

“THE THING BECAME REAL”: NEW MATERIALISMS AND RACE IN THE
FICTION OF NELLA LARSEN

BY

LAURE ADAMS PARKINSON

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Approved By:

Judith Irwin Madera, Ph.D., Advisor

Erica Still, Ph.D., Chair

Rian Bowie, Ph.D.

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Abstract

My project explores the tension between materiality and textuality in the fiction of Nella Larsen, using new materialist and affect theories as frameworks for reading her short stories, “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom” (1926), and her novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). I argue that Larsen mobilizes concepts of misrecognition and misrepresentation through characters’ encounters with materiality in order to challenge ideologies of race and gender. Significantly, Larsen’s stories and novels form an intertextual relationship not only with each other as a fictional body of work, but with biographical documents by and about Larsen, suggesting the tenuous relationship between fiction and reality. I aim to explore not only how Larsen thematizes these tensions in her own work through acts of passing and desire, but how she provides readers with new ways of thinking about identity politics in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

What things are there to write, if one can only write them. Boiler menders, society ladies, children, acrobats, governesses business men, countesses, flappers, Nile green bath rooms, beautifully filed, gay moods and shivering hesitations, all presented in an intensely restrained and civilized manner, and underneath the ironic survival of a much more primitive mood. Delicious.

[...] And surely it is more interesting to belong to one's own time, to share its peculiar vision, catch that flying glimpse of the panorama which no subsequent generation can ever recover.

- Nella Larsen to Carl Van Vechten, N.d. [1925] (158)

In Nella Larsen's letter to Carl Van Vechten, she illuminates the tension between the materiality of and the language of things: she lists disparate categories of people, places, artifacts, and feelings, and creates a narrative that draws them together. In establishing things' relationality through narrative, she explores the layers of their "present[ation]" that evoke both the "civilized" and the "primitive," hinting at her underlying concerns of racial discourse. By juxtaposing these two modes of representation, one that apparently exists on the surface and the other "underneath," Larsen gestures toward the latency and excess of things that resist full representation. Similarly, temporalizing the "peculiar vision" of the present moment as "that flying glimpse [...] which no subsequent generation can ever recover," she indicates the way that bodies (animate and inanimate) and the present moment alike problematize notions of fixity. In so doing, Larsen addresses concerns about materiality and textuality that become central to her exploration of identity in her fiction.

My thesis will examine moments of encounter with material culture in Nella Larsen's novels and short stories, investigating how current theories of materialism provide ways of reading connections between material environments, race, and sexuality. In Larsen's work, these motifs function on various and often contradictory levels: as

signs, objects, and things—as devices for identification and difference, as objects of desire, and as external realities that impose on her characters’ subjectivity. At the same time, in a thesis that claims to track materializations, matter, and things in Larsen’s work, tracking immaterialization, nothingness, and absence is an equally important endeavor: while the word “things” often refers to clothing or other cultural artifacts in Larsen’s fiction, it also assumes abstract connotations. Rather than dismissing these linguistic contradictions, I aim to examine what I argue is Larsen’s intentional conflation of the material and immaterial, the abstract and the real, and the subject and the object. I argue that Larsen mobilizes concepts of misrecognition and misrepresentation through characters’ encounters with each other and material environments to challenge ideologies of race and gender circulating during the Harlem Renaissance, offering a critique of identity politics that destabilizes racial categories and decenters the human subject in order to elevate concepts of difference and otherness.

While my thesis first and foremost approaches Larsen’s fiction through close reading, I use new materialist theories and affect theory as a framework for exploring the relationship between materialism and identity politics. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argue in “Introducing the New Materialisms,” the project of new materialist theories involves “describing active processes of materialization” that envision humans as part of—rather than separate from—their environments (8). They develop what they term a “multimodal materialism,” which interrogates social systems through the “materially real and socially constructed,” the “microlevel or everyday, and the macrolevel or structural” (32). They conclude that, in these exchanges between seemingly discrete categories, “‘matter becomes’ rather than that ‘matter is’” (10). In Larsen’s work, I argue

that this type of “multimodal materialism” that investigates the relationship between the particular and the universal emerges in Larsen’s exploration of both aesthetic and political representation.

Drawing on materialist theorists, such as Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, and Bill Brown, my thesis demonstrates how Larsen juxtaposes the organic and inorganic in order to reveal how social systems naturalize identity categories, positing normative bodies as universal and othered bodies as particular. She then challenges these apparently fixed classifications through motifs of vitality, misrecognition, and precarity, figuring her protagonists as women continually in the process of becoming-self and becoming-other. Throughout my thesis, I use Grosz’s definition of becoming. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze’s concept of difference, she argues that becoming “means that nothing is the same as itself over time, and dispersion means that nothing is contained in the same space in this becoming” (*Becoming Undone* 97). She adds that understanding difference as underlying identity urges “the pressure to develop a new understanding of identity that is concerned not with coinciding the subject with its past so much as opening the subject up to its becoming-more and becoming-other” (97). I argue that Larsen’s portrayal of her protagonists’ identities resembles Grosz’s concept of “becoming-more” and “becoming-other” because, through acts of passing and images of precarity, Larsen renders her protagonists as constantly reinventing their understandings of self.

While new materialist theories re-conceptualize subject-object relationships by reorienting human subjects to their material environments, Lauren Berlant’s affect theory re-envisioning subjectivity by thinking of desire and sovereignty as relational human conditions. Berlant’s book *Cruel Optimism* (2010) explores the way desire and objects of

attachment can become cruel or unbearable amid personal and systemic crises. While Berlant's work focuses specifically on tracking narratives of adjustment to crises and aesthetics of precarity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, her concepts engage productively with Larsen's work, because Larsen's writing responds to both her own particular crises (her childhood as the only black child in an all-white family, her divorce, the charges of plagiarism leveled against her), as well as what Hazel Carby calls "the crisis of representation" felt by black artists and politicians alike during the Harlem Renaissance (169). For this reason, my thesis draws on Berlant's "poetics of attachment" in order to investigate how Larsen uses the medium of the novel to describe the relationship between desire, representation, and relationality.

Each of my chapters begins with biographical documents from Larsen's life in order to show how her texts form a fabric between fiction and reality, and aesthetics and politics. On a personal level, Larsen not only wrote into her fiction biographical elements of her life, but she also wrote into her life fictional elements.¹ On a more collective level, Larsen's work both belonged to the Harlem Renaissance tradition (belonging to W. E. B. Du Bois's "Talented Tenth"²) and challenged its assumptions about authentic black identity. According to Mollie Godfrey, Harlem Renaissance-era artists and politicians—cultural and political representatives "of the race"—sought to challenge white notions of "authentic humanity" (universal) and "authentic blackness" (particular), by rewriting their own versions of authentic blackness; as a result, they nonetheless sustained notions

¹ Drawing on Davis, Jessica Rabin writes, "Although her novels draw on autobiography, much of the time Larsen spent revising her texts was devoted to 'the process of reinventing fact' (Davis 296). Her novels are thus doubly fictionalized, since the 'facts' of Larsen's life are largely fiction and then Larsen subjects these to literary fictionalization" (Rabin 108).

