic mulatta” trope that *The House Behind*



*the Cedars* presented. She does not die after experiencing a consistent construction of her identity by the men in her life like Rena did in Chesnutt's novel. Rather, Larsen established that multiracial women can and do construct their own identities, but they do so within the confines of the racial imaginary. In an attempt to gain social mobility, Clare and Irene both pass as white at times. However, because they do not identify as white alone, they also pass as black. Undeniably, Irene's insistence that she is a black woman and her struggle with Clare's ability to move between social categories shows her insecurity in her own race. Hence, reading *Passing* through the lens of multiplicity and intersectionality rather than unidirectionally pushes against the racial erasure that the existing racial imaginary has persistently fostered.

### CHAPTER 3: Structures, Performativity, and Erasure in Jessie Fauset's Fiction

“She’s whiter than lots of those white girls at our school. What makes her colored and makes those white girls white?”

-Jessie Fauset, *Comedy: American Style*

In the previous chapter I discussed how Clare’s death at the conclusion of *Passing* demonstrates expressing multiplicity is a dangerous act in societies that focus on binaries and strict structures. In Fauset’s work, protagonists do not suffer the death of the “tragic mulatta” trope like the characters do in the work of Larsen and Chesnutt. What Fauset’s work does emphasize is the structural hinderances that society places on individuals who do not fit their prescribed categories. Similar to *Passing*, Fauset structures *Comedy: American Style* within sections titled “The Plot,” “The Characters,” “Teresa’s Act,” “Oliver’s Act,” “Phebe’s Act,” and “Curtain,” thereby mimicking the acts of a play and indicating that individuals must follow a specific structure or perform their parts correctly. Her novel *Plum Bun* follows a similar performance-based structure, this time with the lines of a nursery rhyme. The sections of the novel follow the English nursery rhyme “Plum Bun”: “Home,” “Market,” “Plum Bun,” “Home Again,” and “Market is Done.” In framing the novels with these performative structures, *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style* appear to follow the structure of society, i.e., the expectations society holds for people to adhere to the racial imaginary, which also includes the intersection of gender expectations. Fauset upends the structure, though, at the end of the novel by showing how these characters exist and operate in the world despite their identities not fitting the racial imaginary.

In this chapter, I explore the ways in which Fauset's characters experience the erasure of their identities and take part in acts of performativity to exist within society. For instance, if a character looks white at a particular moment or in a specific context, people assume they are white due to the repetitious assumptions that have been performed and carried out throughout history that developed the racial imaginary. In this assumption, the characters experience the erasure of their multiplicity. The texts demonstrate how these multiracial individuals are expected to perform specific roles in society. At the same time, the texts argue against this expectation by exposing how multiracial individuals subvert the roles they are meant to play. Indeed, Fauset's novels push against the structure that dictates and defines race. Deborah McDowell's introduction to *Plum Bun* notes how Fauset was well aware of white publishers' desires for black writers to write in a way distinctively "different" from whites and within the confines of their ideas of what constituted black writing. McDowell describes it as the "primitive exotic" or the "fantasy of white intellectuals" (xiv-xv). Despite the publishers' desires, Fauset pushed against the norm and exposed their structure and racial ideas for what they were—an imaginary.

In both *Comedy: American Style* and *Plum Bun*, Fauset's characters' struggle with their multiracial identities and take part in performativity. Because some have viewed this performance as the characters' acceptance of the racial binary, Fauset has been read as a conservative writer on race.<sup>10</sup> I explain, though, how these novels do push against the racial imaginary. In *Plum Bun*, Angela moves from her childhood home on Opal Street to New York

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<sup>10</sup> See Abby Arthur Johnson's "Literary Midwife: Jessie Redmon Fauset and the Harlem Renaissance." Johnson explains how "Hiroko Sato...criticized Fauset for her middle-class outlook, shaped by her early experiences among old Philadelphians and her education at Cornell, the University of Pennsylvania and at the Sorbonne" (144-5). Further, people saw Fauset as "pandering to white society" even though she "praised DuBois for his depiction of the 'terrible, grasping, raging white world'" (146).

City in pursuit of a life free of racial prejudice. In this action, she attempts to escape her black heritage while depending upon her light skin to live as white woman among other, seemingly, white people. In *Comedy: American Style*, Fauset juggles multiple characters throughout the plot to show the range in which they experience their multiracial identities, oftentimes through performance and reliance on their visual appearance just like Angela, or, in the case of Phebe for instance, refusal to perform despite society's insistence on multiracial erasure. To examine these refusals, I first look at *Plum Bun* to analyze how Angela takes part in performativity to escape social rejection in society for being black. Through this performance, however, Fauset exposes the fictionality of society's structures and the reality that much of society's structures limit mobility and multiplicity. From there I will show how *Comedy: American Style* depicts racial erasure in varying ways, specifically in terms of how individuals react to Phebe's refusal to pass as white, despite her light skin. Through these novels, Fauset shows how her multiracial characters destabilize society's categorizations, examines the problem with existing social structures, and offers a new way of identifying individuals. Ultimately, these novels work within the context of this project to show how passing novels break the conventional understandings of race as binary by exposing the racial erasure so many multiracial individuals experience.

## **Performativity**

Performativity is crucial to my analysis of Fauset's novels as it allows the characters the ability to exist within social confines that assert they cannot exist as anything more than one racial identity. While performativity is an important facet of Larsen's novel, it is even more pronounced and nuanced in Fauset. The multiracial characters in Fauset's novels experience multiplicity of identity just as Clare and Irene do in *Passing*, but while *Passing* shows that the act

of passing cannot grant mobility to multiracial identities at Clare's death, Fauset exhibits how multiracial individuals exist and live beyond the confines of the racial imaginary. To do this, they perform. Teresa C. Zackodnik explains that both authors implement performativity through their characters:

Fauset and Larsen use the mulatta figure to explore womanhood and race as constructs whose fixity is threatened by characters who cross those lines separating class, racial, and gender identities ... Fauset's and Larsen's mulatta characters pass selectively as white and black, engaging in a performative that challenges American notions of race as a natural closed category. (xxx)

I agree that Fauset and Larsen use their characters' performances to challenge notions of race. Further, as I mentioned in Chapter Two, the lines between race and gender are complex despite society's insistence on drawing "color lines." Thus, to adhere to these lines and to exist within the world, multiracial individuals must perform to meet the requirements of the roles they are assigned despite their multiplicity of identity which results in their multiracial identities experiencing erasure while living in the fantasy of society. To examine how Fauset's characters work through this erasure, I turn mainly to Judith Butler's theory of performativity.