² Biographer Charles Larson notes, "[Elmer and Nella Imes] were part of what W. E. B. DuBois termed the 'Talented Tenth,' the Negro elite, whose education matched that of their Caucasian counterparts (and at times surpassed it). Sophisticated and urbane, and usually light skinned if not blue bloods, they assumed a kind of stewardship for their darker and less educated sisters and brothers" (56).

of essentialized racial categories (123). Godfrey specifically locates this tendency in the two competing aesthetic movements of primitivism and neoclassicism (133).³ Anthony Dawahare similarly writes, “Writers claimed that the New Negro was shaped by modernity yet retained in some way a racial essence or character that preceded modernity” (23). Hazel Carby more broadly identifies this contradiction as a “crisis of representation of the period” (169):

I use the word *representation* in two distinct but related ways: as it is formally understood in relation to art and creative practices, and as it applies to intellectuals who understand themselves to be responsible for the representation of ‘the race,’ defining and constructing in their art its representative members and situation themselves as representative members of an oppressed social group. (164)

Indeed, for Larsen, she sought not only to find a way to represent the black female body in aesthetics, but to find a place for her in the political and social spaces. In my thesis, “representation” refers to Carby’s double meaning of political and aesthetic representation, because I argue that Larsen challenged these categories.

But where did Nella Larsen Imes fit into this milieu? In “Nella Larsen’s Harlem Aesthetic,” Thadious Davis writes, “Nella Larsen, novelist, emerged from a particular cultural configuration—Harlem of the New Negro Renaissance; perhaps no other could have produced her” (380). Yet Davis, Godfrey, and others have acknowledged that Larsen “never fit comfortably” into this—if any—social, aesthetic, or political group (Godfrey 133). In fact, as a child of a white Danish mother and a black father from the

³ For a discussion of “the cult of true primitivism,” see also Ann duCille, “Blue Notes on Black Sexuality” 426-427.

West Indies, Nella Larsen existed on the fringe of the networks in which she is often included. Jessica Rabin calls this Larsen's *multiple affiliation*: "serial or simultaneous connections to more than one formation—and in many cases, to competing formations" (106). Even after achieving fame, Larsen "remained [...] highly visible, but rarely the center of attention" (Davis, *Nella Larsen* 7). As her fiction makes clear, Larsen was interested in exploring what it meant to be both an insider and outsider, to be both represented and to be the other that was excluded, but that nonetheless constituted, the subject.

Using these materialist and affective theoretical frameworks alongside biographical and historical research on Larsen, my thesis interrogates the relationship between the material reality of Larsen's historical-social-aesthetic context and the textual landscapes she creates to investigate identity politics. The first chapter of my thesis examines Larsen's first two short stories, "The Wrong Man" (1926) and "Freedom" (1926), published under her pen name Allen Semi in *Young's Realistic Stories Magazine*. While "The Wrong Man" takes place at a party for an "exclusive" Long Island set and heavily employs imagery of material culture, "Freedom" depicts a psychological drama that uses mostly organic imagery. In this chapter, I read the presence of material culture in "The Wrong Man" and the organic imagery and immateriality in "Freedom" together, arguing that by complicating politics and aesthetics of recognition and representation, Larsen's narratives render black female subjectivity both a universal and particular experience that emphasizes difference over identification.

The second chapter of my thesis uses Berlant's theory of "cruel optimism" to track the protagonist Helga Crane's optimistic attachments to material culture and

abstract “things” across a trans-Atlantic landscape in Larsen’s first novel, *Quicksand* (1928). In this chapter, I specifically examine Helga’s invocation of a desire for “things” that organizes her geographical movement, a movement into spaces that I describe as narrative “impasses” (to use Berlant’s term). While Helga’s desire for things reveals her ontological precarity and motivates her relocation to various cities, each site of relocation reveals itself to be an impasse because of Helga’s social, economic, and racial precarity. I argue that Larsen’s use of desire as a narrative strategy—mobilized through her elastic use of the word “things,” free indirect discourse, and geographical/narrative impasses—re-presents identity and subjectivity as modes of difference and becoming.

In my third and final chapter, I examine scenes of encounters between Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry in Larsen’s second novel, *Passing* (1929), arguing that the act of passing reveals recognition to be a form of misrecognition. For Larsen, the act of passing is a narrative device that allows her to explore precarity, which I argue that Larsen defines as the convergence of danger and desire for misrecognition. I track how Larsen complicates her dual protagonists’ subjectivity by forcing them to encounter their own nonsovereignty through each other and materiality. My reading leads me to re-examine the ending of Larsen’s novel, specifically the under-studied possibility that Clare dies an accidental death by falling out of a window. While the ending of Larsen’s novel is ultimately unsolvable, I argue that considering the possibility of an accidental death illuminates the way that Larsen’s text not only destabilizes identity categories, but problematizes the very notion of individuality itself and hints at the transformational possibilities that nonsovereignty offers.

By examining Larsen's fiction through a lens that combines materialist and affect theory, I aim to examine new ways of reading Larsen's fiction as not only particular stories about improper bodies who exist in-between categories, but universal theorizations on living relationally and negotiating precarity in times of political-aesthetic crises. In this regard, I argue that Larsen's fiction develops an aesthetic of nonsovereignty that proposes definitions of identity without necessarily fastening to them. In fact, Larsen's bleak endings for her characters who challenge identity politics signify Larsen's ability to conceptualize new definitions of identity, but her inability to imagine their realization in 1920s America.

Chapter 1 – “Inevitable Black and White”: (Mis)Recognition and (Mis)Representation in
“The Wrong Man” and “Freedom”

Nella Larsen (“Passing”) has skin the color of maple syrup. Her costume of shading grays makes it seem lighter than she really is. [...] Underneath her satin surface Nordic and West Indian are struggling. [...] Nella Larsen’s philosophy toward life is answered:—“I don’t have any way of approaching life...it does things to me instead.” [...] [S]he is convinced recognition and liberation will come to the negro only through individual efforts... [...] She wants things—beautiful and rich things.

- Mary Rennels, “Behind the Backs of Books and Authors,” From *The New York Telegram*, April 13, 1929 (150-151)

Mary Rennel’s profile of Nella Larsen foregrounds issues of representation, misrecognition, and race that Larsen begins investigating in her two short stories published three years earlier, “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom.” Describing Larsen’s “struggling” Nordic and West Indian “sides” as if they were discrete aspects of her identity, and the “recognition” that Larsen predicts will come to African-Americans, Rennels touches upon—if not demonstrates—the problematic themes of (mis)representation and (mis)recognition in relation to discourses of race that Larsen explores in her work. Illustrating Larsen’s skin as “satin” and picturing her “costume of shading grays,” Rennels not only delineates Larsen’s thematic concerns in her short stories, but employs the same figurative imagery that Larsen uses, especially in “The Wrong Man.” Similarly, Rennels’s concluding statement, “She wants things—beautiful and rich things,” echoes the desires voiced by Larsen’s protagonists, especially Helga Crane in *Quicksand*. In this way, Rennels’s piece exemplifies the degree of intertextuality between Larsen’s fiction and extant biographical documents by and about her.

Both “The Wrong Man” and “Freedom,” published under Larsen’s pen name Allen Semi in *Young’s Realistic Stories Magazine* (1926), foreshadow scenes in Larsen’s

novels. In fact, sections of the stories are in some cases directly transposed into her later texts, especially themes dealing with the relationship between material culture and identity. But, not only are these stories prototypes for Larsen's more developed narratives; they also, as Yolanda M. Manora writes, "serve [...] as lenses for reading them," in that they mark the beginning of explorations of gender and race that Larsen develops more fully in her novels (58).⁴ In this way, I argue, Larsen highlights the interconnectedness of materiality and textuality, while simultaneously exposing the gap of nonidentity between the two.

Indeed, both stories employ motifs of materialisms to complicate facets of identity. Examining Larsen's choice to publish in *Young's* under a male pen name, the first section of my chapter argues that she employs misrecognition and misrepresentation as strategies for evading the exclusion she would most likely face as a black female author, whose experiences were marked as particular rather than universal. In fact, these material conditions provide a conceptual backdrop for Larsen's stories. In the second section, I argue that Larsen stages misrecognition through the protagonist Julia Romley and the racialized and gendered space of the Long Island party, problematizing both aesthetic and ontological binaries that categorize bodies. While in "The Wrong Man," Larsen draws heavily upon motifs of material culture to evaluate identity politics, in "Freedom," Larsen presents themes of misrepresentation and nonidentity from a psychological, immaterial standpoint. In this final section of my chapter, I read Larsen's use of free indirect

⁴ Thadious Davis similarly explains, "Larsen's two stories in *Young's*, read intertextually with her other published fiction, reveal the integral relationship between landscapes and mental processes, between physical landscapes and boundaries and human manners and styles, between racial and economic structures" (*Nella Larsen: Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance* 183). While this chapter will not provide an intertextual analysis of these stories to Larsen's novels *Quicksand* and *Passing*, I will examine the ways in which material culture, organic processes, and the relationship between body and place illuminate Larsen's developing interest in identity/body politics that become so crucial to her later work.

discourse and images of vitality and organic processes as narrative strategies for exploring how nonidentity is both a condition of representation and freedom. Reading these stories as companion texts, I argue that Larsen's reliance on material culture in "The Wrong Man," on the one hand, and her depiction of organic imagery in "Freedom," on the other, evidence Larsen's concerns with hypothesizing ways of representing bodies that literature has otherwise failed to represent, either because those bodies occupy multiple categories or none, like Larsen herself.

As numerous scholars have noted,⁵ while both stories concern uncertain, contingent identities, themes of race are markedly absent from them, setting them apart from *Quicksand*, *Passing*, and Larsen's last published short story, "Sanctuary." Manora and biographer Charles Larson make similar claims by acknowledging that this absence of direct treatment of race might be explained by the "largely white readership" of *Young's* (Manora 63).⁶ But rather than dismissing race as absent in either of Larsen's texts, Manora (diverging from Larson) convincingly argues that, at least in "The Wrong Man," issues of passing and race are coded through gender, class, color imagery, and clothing motifs (63). "Indeed," Manora writes, "deception, concealment, and false identity are critical elements of [Larsen's short stories] and, perhaps even more intriguing, of the circumstances surrounding their publication in *Young's*" (55). In other words, the absence or coding of race is not only thematized in Larsen's short stories, but a strategy for their publication: the texts themselves "pass" as "universal" (white) stories about transgressive female sexuality rather than "particular" stories about black female identity.

⁵ See Larson 60; Hutchinson 196; Davis, *Nella Larsen* 174-5.

⁶ Larson writes, "Larsen's decision to ignore race – the substance of her two published novels – was no doubt prompted in part by her market" (60).

Writing about black artists' reception during the Harlem Renaissance, Mollie Godfrey observes,

Harlem Renaissance-era white critics often measured artistic value in terms of a work's supposed universality, but they barred black art from being considered universal in two ways: first, by dismissing such work as imitative whenever it looked too much like white art (either in style or in characterization); and second, by dismissing it as primitive or racially particular whenever it was recognizably black. (122)

While Godfrey's article refers specifically to Larsen's short story "Sanctuary" (1930), her comment illuminates concerns surrounding the speculation about the publications of "Freedom" and "The Wrong Man." That Larsen does not explicitly address themes of race and that she uses a pen name that masks her gender and, as some critics argue, her race (a point to which I will return shortly) demonstrate her awareness of the tension between white male experience as universal and black female experience as particular. In fact, not only does Larsen seem to be aware of this tension, but, as I argue in this chapter, she thematizes this tension through misrecognition and misrepresentation centered around or initiated by the characters' encounters with material culture.

Gender, Race, and Authorship: *Young's Magazine*, "Allen Semi," and The Critical Reception of Larsen's Short Stories

In "Freedom" and "The Wrong Man," Larsen's coding of race, treatments of transgressive female sexuality, and motifs of material culture cater to the readership and narrative formulas of *Young's Realistic Stories Magazine*. Biographer George Hutchinson

writes that *Young's Realistic Stories Magazine* (sometimes also referred to as *Young's Magazine*) was a pulp monthly that specialized in stories featuring “modern women who smoked and had affairs” (197). The plots typically revolve around a love-triangle, often in which a poor girl and a rich girl compete for the same male lover. Although the intended readership was young women, biographer Thadious Davis writes that the stories (with titles such as “Wisdom of the Serpent,” “The Hootch Dancer,” and “Pearls for Purity”) usually followed a “male-defined formula” told “from the perspective of male fantasies,” revealing “an internalization of male-constructed images of women as sexual objects” (*Nella Larsen* 173-174). Yet despite the male-centered formula, the magazine had a large female readership, and Hutchinson adds that, according to E. Franklin Frazier, the stories “helped to define the meaning of sex’ for many young black women in the ‘demoralized’ areas of Chicago’s South Side” (197). More than likely aware of her readership, Larsen perhaps chose to code treatments of race in the text as a way to begin exploring themes of passing that would dominate her second novel.

If the narratives of “Freedom” and “The Wrong Man” code race—how we “read” blackness and whiteness on bodies—Larsen’s pseudonym reveals how she also obscured other aspects of identity, namely gender. Larsen published her two short stories under the name “Allen Semi,” an inversion of her married name, and various theories exist as to why Larsen decided not to use her own name. Larson interprets Larsen’s choice as a determination “in her career to separate her personal and public selves,” but he also suspects that the publication in which the novels appeared—a “slick magazine”—influenced her choice (58-59). Equally compelling, Manora argues that the pen name “acts as a signifier for Larsen’s transgressive tendencies; black and female, she published

under a pen name that identified her as male and which implied she was white, or, leastways, veiled the fact that she was black” (59). Davis offers the fullest explanation of the choice, stating that the name “lacked a clear ethnic or racial association,” adding that “[t]he choice of a masculine pseudonym may have been a matter of expediency and strategy, a way of striking the more familiar posture of the author-artist as male” and allowing her to explore themes that had been traditionally barred from women (*Nella Larsen* 173-174). While these interpretations are mere speculations as to why Larsen disguised her authorial self, they highlight the ways in which identity politics were, and have continued to be, intertwined both in Larsen’s life and in her work.

More specifically, her coding of race in her texts and her coding of gender in her pen name demonstrate not only Larsen’s awareness of the bias toward black female authors, but her interest in the way the “universal” and the “particular” are gendered and racialized categories. That her married name, Nella Imes, serves as the framework for “Allen Semi” signifies Larsen’s tendency to subvert or challenge notions of authentic human experience by highlighting the ways that the particular and universal are mutually constitutive categories. In “The Wrong Man,” Larsen thematizes this problematic relationship between the particular and the universal through a poetics of misrecognition that interrogates naturalized identity categories.

“The Pale Indefinite Gray”: Misrecognition in “The Wrong Man”

The denouement of “The Wrong Man” unfolds through various layers—aesthetic and narrative—of misrecognition. In Larsen’s first short story, Julia Hammond Romley, a bourgeois housewife who studied interior decorating, attends an “exclusive” Long Island

party with her husband Jim (Larsen, "The Wrong Man" 5). There, she discovers that her rival Myra Redmon has brought a man named Ralph Tyler as her date. When she has a moment alone, Julia summons Ralph to the garden, pleading with him not to tell her husband that she was once his mistress during a personal financial crisis. However, the end of the story reveals that Julia has confided in the wrong man. In an attempt to mask her own past from her beloved husband, Julia not only misrecognizes the man with whom she has shared this secret past, but inadvertently exposes herself, stripping herself of the material security that allows her to participate in her bourgeois fantasy. In "The Wrong Man," Larsen employs a poetics of misrecognition through a commodity aesthetic, a dialogue between clothed bodies and interiors, and encounters between characters in order to thematize her experience as a black female author as universal rather than particular.