Scholars have used Butler to analyze Nella Larsen's *Passing*<sup>11</sup> and Butler herself has written on *Passing*. Butler's work on *Passing* and, specifically, the theory of performativity, however, also works well to help me explore the multiracial experience in Fauset's works. Butler places significant importance upon the "*appearance of substance*" which is "a constructed identity" and a "performative accomplishment" ("Performative Acts" 520; emphasis original).

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<sup>11</sup> See Christopher Hanlon's "The Pleasures of Passing and the Real of Race."

Butler makes a point to distinguish that, “in the theater, one can say, ‘this is an act,’ and de-realize the act,” which makes it clear to everyone that the act is not reality (527). On the other hand, in the public “the act becomes dangerous ... precisely because there are no theatrical conventions to delimit the purely imaginary character of the act” (Butler 527). While Butler’s discussion of the appearance of an identity refers to gender here, Fauset’s novels emphasize the importance of appearance as some of the characters have the appearance of being white, but their identities while passing rely upon the construction of their identity and their performance. With this focus on the appearance of individuals, Fauset shows how social structures rely on the racial imaginary since what people look like does not always align with their identities. While Larsen’s *Passing* focuses primarily on how Clare obtains power by moving between social categories, *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style* emphasize this performativity as the characters rely upon it for acceptance but ultimately experience their multiracial erasure as a consequence of this performance.

In addition to the performative accomplishment that constructs people’s racial and gender identities, Butler explains that this is possible because of our history in constructing, specifically, our gender roles. Butler notes femininity and masculinity are “the forcible citation of a norm, one whose complex historicity is indissociable from relations of discipline, regulation, punishment” (*Bodies* 177). Thus, Butler argues that gender roles are not inherent, but that they are prescribed upon the sexes through acts of historical repetition and performance. Moreover, Butler’s assertion that our performance of norms exists because of “discipline, regulation, [and] punishment” shows how the structure of our society controls our behaviors and how we, in turn, reinforce the structures of our society through those behaviors.

The concept of repetition also drives Joseph Roach's examination of performance, another theoretical framework I apply in this chapter. Roach's concept of "surrogation" shows how performance works as a "'restored behavior' or 'twice behaved behavior' ... that 'is always subject to revision'" (3). This concept explains how the process of performing changes and how it has worked to develop the racial imaginary throughout time. People learn from the performances they have witnessed around them and they then enact the performance again—"twice behaved behavior"—because they realize they are supposed to perform in a specific context depending on their racial or gendered identity. Zackodnik explains that this concept of performance works to reimagine the "tragic mulatta" trope:

At the hands of African American women writers and orators, the mulatta of tragic mulatta fame is restored rather than reinscribed, and in the process she is transformed and the racial work she performed displaced so that she becomes not a figure through which white fantasies of racial difference are played out but rather one through which the color line is tested and transgressed. (xvii)

In looking at how Roach describes performance as working as a "restored behavior," the "tragic mulatta" trope becomes something different from the original use. Indeed, Fauset reinscribes the trope of the "tragic mulatta" to instead show how her identity exists beyond the racial imaginary. I thus apply Roach's "surrogation" to the way in which multiracial individuals experience their multiple identities, especially in *Comedy: American Style*. Ultimately, applying performativity to Fauset's texts reveals the way in which multiracial individuals experience erasure, as well as shows how passing is a multidirectional movement as performativity operates intersectionally.

### ***Plum Bun's Structure***

The racial erasure in *Plum Bun* works through how Fauset structures the novel. To establish the power of social structures, Fauset structured *Plum Bun*'s sections to follow a nursery rhyme throughout the novel as Angela moves from her hometown to live in New York City. Angela longs for the freedom to work where she wants and marry who she wants without social rejection or mistreatment. To do so, she passes, or performs, primarily as white. Many readers view Angela's passing as a choice she makes in constructing her identity, that she is simply making a choice to pretend to be a white woman. In fact, in his article on *Plum Bun*, Willie J. Harrell claims passing allowed individuals to define their "self-identities" (190) which indicates that the passing individual holds agency and power in this act. Further, Gregory Phipps demonstrates that in embracing her black identity at the end of the novel, Angela "is able to reject essentialist social systems, since the very life she is leading proves that they are artificial and malleable" (235). Thus, both Harrell and Phipps view Angela as holding agency over her choices. However, I argue that Angela's choice is a lot more complex.

While it may seem that Angela makes choices throughout the novel, her actions depend upon society's established norms for racialized and gendered behaviors. Hence, while Fauset highlights the problem with social constructions of racial and gender binaries, she does not present this issue by emphasizing Angela's choice to pass for white, but rather, her lack of choice and the problem with the racial imaginary as Angela must take part in performativity and follow the established structures of society, which largely consists of the erasure of her multiplicity and multiracial identity. Angela, just like Clare and Irene from *Passing*, is "both a black white woman and a white black woman" (Hutchinson 294). Hence, she cannot perform as a white woman or as a black woman without erasing parts of herself. As Hames-García puts it, "[m]odern society tends to conceive of a person's complexity in a way that fractures it" (7). To



me, this fracturing of one's complexity or identity speaks to the pain of passing and the erasure that follows. Therefore, erasure is not simply the absence of one's race, but the fracturing of it.

### **Nursery Rhyme**

To frame Angela's reliance on performance and society's fractured conceptions of identities, Fauset employs specific structural constraints throughout the novel to emphasize the way in which society consists of socially prescribed categories. As the novel's sections follow the English nursery rhyme "Plum Bun," Fauset reveals that Angela cannot easily escape her socially constructed fate to adhere to the racial imaginary as the section titles map out exactly where she must end up. She moves Angela through sections of the book titled "Home," "Market," "Plum Bun," "Home Again," and "Market is Done." As the sections and the title of the book refer to the nursery rhyme, Fauset frames Angela's story through a structure that readers of the era would recognize: "To Market, to Market / To buy a Plum Bun; /Home again, Home again /Market is done." Thus, Fauset emphasizes Angela's predetermined and repetitious fate in categorical essentialist ideologies by using the nursery rhyme's structure as a metaphor for Angela's life. Although Angela is multiracial, society's structures and ideologies instruct her to behave in an "either/or" manner. She must be black or white, but not both. Thus, Angela performs throughout the novel, in tandem with the nursery rhyme, to fit the category of the ideal "white woman," despite this meaning that she must fracture and reject her multiracial identity.

The scholarship that has been done on the "Plum Bun" nursery rhyme emphasizes the consumerism of the rhyme rather than its representation as a metaphor for Angela's fractured racial identity. In examining the significance of the nursery rhyme in relation to the novel, Jean Marie Lutes explains that the rhyme symbolizes "Angela... [as] the 'plum bun' who markets

herself to white men, suffers, returns home, and finds her true love” (92). Similarly, Charles Scruggs views the rhyme as a symbol for the consumer aspect of Angela’s time in the city, but also examines how Fauset uses the nursery rhyme to emphasize a structure:

Plum Bun’s first part is called ‘Home’, and its last two parts ‘Home Again’ and ‘Market is Done.’ The second part, ‘Market’, is New York, the great city where Angela does her shopping. The third part, ‘Plum Bun’, focuses upon the object of her desire as a consumer in the city. Although the nursery rhyme, like the novel’s structure, seems to end where we began, the title of the novel’s last section is not ‘Home’ but ‘Market is Done.’ (86-7)

Scruggs discusses the similarities between the rhyme and the novel, both concluding with the ending of “Market” and the ways in which Angela navigates the consumerism of the city in order to find her place. Although the rhyme does reflect the consumerism of the city, the structure goes beyond the ways in which Angela markets herself. Certainly, Angela “markets” or performs within specific contexts to gain more agency and freedom in New York, but I find the significance of ending on “Market is Done” to relate to Angela’s eventual rejection of the racial imaginary. She does not return “Home” but finally shows how the performance may end, a contrast to Larsen’s *Passing* since Clare dies and thus, represents the way society prevents her from experiencing her multiracial identity. Throughout most of her novel, Fauset emphasizes the struggle Angela experiences to escape her performance.

As Angela must abide by the structure of the rhyme, Fauset reveals the difficulty in Angela’s every attempt to make choices throughout the novel. In the first section, “home,” Angela longs to change the course of her life, “wondering at just what period of one’s life existence began to shape itself as *you* wanted it” (22). In this very wish, however, Fauset’s

structure exhibits how Angela will not be able to shape her life as she wants it easily, for her multiracial identity is fractured by society's definitions. As Angela moves from "home" to "market," Fauset foreshadows Angela's impending fate. In this section, Angela believes she is finally free from her racial constraints; however, she soon recognizes her gendered "limitations" and understands that to gain ultimate power, she must marry a man (Fauset 88). Catherine Rottenberg explores this limitation, asserting "[m]ost women, even those who have escaped to the city and attempt to emulate the New Woman ideal, are still profoundly influenced by dominant gender norms and yearn for the social approbation that marriage affords" ("Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*" 274). As Angela rejoices in her racial freedoms, she accepts the same gendered limitations that Rena experiences in *The House Behind the Cedars*. Thus, Fauset heightens Angela's lack of identity choice through structural constraints.

### **Visual Significance**

With the structure of the novel emphasizing that individuals must follow societal guidelines, Fauset simultaneously undercuts this structure by also showing how passing itself destabilizes ideals of race as essential and builds upon white anxiety as Angela's visual presentation guides people's understanding of who she is. Angela's attempt to maintain agency over her racial identity and gender performance relies on her ability to embrace her white features. During the Harlem Renaissance—as well as before and after—companies profited off ideologies that white skin was better than dark skin. Commercial advertisements focused heavily on "skin-lightening creams and hair straightening products" (Balshaw 131). Because of this societal beauty standard, Angela embraces her white features as a source of power; however, Angela's performance as a white woman ultimately reveals the ways in which society imposes ideas onto her identity based

on her physical appearance. Angela perceives her physical appearance and ability to pass as a clear source of power. Angela longs for everything “wrapped up with white people” because it allows her “power” since “the badge of that power was whiteness” (73). Angela experiences the exact impact of this power on a date with her friend Matthew at the theater. Matthew asks her to get the tickets while he pays the cabbie, but when they attempt to enter the theater, the attendant asserts to Matthew “she can go in, but you can’t” (75). In this experience, Angela realizes, though she is multiracial and, thus, black as well, her race matters little because her features say otherwise. She realizes “it isn’t being coloured that makes the difference, it’s letting it be known” (78). This again speaks to Butler’s assertion that “the *appearance of substance* is precisely that, a constructed identity” dependent on repetitious acts (“Performative Acts” 520). Angela’s skin color does not reveal her multiracial heritage but adheres to the visible features of whites according to the racial imaginary; thus, people assume Angela is white based on her “performative accomplishment” in passing (Butler “Performative Acts” 520). The performative accomplishment in this case, though, hinges simply on Angela’s not proclaiming her multiracial identity, but rather, allows people to view her appearance and assume she is white. Phipps explains Angela uses this performance to “break out of the routine of discrimination” and experience power in terms of her racial expression (227). In passing, “Angela enters into multiple communities, demonstrating in the process the flexibility and variability of her social identity,” which highlights her ability to perform race (Phipps 227). But, despite Angela’s attempt to use her appearance for her own construction of identity and power, Angela finds herself powerless in the erasure of her multiplicity.

Angela’s realization of her lack of power manifests in her inability to reconcile her white identity with her black identity. During a date with a white man named Roger, Angela witnesses

him preventing “three coloured people” from sitting near them in the café (133). Roger asserts he made them leave so they would not spoil “white people’s appetites” and that he knew that Angela “had no time for darkies” nor had she probably ever “been that near to one before” (134). In these racist assumptions, Roger projects ideals onto Angela, placing her into the category of a white woman. Here, however, Angela’s performance as a white woman does not allow her power but removes her control completely as she becomes “silent, lifeless” (134). Kathleen Pfeiffer supports the paradoxical nature of Angela’s passing by examining her rejection of her black identity:

Like the society of which she is a part, she embraces only one aspect of identity and overdetermines its significance. She participates in the very same cultural predisposition to stereotype that her passing wants to dissolve. (“The Limits of Identity” 89)

Pfeiffer recognizes the ways in which Angela emphasizes binaries by performing “whiteness.” Relating to this affirmation of stereotypes, Butler explains “gender is an act which has been rehearsed... [and] requires individual actors in order to be actualized and reproduced as reality once again” (526). Angela’s performance of race reaffirms the distinction between black and white behaviors, actualizing them through her performance and making them a reality. Thus, by casting aside her multiracial identity, Angela remains silent when Roger insults other people of color and, henceforth, remains powerless as she experiences the erasure of her multiracial complexity.

This erasure is significant as it dictates Angela’s identity throughout the entirety of the novel as she experiences people’s examinations of her visual features and the conclusions they make based on those appearances. For instance, because of her appearance, Angela’s art teacher, Mr.