The dialogue Larsen establishes between both the clothed body (fashion) and the confined body (the interior) problematizes racial binaries of universal whiteness and particular blackness through the subversion of modernist aesthetic categories and the "inevitable black and white" inscribed on the bodies of the story's characters. Through the setting and clothing of the characters, Larsen places Julia Hammond Romley at a crossroads in modernist aesthetics that challenges the distinction between white/universal neoclassicism and black/particular primitivism that defined what Godfrey terms the "two competing visions of modernism" (125). Describing the scene as "blaz[ing] with color" and "riotously hued," and the jazz music as "primitive" and "savage," Larsen evokes a primitivist aesthetics within a mannered, bourgeois New York setting (3, 4). For Manora, who draws upon Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the carnivalesque, Larsen uses the party

setting to explore class and racial transgressions, revealing the “tenuousness” of the “mannered worlds” of parties and inverting power structures by displaying them as oddities (Angela Mitchell qtd. in Manora, 61-62). Indeed, Larsen’s references to primitivist aesthetics hint at racial transgression, coded in class; but I would also add that these descriptions participate in contemporary discourses of the relationship between race and aesthetics that Godfrey outlines. Like “Sanctuary,” “The Wrong Man” “disrupt[s] the primitivist aesthetics and neoclassicist logic that holds the universal and particular—or the civilized and the primitive—at odds” (Godfrey 131). By bringing the “primitive” to the mannered setting of the bourgeois New York party, Larsen not only ruptures the “universality” of whiteness and its privilege over the “particularity” of blackness, but exposes that white universality—predicated, contradictorily, on exclusion—as, ultimately, a particular itself. In deploying these two aesthetic categories in the description of a party, Larsen reveals that both the primitive and the mannered are socially-constructed categories rather than innate to a particular race, and she even suggests that these racial categories might themselves be socially-constructed. The setting of the party thus serves as a conceptual space for Larsen to interrogate aesthetic categories and identity politics.

Within the space of the party, Larsen’s color-coding and gendering of clothing disrupt normative categories of gender and race. The narrator observes, “It seemed that the gorgeous things which the women were wearing had for this once managed to subdue the strident tones of the inevitable black and white of the men’s costumes” (“The Wrong Man” 3). Larsen uses clothing color to gender the male partygoers, while she terms the women’s clothing “gorgeous”—an adjective lacking any color association. While the “inevitable black and white of the men’s costumes” infer distinctly-drawn categories, the

ambiguously-described “gorgeous things” of the women indicate permeable boundaries. In this way, Larsen’s text at first seems to use clothing to inscribe normative gender roles onto bodies, literally “fashioning” them into socially-acceptable subjects; yet she ultimately subverts this function when the women’s clothing “subdue[s]” the men’s. Georg Simmel identifies this destructive impulse of fashion as “the mixing of male and female principles,” or the “double effect” of fashion. In his 1905 seminal work “The Philosophy of Fashion,” he elaborates:

[...L]ife according to fashion consists of a mixture of destruction and construction; its content acquires its characteristics by destruction of an earlier form; it possesses a peculiar uniformity, in which the satisfaction of the destructive impulse and the drive for positive elements can no longer be separated from each other. (21)

While Simmel’s own terminology plays off essentialist gender binaries (the male “constructive,” and the female “destructive”), the “mixing of male and female principles” reveals the subversive potential of fashion to break the same codes it enforces. Thus, what emerges in both Larsen and Simmel’s writings is the way these apparently mutually exclusive but mutually constitutive categories (male/female, black/white) become ruptured. Significantly, Larsen associates the *female* principle with the “destructive” or subversive quality of fashion, indicating that the body of the subordinate Other initiates the de-naturalization of socially-constructed categories. Through the fashioned bodies of the women, the discrete categories of black/white and male/female become a “whirling mass,” a “mob” of indistinguishable bodies (“The Wrong Man” 4). Thus, the female body acts as a site that destabilizes the opposition of the normative and Othered. Within this

framework, Larsen addresses the difference that underlies identity through Julia Romley's precarity and the encounter between Julia and Ralph Tyler.

Against this backdrop of competing aesthetic ideologies and deconstructive categories of race and gender, Larsen figures the character Julia Romley as an embodiment of contradictions through her career in interior decorating, her ambivalence toward commodity culture, and her envy and misrecognition of Ralph Tyler. First and foremost, Julia's occupation as an interior decorator sets up tensions between agency and structure, the real and the ideal, and self-definition and internalization of normative beliefs that inform the racialization and gendering of bodies. As an interior decorator, Julia professionally arranges objects to create a certain aesthetic or narrative about a particular space and its inhabitants. At the party, she obsessively organizes the attendees by appearance: "Young men, old men, young women, older women, slim girls, fat women, thin men, stout men" (4). The ability to control environments stabilizes her identity and relation to other characters. She feels "so happy, so secure" with "her studio and success"; "marriage to Jim Romley"; "this envied gay life in one of Long Island's most exclusive sets"; and "love, wealth, and position" (Nella Larsen, "The Wrong Man" 5). But upon discovering Ralph Tyler's presence at the party, which reminds her of her precarious existence before her education and marriage, she worries that "she [is] about to lose everything" (5). For Julia Romley, interior decorating ensures security because it provides the illusion of control; however, Larsen problematizes this notion through Julia's ambivalent attitude toward her surroundings.

Larsen's staging of the protagonist as an interior decorator in a setting that overwhelms her reflects a modernist ambivalence toward the rise of the commodity

aesthetic, which reconfigured notions of selfhood and space. In “From Parlor to Living Room,” Karen Halttunen argues that between 1900 and 1920, the “concept of interior decoration as a form of language” began circulating in popular magazines, marking the transition from the Victorian interest in *character* to *personality*, by which *character* internalizes Victorian morals and *personality* externalizes one’s “authentic” identity (180).⁷ Yet, this “personalized self” is, in fact, a *modal self*, in which a false sense of subjectivity is constructed through accumulation of replaceable, movable goods (Halttunen 187). Jean-Christophe Agnew describes this redefinition of selfhood as a “commodity aesthetic,” in which the self and society are perceived as “so much raw space to be furnished with mobile, detachable, and transactionable goods” so that “the very boundaries between the self and the commodity world collapse in the act of purchase” (135). In other words, in the modal self, *being* and *having* become indistinguishable modes of self-definition. Julia’s ambivalence toward commodity culture, evoked through her occupation that produces a modal self (“having”) and her need for security (“being”), presents an ontological paradox that highlights the precarity of Julia’s body.

Larsen further emphasizes this sense of ambivalence toward commodity culture and its implications of the self through Julia’s ambivalent attitude toward the party. Confiding in her husband, Julia feels “trapped” in the “crush” of the party, but she also describes it as “wonderful [...] like a princess’s ball in a fairy tale” (“The Wrong Man” 5).

⁷ In 1899, one of the most popular home magazines, *House Beautiful*, asserted that “in the ‘unspoken language’ of interior decoration, ‘the *expression of personality* is the thing to be aimed at” (emphasis in Halttunen, 181). Halttunen elaborates: “The culture of character had focused on moral concerns and preached the virtues of self-control; the new culture of personality was more concerned with emotional temperament and with the techniques of self-expression. Character had embodied a uniform standard of conduct based on fixed principles; personality was more a matter of individual idiosyncrasies, personal needs, and interests” (187).