Shield asserts, “I can’t think she’s really coloured, Mabel. Why she looks and acts just like a white girl. She dresses in better taste than anybody in the room” (72). To assume that a “white girl” looks and acts in a way that would differentiate her from other races, indicates the power of the racial imaginary. Thus, through this assertion, Mr. Shield makes assumptions about Angela’s outward appearance, down to her very clothes. Lutes speaks to this emphasis on clothing in relation to Angela’s race and how “paradoxically, [consumerism] both integrates and isolates women of color” (77-8). This example proves this true, for although Angela’s physical appearance, choice of clothing, and behavior leads people to believe she is white, she ultimately isolates herself into a category despite her attempt to break free. In refusing to tell people she is multiracial and allowing people to believe she is only white, Angela attempts to gain mobility, but experiences constraints as people construct her identity for her.

In addition to highlighting structural constraints, Fauset also employs repetition in Angela’s experiences being visually defined by others as black or, in their words, “coloured.” In “Home,” Angela experiences peoples’ disbelief over her race multiple times. For instance, as a child, Angela befriends a little girl named Mary Hastings. When another little girl, Esther, exposes Angela’s racial identity, Mary exclaims “Coloured! ... Angela, you never told me you were coloured” (43). To this, Angela responds with “Tell you that I was coloured! Why of course I never told you that I was coloured! Why should I?” (43). Mary expresses a common reaction in that it is the duty of the person of color to make their identity evident to white people. This exchange repeats within the same section of the novel, as Esther once again “outs” Angela, this time, years later in her art class. The art professor asserts his disbelief with “Miss Murray, you never told me that you were coloured” to which Angela repeats, “Coloured! Of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I?” (72-3). The reaction of the white characters to

express their shock at Angela's race as well as seemingly blame her for not telling them directly addresses the fact that people of color are not always visible. By not explicitly expressing that she is black or multiracial, people assume, based on Angela's light skin, that she is white. In analyzing *Passing*, Butler works through the visual construction of race by examining Clare's refusal to share her blackness with her husband. In doing so, Clare "withholds the conversational marker which would counter the hegemonic presumption that she is white" (Butler, *Bodies* 125). Like Clare, Angela withholds information about her multiracial identity, which allows her appearance to drive people's assumptions about her race. Because her appearance exposes the faultiness in the racial imaginary, the white characters experience shock and make it clear they believe it is Angela's duty to disclose her racial identity to everyone she encounters so they will not assume she is white.

Eventually, Angela does disclose her racial identity like the white characters seemingly wanted; however, they contradictorily cannot accept this either since it still disrupts their racial imaginary. At the end of the novel when Angela is among the reporters who are talking to Miss Powell, Angela expresses, "if Miss Powel isn't wanted, I'm not wanted either. You imply that she's not wanted because she's coloured. Well, I'm coloured too" (349). Although it may seem this encounter diverts from her previous experiences, since Angela exposes herself, the reporters react in shock, just as everyone has before: "I don't believe you know what you're saying, Miss Mory" they assert, "take it back!" (349). To this, Angela once again repeats the instance in which she must answer to someone about her race. Further, even though she finally tells them she is "coloured" like so many white individuals have prodded her to do throughout her life, they are still not satisfied with her answer. For a visibly white woman to tell them she is not white injures their understanding of what it means to be white and breaks down their faith in the racial

imaginary. By the white characters expressing shock and discontent at Angela withholding her racial identity as well as at Angela asserting loudly that she not white, Fauset accentuates Angela's repeating experiences, as she is bound to follow the novel's structure, which leads her to experience repetitious, essentialist ideologies of race that exclude the existence of multiracial individuals. Fauset undercuts the racial imaginary by showing how multiracial individuals cannot be easily defined. At the same time, she shows the power of the racial imaginary to prevail despite its inconsistencies since, no matter what, people will not accept Angela's identity since she does not fit the black/white binary.

### **Performance in *Comedy: American Style***

Like *Plum Bun*, *Comedy: American Style*'s structure establishes that society makes it nearly impossible for individuals to construct their identities without adhering to some sort of performance because of the black/white binary of the racial imaginary. Further, the title itself refers to the idea of the theater and the genre of "comedy." However, by calling the novel a comedy, Fauset upends our ideas of what things are supposed to be. As Sigmund Freud put it, a joke offers a "contrast between sense and nonsense. What at one moment has seemed to us to have a meaning, we now see is completely meaningless" (7-8). Thus, jokes and comedy offer people the ability to say things under the guise of "nonsense," although they may have a deeper meaning. This very concept of a joke works to Fauset's favor in this novel, for she is able to critique society under the guise of it being a "comedy" or nonsense. Therefore, while *Plum Bun*'s structure emphasizes the immobility of multiracial individuals and the contradictory visual representations of race, *Comedy: American Style* similarly emphasizes the fiction of society by asserting that what we see may not be what we think. While *Plum Bun* focuses on a light-skinned



multiracial individual passing for white, *Comedy: American Style* shows how some light-skinned multiracial individuals may not want to pass for white. These different examples of passing further the idea of the “comedy, but not really a comedy” because, if someone can look white, but identify as black, society’s categories become exposed as completely fictional. I point to Roach’s discussion on performance as he expresses, “culture reproduces and re-creates itself by a process that can be best described by the word surrogation” (2). Surrogation takes the concept of mixing races further, showing how the culture changes itself each time it is performed. In this performative and transformative process, culture— race in this case— becomes fluid and therefore does not match the notion that race is static per the racial imaginary. Hence, both the multiracial characters who identify as white and those that identify as black bring out the white anxiety of the 1920s and 30s because their existence exposes the fact that one cannot easily distinguish between the races. As society in the 1920s-30s presented segregation and racism as sensible, Fauset exposes the way in which these notions are nonsensical and how surrogacy permeates society which affirms white anxiety and destabilizes the racial imaginary.

The novel, just like the multiracial characters within, exposes racial complexity, as multiple characters experience their race differently. The novel begins with Olivia as a child, realizing she is different from other children. A little girl calls Olivia a “nasty little nigger,” and from there cannot bear that she is “considered different” (4). Her relationship with her mother deteriorates as Olivia expresses disdain for her dark-skinned father. Despite Olivia’s dislike for people with dark skin, she holds the hope that she will be able to have light-skinned children and marries Christopher Cary, a multiracial man who refuses to pass but whose “skin was actually whiter than Olivia’s” (25). This introduction sets up Olivia’s internalized racism which influences her children’s lives and the plot of the novel. Olivia encourages her daughter, Teresa, and her

second son, Christopher to pass for white, while she regularly mistreats her son, Oliver, because of his darker skin. With Teresa, Olivia feels “the incontestable proof of her white womanhood” (37). Oliver, on the other hand, is proof of her blackness. Through these opposite sides of the spectrum, Olivia’s children expose her multiplicity of identity and the extent of her attempt to erase her black identity. In addition to the Cary family, the novel follows the people involved in their lives. Although “Teresa’s Act” takes up the majority of the book along with Oliver’s, Phebe, Teresa’s childhood friend, finishes the book off, right before “Curtain.”

Interestingly, few scholars have focused on Phebe’s multiracial experience in the novel. I find Phebe and Teresa’s experiences with performativity and racial erasure similar in that both of their mothers have an impact on their identities, although Phebe and Teresa respond differently. While Olivia encourages Teresa to pass for white and attempts to erase her black identity, Phebe’s closeness to her mother results in her strong identification with being African American, despite her white appearance and the suggestions of those around her to simply be white: “I just prefer being colored” (289). As Roach puts it, “[t]he process of surrogation continues, but it does so in a climate of heightened anxiety that outsiders will somehow succeed in replacing the original peoples ... That is why the relentless search for the purity of origins is a voyage not of discovery but of erasure” (6). Here Roach shows the differences between races and cultures becomes emphasized with this surrogation. I look at surrogation to see how Olivia wants to succeed in replacing her black culture with her white one. Phebe, on the other hand, wants to highlight her black culture, but practices surrogation by recreating it a bit differently than her mother. Thus, just like *Plum Bun, Comedy: American Style* shows the way in which multiracial individuals experience racial erasure. While Angela experienced the erasure of her black identity

through passing as white, Teresa and Phebe experience this erasure through other people's definitions of their racial identity and suggestions for how they should or should not identify.

### **Teresa's Experience**

Teresa's mother, Olivia, fuels Teresa's experience as multiracial woman in that she is told how to perform her race throughout the novel. Olivia tells Teresa who she can and cannot play with as a child and her choices depend upon the skin colors of the children. Later, as Teresa grows up, Olivia chooses to send Teresa to Christie's Academy specifically because of race since, "while the school had no objection to foreigners, Negroes nor Jews, it happened that none had ever registered within their portals" (70). Because there is no other "colored girl" (71) in this school setting, Teresa goes along with her mother's teachings and allows the other girls to assume she is white. The lack of women of color in the school speaks to the institutional racism of Christie's Academy since, though there are no rules that forbid non-whites to attend, social norms dictate that they are not welcome. Further, the narrator notes, "[t]he girls, of course, unquestionably accepted her as white; the absence of any other colored girl took away any sense of strain or disloyalty to her own" (71). By noting that the *absence* of other colored girls allowed Teresa to pass without the feeling of betrayal to her race, the novel speaks to the pervasion of erasure. Teresa doesn't choose to be white, but it's chosen for her.

Teresa pushes against her erasure and expresses her racial identity to a girl named Alicia who Teresa identifies as "colored." With a sense of kinship toward Alicia, Teresa expresses her inability to completely disregard her multiracial identity. Teresa tells Alicia, "I'm not white really...I'm colored. I love being colored...but Mother has always been so set on passing... She was never willing for a colored girl even to come and play with me" (87-8). Here, Teresa rejects

her mother's continual erasure of her black identity. Instead, Teresa embraces the piece of her that pushes against her mother's racist outlook. In this friendship, Teresa recognizes the way in which Alicia holds a pride in her race, something that Teresa was never able to express due to her mother's rejection of their black heritage: "Olivia's teachings had urged not so much: 'Be white,' as 'Don't be colored.' It was impossible for the child to know esteem for either group" (83). This line establishes how Teresa's dual identities were both at odds within her understanding of who she was as a human. Because of her mother's erasure of her black identity, her whole identity experiences a fracturing that prevents her from holding pride in any aspect of her race. Fauset emphasizes Teresa's conflicting racial presentation through her interaction with Alicia's family who see her as "a 'white colored girl' who struck them at times as being 'more white than the average white person'" (88). Here, Fauset offers a paradox. How can a multiracial woman be "more white" than whites? How can you be a "white colored girl"? This is where Olivia's racial erasure effects Teresa's surrogation; since Teresa has not been able to embrace her black heritage, her reproduction of the culture has been fractured.

This fracturing affects Teresa so strongly that despite her multiracial identity, she embraces her erasure. Teresa eventually gives into Olivia's influence and rejects her love interest, Henry, because he is not white and refuses to pass for anything but African American. Despite Henry's point that they are all people of color, Olivia tells Henry, "I have brought Teresa up all her life to think of herself as white" (142). Olivia, hence, doesn't seem to completely believe her fantasy of being white but accepts that she is raising Teresa to simply "think" she is white, perpetuating the racial imaginary. Thus, similar to Simone de Beauvoir's claim that "one is not born, but rather, becomes a woman," Olivia seems to think she can become white through performance and a "repetition of acts" (Butler "Performative Acts" 519). Teresa, in an attempt to

somehow maintain her relationship with Henry while simultaneously continuing the erasure of her racial identity, asks him to speak Spanish and “pass for a Mexican” (143). In response to this, Henry calls Olivia and Teresa “make-believe white women” (143), indicating that he views their passing as a complete façade. In this interaction, Teresa solidifies her erasure as she accepts her mother’s influence, loses her relationship with Henry, and continues passing as white.

### **Phebe’s Experience**

Phebe’s character stands in contrast to Teresa’s, despite their connections to their mothers and multiracial identities, because Phebe refuses to pass for white regardless of her light skin. Scholars before me have discussed Phebe’s part in *Comedy: American Style* briefly but have not fully explored her significance in relation to performativity and racial erasure. For instance, Jacquelyn Y. McLendon explains how “Phebe’s characterization ... revises those ‘black’ women who use their white skin as a commodity. Unlike Teresa, Phebe has the courage to stand firmly by her convictions, and unlike Olivia, she is loyal to her own flesh and blood” (69). While McLendon does acknowledge the significance of Phebe’s ability to remain steadfast in her identity as black despite the color of her skin, McLendon spends more time focusing on Teresa and Olivia’s relationship. Phebe is introduced through the perspective of Olivia at the beginning of the novel as a little girl. She is described as “a very fair blonde with dark blue eyes” (33). Through this perspective, Olivia makes it clear to Teresa she prefers her to play with Phebe rather than Marise Davies because Marise has dark skin. To this preference, Teresa points out to her mother that both Marise and Phebe are “colored” (35). Teresa explains that Phebe makes it evident to everyone at school that she “belong[s] to the black or negro race” (35). Thus, Phebe’s skin color and racial identity pose a challenge to Olivia’s sense of race. If skin color doesn’t

define one's racial identity—if a white girl can claim her blackness—then Olivia, too, must face the reality that she is not white as she claims to be, despite her ability to pass. Thus, Phebe's performativity differs from Angela's in *Plum Bun* because she does not follow the traditional “forcible citation of a norm” as Butler puts it (*Bodies* 177). Instead, she pushes against the regular performance of whiteness by contradicting what it means to be black through her visual appearance. She uses surrogation to continue her mother's culture, but by doing it through a light-skinned, black body.