In likening the party to “a princess’s ball in a fairy tale,” Julia participates in a “fantasy of acquisition”: in fantasizing about the interior, she falls into the “mutual entanglement of creative and consuming visions” and becomes a “self-consuming artifact” (Agnew 153, 155). On the one hand, the “creative” vision describes Julia’s occupation as an interior decorator, in which she seeks to manipulate the objects around her to produce a cohesive narrative. On the other hand, the “consuming” aspect becomes evident when she laments that she “feel[s] small, so futile” in the social atmosphere of the party. In this way, Larsen collapses the separation between the discursive and the material, the fantastic and the real; in so doing, she reveals Julia’s identity to be constituted by her attempts to secure her class and social status.

Given these characteristics of early twentieth-century commodity culture, one could read Julia Hammond Romley’s role as an interior decorator not only as an attempt to embody two diametrically-opposed types of femininity, but also as an encoding of the trope of the tragic mulatto and/or a passing subject. Although Larsen never identifies Julia Romley’s racial characteristics, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson identifies this paradoxical incorporation as one of the primary features of the trope of the tragic mulatta, describing the mulatta as “a constrained symbol of Victorian womanhood, a seductive temptress, and a deceptive, independent, modern woman” (xix). In fact, Hutchinson reads Julia Hammond Romley’s conflicting past and present selves as an evocation of the trope (199). Indeed, not only does Julia’s ambivalence toward commodity culture reflect the paradoxes explored in the trope of the tragic mulatta; her appearance does too. The narrator describes her on the night of the party:

Julia Romley, in spite of the smoke-colored chiffon gown (ordered specifically for the occasion) which she was wearing, seemed even more flamingly clad than the rest. The pale indefinite gray but increased the flaring mop of her hair; scarlet, a poet had called it. The satiny texture of her skin seemed also to reflect in her cheeks a cozy tinge of that red mass. (Larsen, "The Wrong Man" 4)

Manora argues that the pervasive use of gray imagery suggests that Julia "mediat[es]" categories of "black and white," embodying racial ambiguity (64). However, emphasizing the heavy use of color imagery mixed with the grayness, Manora adds, "Julia becomes less and less gray and more and more 'colored,'" implying that she passes (65). In this way, Manora argues that color imagery encodes racial ambiguity through metaphor. Yet I would argue that, in Larsen's text, clothing and color imagery do not function metaphorically or representatively for race; rather, indicated by the "satiny texture of [Julia's] skin," they thematize misrecognition by highlighting the way that identity categories are naturalized by social or aesthetic systems like fashion. For this reason, I argue that definitive claims about Julia's identity particularize her character or mark her body because Larsen emphasizes not *who* Julia is, but *how* she and other characters are *read* by one another and the reader.

The story's crucial moment of misrecognition develops over the course of the narrative's characterization of Ralph Tyler, whose physical description is as ambiguous as Julia's. The narrator and characters variously describe him as an "Indian chief," "a man yellowed and hardened as if by years in the tropics," and "that tall browned man" (Larsen, "The Wrong Man" 4-5). An "explorer [...] just back from some godforsaken

place on the edge of nowhere,” who was “given up for dead,” and whose discovery of a buried city is a “great contribution to civilization,” Ralph Tyler embodies the civilized and uncivilized, the cultured and the primitive (6). For Manora, these descriptions serve to racialize Ralph Tyler as non-white. She writes, “[...W]ith the ever darkening depiction of Ralph Tyler, Larsen, again, uses color to open a space of ambiguity in the text” (66). I agree with Manora’s assessment about ambiguity because it renders Ralph Tyler’s body precarious, like Julia’s. However, I argue that, again, Larsen uses color imagery not to define her characters racially, but to play with surfaces in order to set up Julia Romley’s misrecognition at the end.

For this reason, while Julia Romley insists on projecting her own fantasies onto Ralph Tyler because she thinks he guarantees her security, Ralph Tyler’s unstable identity ruptures that fantasy. According to Lauren Berlant,

Misrecognition (*méconnaissance*) describes the psychic process by which fantasy recalibrates what we encounter so that we can imagine that something or someone can fulfill our desire [...]. To misrecognize is not to err, but to project qualities onto something so that we can love, hate, and manipulate it for having those qualities – which it might or might not have. (*Cruel Optimism* 122)

In “The Wrong Man,” Julia projects onto the man she assumes to be Ralph Tyler the idea that he could be an impediment to her future happiness. His repression, she believes, of his past relationship with her will ensure her social and economic security. She contrasts his “splendid things,” his “honor, fame and money,” with her own “little thing” that “can’t matter” to him but “means everything to [her], everything” (Larsen, “The Wrong

Man” 8). She attempts to manipulate his perception of “things” that “matter” in order to secure her own comfortable, bourgeois lifestyle. Yet, the fact that he is the “wrong man” indicates that Julia’s tragic flaw is defining both herself and others by what they *have*—namely, material security. In this way, Larsen demonstrates that Julia misrecognizes, rather than misidentifies, the man because her error surfaces in her desire to project qualities that satisfy her ideals onto others.

In this regard, the title of Larsen’s story presents misrecognition as text’s chief thematic concern: “The *Wrong Man*” suggests there is—or might be—a “right” man, though he importantly never materializes in the text. Larsen leaves unresolved several questions: Who is the man with Julia Hammond Romley at the end? Is he merely another partygoer, or, as Hutchinson suggests, a second Ralph Tyler (198-199)? Significantly, no “right” man—the implied opposition—appears to counter the “wrong” man, suggesting that the normative never appears to counter what “universal” subjects designate as transgressive. Thus, the text shatters Julia’s belief that she can organize her surroundings, others, aspects of herself, and her past: “things” exceed their utility as objects of a subject’s desire. Larsen demonstrates that these categories that can be identified are unstable and contingent, marked by the subject’s desire to define self and other through the possession of things. Leaving the conclusion ambiguous, Larsen not only dramatizes misrecognition through the characters’ encounters, but employs misrecognition as a narrative device that destabilizes the reader’s ability to identify characters. Berlant writes, “A poetics of misrecognition may seem to risk collapsing *the critical analysis of fantasy into fantasy itself*” (my emphasis, *Cruel Optimism* 122). Indeed, as Berlant’s assessment makes clear, critical analyses of “The Wrong Man” that seek to classify characters by

racial categories based on the text's authorship to a certain degree participate in misrecognition, in that they project fantasies that attempt to make sense of the text onto the characters by relying on textual clues that, at least in "The Wrong Man," amount to circumstantial evidence. Yet, this does not indicate that Larsen's characters, especially Julia Romley and Ralph Tyler, are (or are not) white, black, or mulatto/a. Rather, I suggest that through thematizing misrecognition through aesthetics, characters' encounters, and narrative strategy, Larsen also thematizes race—and the myriad discourses and politics of representation that it carries—as a universal rather than a particular experience.

Larsen's short story "Freedom" similarly problematizes politics of representation by interrogating socially-constructed identity categories, albeit in a different way. While "The Wrong Man" features a female protagonist interacting with other characters in a social setting, "Freedom" contains motifs of organic processes and takes place within the thoughts of a male protagonist. Yet despite these vast differences in narrative style, I read these stories together because, in both, Larsen explores the intersections of fantasy and reality, materiality and immateriality, the universal and particular, and how these binarized avenues of identification can be problematized by narratives. In this way, Larsen's two short stories form a fabric with one another and, in fact, her novels. For this reason, examining Larsen's differing stylistic approaches to similar thematic concerns reveals how she, like her characters, does not easily fit into aesthetic and identity categories because defining art and defining self are processes of becoming.