Phebe's appearance, and people's perceptions of her—particularly men's perceptions of her—dictate her life. Despite Phebe's insistence on her identification with the black community, her love interest, Nicholas, attempts to control her identity by focusing on her skin color. At the very beginning of the novel, when, as a child, Nicholas first sees Phebe, he innocently asks his mother “[s]he's white, ain't she?” (49). When his mother says no, he says “[s]he's whiter than lots of those white girls at our school. What makes her colored and makes those white girls white?” (49). This question signifies the way that Nicholas views race is focused on essential binaries that define race through skin color since he cannot understand how a girl with skin as white as Phebe could be black. Later in the novel when the two are adults, because Nicholas is not in love with Phebe as she is with him, he uses her skin color as an excuse to not be with her: “Haven't you seen people whispering, and staring when we've got into street-cars? White men leering at you and looking daggers at me? White women curling their lips at both of us?” (260). While this is a fair point to make since Nicholas does receive racism that Phebe does not because of his dark skin, it is also an example of the way in which Phebe's identity is constructed by everyone else, despite her own identification, similar to the way in which Rena's identity is constructed in *The House Behind the Cedars* by the men in her life. Further, Phebe's description

through the eyes of Llewellyn Nash, a white man who falls in love with her under the impression that she is white, emphasizes her features and his dictation of her identity. He notes “her bright fair hair” (229) and her “small white face with its deep blue eyes” (230). He is taken by her beauty as if no other woman in the world could be so beautiful and focuses on her colors and the lightness and brightness of her: “Her brown suit gave her fair hair a brighter tone” (231). Phebe’s outward appearance, even her very clothes, indicate to others that she is white just as Angela’s appearance is associated with whiteness in *Plum Bun*.

Phebe, unlike Angela and Rena, rejects the idea of performing or passing as white, despite the ease with which it would allow her to live her life. In the section, “The Characters,” Phebe and Nicholas speak together about race:

[Phebe:] “I had a teacher in the graded school who couldn’t bear me after I told her I was colored.”

[Nicholas:] “You certainly are straight about that, aren’t you? Not a bit like Teresa.”

[Phebe:] “I always told you that wasn’t Teresa’s doing. That’s her mother’s foolishness.”

(64)

Here, Phebe points out a specific instance when she was a child that she refuses to pass. We learn about this instance first through Teresa’s perspective as a child, telling Olivia how Phebe asserts to the teacher “I belong to the black or Negro race” (35). This assertion proves similar to Angela’s declaration in *Plum Bun* that she is a woman of color. The difference, though, is that Angela expresses she is a black woman upon white people asking her why she didn’t tell them (43), Phebe, on the other hand, offers the information up willingly. Although Olivia is shocked Phebe chooses not to pass since she has light skin, Teresa says, “her mother *is* colored. Not black, you know, Mamma, but real, real brown” (35). To Olivia as well as Nicholas, it would

seem obvious for Phebe to simply pass for white, but Phebe's closeness to her mother and rejection of her white father prevents her from doing so. She describes her father as an "errant distant white man whose blood drifted so carelessly in her veins" (243). "Blood" then, is not so important to Phebe, as who she loves and who she identifies with.

Phebe's willingness to embrace her black identity despite her white skin complicates people's ideas about race. To most of the people around Phebe, it seems it would be easier for her to simply erase her black identity and pass as white completely. Nicholas emphasizes to Phebe she cannot understand the struggle he endures as a black man: "But it's impossible for a girl of your appearance even to guess at the extra complications of living which come to vex and torment a man like me" (237). Nicholas' emphasis on Phebe's privilege connects to *Passing* and the conflict Irene and Brian experience at having different experiences in America due to their different skin tones. Even Llewellyn tells Phebe "You're the whitest white girl I ever saw. You couldn't have black blood in your veins" (286). With these assertions, the men erase Phebe's identity as a multiracial woman, asserting she cannot exist as black because of her appearance. Brando Skyhorse uses the term "passing loud" in an essay he wrote on passing. He writes, "[i]f someone passes loud ... then the act of camouflage isn't survival, but a means to shed one's perceived invisibility, their *nonexistence*, so, they can be seen, and their voice be heard" (11). Although Skyhorse is referring to people passing for something they are not in this instance of his essay, the idea that Phebe could be passing not for the ease of mobility or freedom like some, but to actually shed her nonexistence in society resonates within the novel. People insist upon erasing her identity as a black woman; thus, she pushes against their insistence by claiming her identity loudly.



## **Resisting the Racial Imaginary**

Looking at both *Plum Bun* and *Comedy: American Style* together reveals the various ways in which multiracial individuals experience disadvantages due to existing within structures of society that do not allow them full mobility. At the same time, these novels show how multiracial people's very existences undercut these structures. These two novels work well together as they depict light-skinned women who chose to live their lives differently depending on their racial identifications. While Angela passes as white to gain mobility and freedom, Phebe chooses to pass as black to resist racial erasure and embrace the heritage with which she identifies. I point out that they both pass because they are multiracial women and living as either/or still prevents them from fully expressing their multiplicity. Nonetheless, both women still undercut the structures of society through these examples of passing because of their visual representations. Angela shows that she may exist within white society simply because she can fool white people into believing she is not black, just like Teresa does. Phebe, on the other hand, upends people's ideas about what it means to be black since she looks like a white woman according to the racial imaginary—with light skin and light hair—but calls herself black unapologetically. She refuses to let people around her erase her identity and her connection to her black mother.

Although Roach claims that the performativity of culture by continuing generations may lead to anxiety that the culture will completely change or replace the original, surrogation means that culture cannot be reproduced without some sort of change. There is no one way to be multiracial, black, female, male, etc. Performance changes the thing itself as time moves, “always subject to revision” (Roach 3). The need for performance to always take part in some sort of revision supports the idea that race cannot be stagnant as the structure of society attempts

to prove. Race, like gender, is instead fluid. Angela in *Plum Bun* proves this as she finally expresses at the end of the novel “if Miss Powel isn’t wanted, I’m not wanted either. You imply that she’s not wanted because she’s coloured. Well, I’m coloured too” (349). Despite her telling people what they want to hear, they are not happy with her depiction of a woman of color since it does not match the racial imaginary. Nicholas’ assertion that Phebe is “whiter than lots of those white girls” (49) again pushes against the racial imaginary since what people see is not always what they think it should be.

## CONCLUSION

“I’m not the color of my skin. I’m a story.”

-Heidi W. Durrow, *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky*

Danzy Senna’s 1998 novel *Caucasia* involves a young, multiracial girl named Birdie Lee who passes for white with her white mother and, when she admits this to her black father, he replies, “there’s no such thing as passing. We’re all just pretending. Race is a complete illusion” (391). Birdie Lee pushes against this saying, “[i]f race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum ’cause I looked white. You don’t think that’s real? Those are the facts” (393). What Birdie Lee exposes here is the problem with simply claiming race is an illusion since, as Michael Hames-García points out, “racial identities are real, even if they are also socially constructed” (xvi). Further, the effects of the racial imaginary upon these identities are real as well. I point to Senna’s novel and two other contemporary novels, Heidi W. Durrow’s *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* and Mat Johnson’s *Loving Day*, to conclude this thesis as they show how passing has evolved. The work of Charles Chesnutt, Nella Larsen, and Jessie Fauset provided me with the theoretical frame with which to read passing novels beyond the black/white binary of the racial imaginary. The prevailing existence of the erasure of multiracial identities due to the racial imaginary, though, is the reason to look at how passing novels still speak to the racial imaginary today—while race may be constructed, the experiences are not an illusion.

Passing novels have evolved to address the changing racial imaginary. There has been a rise in awareness over racism since the Harlem Renaissance and into our current era as laws—such as Civil Rights legislation—outlawed segregation and discrimination. However, even while racism is penalized in many ways, the racial imaginary persists within society which constructs

binaries, “us versus them” mindsets, and ignores the possibility of identity formation in intersectional terms, i.e. multiplicity. Thus, these present-day passing novels call attention to the continual lack of recognition of multiracial identities. As I mentioned in the Introduction, multiracial people have consistently experienced marginalization and have had their identities constructed for them.<sup>12</sup> This marginalization is significant, particularly because multiracial and multiethnic people have been and are continuing to increase in numbers in the U.S.<sup>13</sup> Hames-García explains how “restriction...misrepresents and misunderstands multiply oppressed people to an even greater extent than it does other people” (8). Hames-García explains that this restriction oppresses people such as “Black women” and “gay Chicano men,” pointing out the intersections of their racial, gender, and sexual identities (8). The misrepresentation of multiracial people works the same, though. Because the multiracial body threatens and exposes the racial imaginary as a constructed concept, the bodies become marginalized and ignored even as these bodies make up much of the population. As multiracial people have often been left out of the discussion about marginalized bodies, we experience an erasure. In this Conclusion, I assert that passing novels continue to work through the complexity and struggle of multiracial identities by exploring how the concept of passing and the way in which people self-identify has changed. Further, what these contemporary novels show are that ideas of equality and freedom are connected to the racial imaginary as well. Present-day passing novels problematize the concept of foundational equality as racism persists in different forms through the racial imaginary.

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<sup>12</sup> See Jason Carroll’s “Behind the Scenes: Is Barack Obama Black or Biracial?”

<sup>13</sup> See Gretchen Livingston’s “The Rise of Multiracial and Multiethnic Babies in the U.S.”

## Contemporary Passing Novels

Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From The Sky* sets up the struggle for multiracial individuals to feel as though they belong to any racial group due to the prevalence of the racial imaginary. Durrow's lead character, Rachel, grapples with the apparent paradox of her biracial identity and physical appearance: "I learn that black people don't have blue eyes. I learn that I am black. I have blue eyes" (10). This tension continues throughout the novel as Rachel often feels like she isn't black or white enough. While *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* is not an explicit passing novel, Rachel experiences the act of passing by often stopping herself from mentioning anything about her Danish heritage while attending her primarily black school. She describes her class through the binary of the racial imaginary:

There are fifteen black people in the class and seven white people. And there's me. There's another girl who sits in the back. Her name is Carmen LaGuaria, and she has hair like mine, my same color skin, and she counts as black. I don't understand how, but she seems to know. I see people two different ways now: people who look like me and people who don't look like me. (9)

In this excerpt, Rachel describes how people's skin color and hair texture often dictates who they are or how they will be identified. Thus, to be accepted by the black girls, Rachel omits the whiteness of her identity. Through this omission, Rachel passes, similar to the way in which Irene does in Larsen's *Passing*. As Irene passes for white occasionally by omission and for convenience, Rachel does the same thing, passing for black by omission to be accepted by those around her.

Despite Rachel's attempt to categorize herself as she wishes, multiple characters throughout the novel question Rachel's racial identification. Rachel explains how the girls at

school “think [she wants] to be white” explaining “[t]hey call me an Oreo. I don’t want to be white. Sometimes I want to go back to being what I was. I want to be nothing” (148). By saying she wants to be “nothing,” Rachel expresses a desire for a lack of racial identification for, as a biracial person, it would be easier to simply be called “nothing” than to face the inability to fit within the confines of racial categories that don’t accept her. Rachel’s racial identity, though, continues to be constructed for her. Just like Rena in *The House Behind the Cedars*, she experiences a male telling her who she is. Right before they have sex, a white boy named Jessie tells Rachel “[i]t’s like you’re black but not really black” (230). This assertion not only constructs Rachel’s identity through the control of a dominant male, but it excludes her from belonging to the category of black and erases her multiplicity. Hames-García explains that “multiplicity of the self becomes obscured through ways of thinking that accompany domination and oppression” (7). Jessie tells Rachel what and who she is through his domination over her body. After they have sex, Jessie asserts another claim upon Rachel’s body by saying, “I’ve never done it with a black girl before” (234). This statement implies Rachel has become another number in Jessie’s sexual conquests and has been fetishized for this purpose. He determines the extent to which she can be black based on his needs and how it fits the narrative he constructs—he erases her identity both as black and as white.