“A Universe Personal”: (Mis)Representation in “Freedom”

In “Freedom,” Larsen interrogates the relationship between representation (aesthetic and political) and hegemonic concepts of freedom through images of matter, vitality, and the movements between the particular and the general. Fragmented into three sections, the story begins a few months after the protagonist abandons his pregnant lover of three years. The second part depicts his response to learning of her death during childbirth after he returns from a year abroad, as his obsessive emotions transform from happiness, to resentment, to longing. Revisiting the man a year later, the final section traces his descent into madness and, eventually, suicide. The narrative’s temporal progression mirrors the length of the man and woman’s relationship, suggesting that the text acts as both an embodiment of their relationship and a negation of it. The text’s concern with acts of materialization and immaterialization—explored through free indirect discourse, treatment of the abject, nonidentity, and vitality—problematizes the relationship between materiality and its representation.

While Larsen’s biographers focus on her exploration of the psychological dimension of the male character in their analyses of the text,⁸ I would argue that the principle thematic concern of “Freedom” is a politics of representation. Larsen employs language throughout the text that highlights concerns with visual, mental, physical, and textual representation. The protagonist “groan[s] inwardly at his own mental caricature of himself,” he “trie[s] to construct a representation of [his mistress’s] future without him,”

⁸ Commenting on the narrative technique in the story, Hutchinson argues that Larsen was “experimenting with ways of representing repressed desire and psychic disavowal, scapegoating as self-defense. She reveals how we sequester, in intricate labyrinths of the mind, those *abject stirrings* that make us feel guilty. In the name of *orderly identity*, we make the other bear the guilt” (200). Davis writes, “While ‘Freedom’ differs from the other Larsen Imes works in its male protagonist, it is nonetheless similar to them in its exploration of the sub-consciousness and consciousness of a troubled individual unable to identify correctly the cause of the troubles” (*Nella Larsen* 180).

and his “contemptuous mood visualize[s] her at times” (“Freedom” 14-15). Indeed, these moments in the text reveal Larsen’s preoccupation with the psychological; but, even more importantly, they dramatize Larsen’s concern with the tension between material reality and its social construction—specifically, how bodies are represented aesthetically and how they are generalized into representative categories of race, class, and gender. In “Freedom,” Larsen treats both the politics of aesthetic representation and group identification through the protagonist’s essentializing descriptions of the woman, the immateriality of the female body, and narrative strategy.

Larsen sets up a politics of representation through the contrasting portrayals of the protagonist and his lover, who remains a “present absence” throughout the text. The protagonist’s actions and thoughts drive the plot, while his lover only appears through recollections. As the privileged male subject of the story, the protagonist frees himself from his lover at the onset of the narrative and wanders through the city like a *flâneur*, observing that the “world had turned to silver and gold [...]. Even the placards in the shops shone with the light of paradise upon them.” The shop windows encourage him to “lose himself in India, China, the South Seas” (15). The man’s identification with commodity culture, which speaks to his fantasies, suggests his sense of security in his identity. Travel allows him to figuratively “lose himself” without compromising his subjectivity. In this way, commodity culture centers the protagonist within the realm of the symbolic, where his identity is represented.

On the other hand, the representation of his pregnant lover works to both expel her outside of the realm of the symbolic and contain her within it. Observing this paradox, Hutchinson writes that “Larsen deliberately stresses the unknowability of the woman who

both is and is not the center of the story” (my emphasis, 200). Significantly, the woman never materializes; rather, the story relies on the narrator’s and the protagonist’s vague invocations of her. In this way, the pregnant female body is disembodied in (or by) the text through acts of generalization and aestheticization that inform nonidentity. The narrator describes the unnamed man’s anger at his previous mistress as he “dissect[s] her”:

Her unanimated beauty seemed now only a thin disguise for an inert mind, and not for the serene beauty of soul which he had attributed to her. He suspected, too, a touch of depravity, perhaps only physical, but more likely mental as well. Reflection convinced him that her appeal for him was bounded by the senses [...] Why, for him she had been the universe; a universe personal and unheeded of outside persons or things. (Larsen, “Freedom” 14)

The words “unanimated” and “inert” invoke the distinction between human subject and nonhuman Other, categorizing the abandoned woman as “dead matter” (to use Coole and Frost’s terminology, Introduction 8). Drawing on body/soul and physical/mental dichotomies, the protagonist subscribes to the *scala naturae* that privileges him over his mistress, whom he goes on to describe as a “creature irresistibly given to pleasure,” a “sybarite,” and a “parasite” (Larsen, “Freedom” 14).⁹ That his relationship to her is “bounded by the senses” situates her in a lower order of being because it insinuates that

⁹ Emerging in the Middle Ages and taking form as a humanist form during the Enlightenment, the *scala naturae* (or “Great Chain of Being”) ranks every order of existence, with God at the top and inanimate matter at the bottom. This hierarchy functions, Christopher Manes argues, as an “emblem of human superiority over the natural world,” evidence of “an ontological difference between *Homo sapiens* and the rest of the biosphere” (20). While part of the dominant discourse of Christianity and Enlightenment cosmology for the last several centuries, this worldview has not only perpetuated the subjection of the non-human to human forces; it has also allowed for the oppression of other groups of humans by hegemonic, normative identities.

the physical is subordinate to the spiritual. In rendering her inferior by highlighting her physicality, the man excludes her from the privilege of representation in a text told from a non-physical, mental viewpoint.

Similarly, the protagonist's attempt to read socially-constructed femininity through aestheticization naturalizes ideologies that inscribe ideal images onto real bodies. The protagonist's recollection of the woman is "conscious of every detail of her appearance: her hair simply arranged, her soft dark eyes, her delicate chin propped on hands rivaling the perfection of La Gioconda's" (15). Aestheticizing her body by comparing her to the *Mona Lisa*, the protagonist (through the mediation of the narrator) attempts to paint a unified visual portrait of the woman; but through this act of aestheticization, Larsen reveals that his mental/textual picture of her is discursive. Caroline A. Brown, summarizing Judith Butler, writes that the racialized and sexed body is not an "organic unity," but a "culmination of [...] the very discourses that have cohered to allow its ultimate cohesion as a conceptual entity" (9). In this way, the man does not recollect "every detail of her appearance," but projects onto her his own fantasies of womanhood informed by hegemonic ideologies. In fact, in an attempt to *render* her body as an "organic unity," the protagonist *rends* her body into dismembered parts: hair, eyes, chin, and hands. For Hutchinson, the protagonist's fantasies about womanhood characterize the woman as a mulatta. He adds that the protagonist of the story "cannot rid himself of the notion of an organic 'depravity' in her character that both entrances and appalls him" (199). Yet categorizing Larsen's story into a certain genre perhaps aestheticizes Larsen's text in the same way the protagonist aestheticizes his lover, illustrating normative society's anxiety about unidentifiable, unknowable origins. Larsen

stresses not the woman's identity so much as the text's representation of her, and, by extension, the reader's desire to place her in an identifiable category. In fact, Larsen's textual ambiguities—the generalized features of the woman, the anonymity of the characters and the spaces they inhabit, and language that evades precise description—emphasize the ways in which representation (aesthetic or otherwise) both include and exclude bodies in an attempt to mark them as “other.”

In the text, generalization as a mode of textual and visual representation characterizes the woman as simultaneously universal and abject, highlighting the nonidentity that underlies representation. The protagonist's inability to give the woman individualized features, in fact, constructs her as a representative of a feminine (and perhaps racialized) category. His perception of the woman as a “universe personal and unheedful of outside persons or things” not only generalizes her, but portrays her as abject. The oxymoronic phrase, which configures a worldview in which the personal/particular becomes the general, places human subjectivity at the center of the material and psychological worlds. In this way, the protagonist figures the woman as a vessel—or a “vehicle” (Larsen, “Freedom” 15)—in which he is the privileged, centered subject. Writing about the abject's relationship to representations of the black female body in literature and art, Brown observes that “it is only through the abject [...] that the full scope of the human can be constituted and affirmed” (10). In other words, the abject, while figured as inhuman Other, in fact underlies our notions of a privileged human subject. Yet, by centering himself *within* her, the protagonist perhaps figuratively assumes the role of the unborn child, whose death (simultaneous to the mother's) signifies a double death for the protagonist: not only does he figuratively die with his

mistress and child, but he dies when the narrative can no longer represent him. In this way, the text highlights “the inadequacy of representation,” which results in what Theodor Adorno calls “nonidentity”: that is, a gap “between concept and reality, object and thing” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 13). According to Jane Bennett, this gap occurs in an attempt to conceptualize—to “capture”—an object in discourse (13-15). The text thus, through complicating identity and nonidentity, unfolds in such a way that the man himself can no longer be represented.