Senna’s *Caucasia* deals explicitly with the concept of passing as her main character, Birdie Lee, must pass as white with her mother. Similar to Rachel, Birdie Lee questions her blackness: “Did you have to have a black mother to really be black? There had been no black women involved in my conception. Cole’s either. Maybe that made us frauds” (285). These questions about her and her sister’s lack of having a black mother cause Birdie Lee to feel shame over her whiteness and her passing. This shame leads Birdie Lee to eventually find her absentee,

black father and tells him, “I passed as white, Papa” (391). It is here that her father claims “[r]ace is a complete illusion” (391). Birdie Lee’s rejection of her father’s claim exposes his own binary thinking by pointing out how he gave her up to keep her sister who could pass for black more easily: “[i]f race is so make-believe, why did I go with Mum? You gave me to Mum ’cause I looked white. You don’t think that’s real? Those are the facts” (393). Thus, Birdie Lee destabilizes her father’s concept of the racial imaginary as she exposes the favor he showed one daughter over the other because one daughter’s skin matched his own better than the other’s. Birdie Lee addresses her father’s perceived belief in equality and freedom by directly calling him out for not provide equal love and care to his daughters. Although her father tells her race is an illusion, she experiences the impact of “looking white” as she is abandoned by her father, left to pass for white with her mother, and experiences consistent exclusion throughout the novel as she never feels like she is white or black.

While Durrow and Senna depict female characters that feel excluded from the black/white binary, Johnson’s *Loving Day* tells the story of Warren Duffy who attempts to push against his multiplicity and instead fit within the racial binary by claiming his blackness. Warren explicitly supports the racial imaginary stating, “there is no such thing as ‘biracial’ in Black America...There’s black and there’s white” (27). In these sentences, Warren nearly completely sums up the erasure of multiracial bodies that I have attempted to articulate in this thesis; that race is a binary and there is no room for intersectional identification. As the novel progresses, Warren reveals that this support of the racial imaginary stems from his insecurity of having a white father and his wish to ignore that part of him. A multiracial woman named Tal eventually describes to Warren the other side of the belief in the racial imaginary. She says, he will never be accepted despite his embrace of the binary:

The same people who despise you for identifying as mixed? Those are the same people who, when you identify as black, despise you for not being black enough. And there's nothing you can actually do to be black enough, for them. Because it's not really how you act that they despise. It's you. Your very existence. (123)

Tal points out the paradox in pushing against being multiracial for, no matter what, the identity will be critiqued by someone since the existence of the multiracial body is threatening. In discussing the threat of the "mulatto body," Samira Kawash explains "[i]n the figure of the passing body, the signifiers of race are unloosed from the signifieds; the seemingly stable relation between representation and the real collapses, and representation is suddenly dangerous and untrustworthy" (131-2). As in *The House Behind the Cedars*, *Passing*, *Plum Bun*, and *Comedy: American Style*, the characters' bodies exposed the unstable representation of what it means to be white, as they pushed against the norm and showed an existence contrary to the racial imaginary.

### **Reading Passing Novels Beyond the Binary**

What these contemporary passing novels show is that the concept of passing is still relevant, and the experience of multiracial individuals is complex as ever. Though these characters do not pass for white because they will be refused service at a restaurant like Irene does in *Passing*, they pass for black or white to be accepted and to find a way to belong among a society that won't accept them for their multiplicity. What I hope to have achieved in this project was to offer a new way of reading passing novels. The scholarship and literature surrounding the subject has not paid significant attention to the characters of passing texts as multiracial and has instead viewed them within the confines of the racial imaginary—as black passing for white.



Because this view continues in supporting the racial imaginary, I attempted to explore the complexity of the characters' multiplicity and dual identities within this project. This is not to say that every scholar has failed in pushing against the binary of the racial imaginary. Kathleen Pfeiffer, on the contrary, emphasizes that "to argue that passing involves racial transgression requires that one not only accept a certain notion of racial difference, but also that one necessarily reinforces it" (*Race Passing* 7). In this, Pfeiffer acknowledges the discussion of passing as a transgression supports a racial binary. Martha Cutter also pushes against the binary in her discussion on *Passing* by explaining how enacting "a single identity in a world in which identity itself is often a performance—a mask, a public persona—is to insure psychological suicide" ("Sliding Significations" 76). Thus, she recognizes that the character who passes must experience the death, in a way, of her plural identity since the world expects a single identity. Additionally, other scholars have done work to destabilize the idea of a "color line," such as Kawash.

While these scholars do well in criticizing the racial dichotomy, there is still a lack of recognition for the multiracial experience itself. Further, the consistent description of passing as crossing from one race to another or, as Pfeiffer even describes it, "a light-skinned black character [who] passes for white" (*Race Passing* 1), disregards multiplicity and the multiracial experience. Another example of this lack of recognition for the multiracial experience can be seen in Mary Condé's assertion that "[b]lack people passing for white do not change any reality, but only exploit the fiction that 'black' people are necessarily black" (94). This reading critiques the racial imaginary because it shows how what we see is not always what we think it should be; however, there is still no discussion of the multiracial aspect of these individuals—thus, the multiracial individual experiences erasure.

In highlighting the shortcomings of previous scholarship, I must admit my project has its limitations. Due to time constraints and the scope of this thesis, I did not examine autobiographical experiences of passing and instead relied only on the fictional genre. Future trajectories of my research could develop into exploring the passing experiences of other races and ethnicities so as to further recognize the multiplicity of identity. My main hope, though, is that future research will continue to read passing novels through intersectionality and multiplicity so that the scholarship on the multiracial experience in passing novels will expand. In order to expand, passing cannot be viewed as a unidirectional act, but as a multidirectional one in which the characters do not simply perform as black or as white, but experience a constant state of performance because of their multiple identities.

As a multiracial woman myself, this project helped me accept my multiplicity and the power to move beyond the racial imaginary. In examining the struggle of characters like Rena, Irene, Clare, Angela, and Phebe, I found renewed purpose in continuing to talk about these passing novels. The multiracial experience of the early twentieth century should not be forgotten within history but examined thoroughly as it speaks to the evolving issue of the racial imaginary that prevails today. We must not forget Irene's struggle to describe the imperceptibility in determining who is black and who is white: "There are ways. But they're not definite or tangible" (Larsen 77). It is through these voices that we can better understand how to move through social expectations and feel empowered in our own skin. As Durrow puts it, "I'm not the color of my skin. I'm a story" (264). It took me reading Nella Larsen's *Passing* to realize my purpose in rejecting the racial imaginary that has held me captive for so long and finally asserting that I am a multiracial Latina with a family, a history, and a story that cannot be taken from me. The experience is not an illusion.

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