Larsen’s use of free indirect discourse thematizes nonidentity as the narrator’s voice becomes increasingly distinct from the protagonist, decentering the protagonist-as-subject. Significantly, neither the protagonist nor the woman is named; rather, they both seem to emblemize the “general” or “universal” rather than the particular. As the narrative progresses, representation becomes more problematic for the man: “His increasing mental haziness [rejects] the fact of her death [...] His twisted memories vision[] her with him in places where she had never been. He [forgets] all but the past, and that [is] brightly distorted” (“Freedom” 17). Over the course of the text, the narrator observes the protagonist’s increasing unreliability through language that emphasizes ambiguity. Berlant suggests that free indirect discourse confuses, rather than illuminates, the centered subject of the narrative: “In a narrator’s partial-merging with a character’s consciousness, say, free indirect discourse performs the impossibility of locating an observational intelligence in one or any body [*sic*]” (*Cruel Optimism* 26). In other words, free indirect discourse calls attention to the unreliability of textual representation, the “nonidentity” that describes the gap between the real and the text. Larsen’s use of free indirect discourse, then, highlights the tentative subject position of the protagonist. As the

narrator's point of view drifts away from the protagonist's, and as the protagonist's ability to represent experience through visual and textual mediums begins to fade, the narrative ends in his suicide. In this way, Larsen connects representation and freedom to the tension between vitality and death.

The protagonist obsesses over vitality, which, according to his logic, guarantees him freedom. At the beginning of the story, he is “prayerfully thankful” that his lover had not “sapped him from all physical and spiritual *vitality*”; but, to protect himself, he wishes for her death: “How that would simplify matters for him. But no; she would not die” (my emphasis, “Freedom” 14). However, when the protagonist discovers his mistress has died during childbirth, he realizes that “[i]t was she who had escaped him” (16). As death becomes an avenue to freedom for the protagonist, he refers to vitality not as a condition of individuality, but as an oppressive force. The narrator, dissecting the protagonist's thoughts, observes, “The *vitality* of the past, forever dragging him down into black depression, frightened him” (my emphasis, 16). Only in taking vitality from the *other*—the object of his desire, the past—can he possess it, and freedom, for himself. With his lover dead, he can no longer obtain freedom because he can no longer usurp it from the Other whom he views as his obstacle. The protagonist's ultimate decision to take his own life thus results from his anger that he has been decentered by the death of the Other. In these moments, the protagonist realizes that “freedom” is “only a mirage”: “[H]e [sees] quite plainly now that he would never be free” (16). He conceptualizes freedom as a type of immaterial, malleable representation that privileges some subjects over subordinated ones. Yet Larsen critiques this perspective by redefining it not as “freedom *from*” social structures, but as a material condition of existing relationally.

Thus, while the protagonist imagines freedom *from* his mistress, Larsen challenges hegemonic concepts of freedom in order to insist on a type of freedom that does not by necessity exclude Othered bodies, but one that acknowledges difference as the underlying principle of identity. Davis reads the protagonist's freedom at the end positively, remarking, "Despite the reversal of expected female gender identity, the situation may be read as freedom *from* traditional love and marriage, and the text read as a discourse on one's coming to power over convention, though the price of stepping out of the marriage-plot is self-destruction" (my emphasis, *Nella Larsen* 179). However, I would argue that Larsen's text does not champion a "freedom *from*," but critiques this configuration, which by necessity relies on the identification of a self and Other. In conceiving of freedom in terms of "freedom *from*," the protagonist conceptualizes freedom as a reaction *to* an object that he perceives as an impediment to his desire. Tracing the history of discourses of freedom, Elizabeth Grosz observes in "Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom" that theorists have traditionally spoken about freedom as primarily a response to "operational forces" or "social, cultural, or identificatory" structures, as an "elimination of constraint or coercion" (140). This conception of freedom limits the subject because it frames freedom negatively and locates it outside the self: the subject cannot be free unless the Other is eliminated. Drawing on Henri Bergson, Grosz redefines a freedom that acknowledges materiality: "Freedom is not a transcendent quality inherent in subjects but is immanent in the relations that the living has with the material world, including other forms of life" (148). The protagonist's death, then, results not from his attempt to escape the marriage-plot, which he has already been "freed from" by the death of his lover and child, but from his tendency to posture self and Other in

opposition. Thus, while Larsen's story does not envision the alternative to the protagonist's fatal politics of representation, "Freedom" nonetheless critiques systems of representation that by necessity exclude bodies in order to grant subjectivity to a privileged few who constitute the normative or universal.

Both of Nella Larsen's short stories interrogate aesthetic and political systems that attempt to identify bodies that do not neatly fit into proscribed categories. In "The Wrong Man," Larsen achieves this through motifs of material culture and encounters of misrecognition between subjects. In "Freedom," Larsen employs motifs of suicide, defenestration, and sexual transgression to explore misrepresentation of female bodies and Western, hegemonic concepts of freedom that exclude others at the expense of some. Larsen thus moves from exploring misrecognition as a form of securing oneself, to a more global critique of freedom *from* as securing one's identity at the expense of another. As my next two chapters show, these motifs and themes resurface in Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*. In this way, Larsen forges an intertextual relationship between her short stories and novels; she also, however, ties her work to biographical materials, both by and about her. Thus, these tensions between materiality and textuality encourage the reader to investigate Larsen's place as a black female novelist in the Harlem Renaissance and the broader trans-Atlantic modernist movement. Her pen name "Allen Semi" and the publication she chose for her short stories evidence Larsen's interest in encouraging a type of misrecognition that allows her work to be read as universal rather than particular. My thesis will continue to evaluate misrecognition and misrepresentation of the black female body as thematized in Larsen's longer texts.

Chapter 2 – “Things. Things. Things.”: A Geography of Material Desire in *Quicksand*

“Nigger Heaven” arrived a few minutes ago [...]. Therefore I shall have a wonderful time. I’m terribly excited. Too, almost incited to forgo the ritual which the reading of particular books always demands of me, a Houbigant scented bath, the donning of my best crepe de chine pyjamas, fresh flowers on the bedside table, piles of freshly covered pillows and my nicest bed cover,--and sit right down to it. But no, as impatient as I am, I shall make it a ceremony.

- Nella Larsen, Letter to Carl Van Vechten, August 6, 1926 (qtd. in Davis, *Nella Larsen* 209-210)

Larsen’s letter to Carl Van Vechten, which expresses her excitement at receiving a personal copy of his novel *Nigger Heaven* (1926), highlights the ways in which Larsen not only ritualistically linked the pleasure of reading to the pleasure of materiality, but also the way that her relationship to her texts was an exchange of influence—her novels were influenced by her own autobiographical material, yet she was influenced by them.¹⁰ The above excerpt features language that resurfaces in *Quicksand*: in particular, the ceremony that approximates intellectual pleasure and sensual pleasure and Larsen’s interest in juxtaposing the words “excited” and “incited.”¹¹ Further, it presents Larsen’s reading experience in the future-tense; it builds anticipation towards something not yet fulfilled. For Larsen, the invocation of desirable things through language brings her and her protagonists closer to those things’ materialization.

In the first chapter of *Quicksand*, Larsen depicts her protagonist Helga Crane after she “indulge[s] in the sweet pleasure of a bath and a fresh, cool change of clothing,” dressed in “vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules,” and “in her own attractive room with her own books” (*Quicksand* 36-7). Later in the novel, Helga’s

¹⁰ In a letter to Dorothy Peterson, for example, Larsen writes, “Right now when I look out into the Harlem streets I feel like Helga Crane” (N.d., July 19, 1927).

¹¹ Anna Brickhouse has made this observation. Although she does not analyze the significance of this repetition, she writes, “Larsen’s first letter to Van Vechten about *Nigger Heaven* bears a suspicious resemblance to the Copenhagen section of *Quicksand*, published two years later. The terms in which Larsen characterizes her feelings about Van Vechten’s book—‘excited,’ ‘incited,’ are exactly those in which she casts Helga’s state of mind in Denmark [...]” (551).

spread of new and exotic clothing across her bedroom in Copenhagen bring her an “unusual pleasure” that make her “feel a little *excited, incited*” (my emphasis, 103). Yet after marrying the Reverend Pleasant Green, moving to the South, giving birth to four children, and relinquishing material possessions, Helga nostalgically reminisces “about freedom and cities, about clothes and books, about the sweet mingled smell of Houbigant and cigarettes in softly lighted rooms [...]” (161). In *Quicksand*, as in her letter to Van Vechten, Larsen dramatizes a plot centered on the desire and pursuit of “things,” which, over the course of the novel, oscillates between a pursuit of material things and immaterial optimistic attachments. While Larsen’s letter uses the future tense to build anticipation toward a desire not yet fulfilled, *Quicksand* employs the past tense; nonetheless, both Larsen’s letter to Van Vechten and *Quicksand* center on the anticipation of the fulfillment of material and intellectual desire.

Both, too, take place amid crises of representation for African-Americans. Although Larsen’s letter avoids touching on controversy surrounding Van Vechten’s novel, she was nonetheless aware of the divisive criticism it received for its reductive portrayal of Harlem life.¹² She was also familiar with publications such as the NAACP’s *The Crisis* and *Fire!!*,¹³ whose titles alone evoke the urgency with which black artists sought to carve out a space for aesthetics that captured the African-American experience.

¹² Larsen told Van Vechten in a later letter that he “knows the Negroe.” She goes on to say that “it’s too close, too true, as if you had undressed the lot of us and turned on a strong light” (qtd. in Hutchinson 210). For an extended treatment of the critical reception of *Nigger Heaven*, see Hutchinson 208-215 and Sheehan 116-117.

¹³ *The Crisis* was a magazine published by the NAACP. For a time, it was edited by Jessie Fauset. In fact, W. E. B. Du Bois published a condemning review of Van Vechten’s novel, calling it “a blow in the face” and “an affront to the hospitality of black fold and to the intelligence of white.” In the same magazine, Du Bois later, too, reviewed *Quicksand* favorably, calling it “fine, thoughtful and courageous” (Hutchinson 128, 164, 220, 284). *Fire!!* was a quarterly avant-garde magazine sponsored in part by Larsen’s good friend, Dorothy Peterson, and edited by Wallace Thurman (Hutchinson 248, 291). For a discussion of depictions of women in *Crisis*, see Sheehan 118.

Yet, as I argued in my introduction, this project paradoxically sustained rather than eradicated essentialized categories of race. *Quicksand*, I argue, uses this backdrop of representational crisis to explore the way optimistic attachments dramatize the precarity of the black female body. Hazel Carby argues that “*Quicksand* [...] embodie[s] the major aspects of [...] the crisis of representation of the period” (169). While Carby examines the implications of “capitalist social relations” and Larsen’s subversion of the trope of the tragic mulatta narrative, I examine Helga’s geographical movement as a way of negotiating materiality and desire, which Larsen posits as fundamental aspects of self-formation and relationships to larger communities.

This chapter examines how Larsen creates an aesthetic of optimistic attachment through her elastic use of “things,” free indirect discourse, and narrative/geographical impasses. I draw on Lauren Berlant’s theory of “cruel optimism” in order to examine Larsen’s use of her own stretched-out present as a narrative strategy and the dramas of adjustment that characterize Helga’s evolving desire for things throughout the novel. Berlant’s theory of cruel optimism is useful for considering the politics of desire and identity in Larsen’s work because, although Berlant’s work focuses on crisis in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, *Quicksand* examines both individual and collective identity crises for those who do not fit comfortably into normative identity categories. According to Berlant, “cruel optimism” describes the condition “when something you desire is actually an obstacle to your flourishing” (*Cruel Optimism* 1). What makes these attachments or objects of desire cruel is when the realization of that desire is “impossible, sheer fantasy, or *too* possible, and toxic” (Berlant’s emphases, 24). For Helga Crane, Larsen reveals her desires to be both impossible and too possible, given

her identity as woman who is, as Werner Sollors phrases it, “neither white nor black but both” (qtd. in Lunde and Stenport 241). Highlighting a gap between desire for and possession of objects of attachment and emphasizing Helga’s precarity, Larsen grounds notions of identity on contingency and relationality.

Tracking Helga Crane’s pursuit of desire in the story reveals how attachments expose the precarity of the black female body. I begin by analyzing how the first scene in the novel sets up a fantasy of wholeness and invokes Helga’s optimistic attachment to “things” that she pursues throughout the text. For this reason, the second half of my chapter examines Larsen’s use of geographical impasses, which she presents as aesthetic landscapes that both impede and encourage Helga’s longing for things. Yet because Helga fails to satiate this desire throughout the novel—in part, because her understanding of “things” continually shifts—, Larsen posits a self that is defined not through externalizing acts of purchase or creation,¹⁴ but through desire itself.

Larsen’s triangulation of person, place, and things in the novel comments on the contemporary socio-cultural conditions for bodies that defy naturalized categories of race, gender, and sexuality. However, as Claudia Tate importantly points out, “racial and sexual analyses of Helga’s oppression do not fully account for her fate. For while it is a consequence of the fact that she is both black and female, another elusive factor [...] makes that identity a deadly combination for her.” According to Tate, the “elusive factor” or “invisible catalyst” is desire (“Desire and Death in *Quicksand*” 240). However, most

¹⁴ In *A Sense of Things*, Bill Brown argues that, in the existentialist tradition, the human subject has either constituted itself in “an act of externalization that transforms the material world (an act of making things), [...or an] act of buying things” (33). Helga problematizes this either/or duality because she seeks to both create and possess.

scholars have read desire in the novel as *either* sexual *or* class-based.¹⁵ I depart from these readings by suggesting that Helga Crane's desires in *Quicksand* are not fundamentally sexual desires, for Helga equally voices desire for class and racial belonging, a point to which I will return. Similarly, while I believe that Helga's desires are in part materialistic, I am not so sure that this equates to living a middle-class existence at the exclusion of those living in poverty because Helga condemns such "gracious ways of living" in New York, when she is closer than ever to obtaining them (*Quicksand* 80). Indeed, Helga Crane perceives money—which defines class mobility and security—to be at odds with her desires, which I will analyze in this chapter. Rather, Helga's desire in the text functions as a narrative device, as part of Larsen's use of what Berlant calls a "poetics of attachment." For Berlant, a "poetics of attachment" thematizes a gap between the fantasy of possessing *x* ("things" for Helga), and the reality of possessing *x* (*Cruel Optimism* 25). In *Quicksand*, I argue, Larsen deploys a poetics of attachment, which takes shape through Helga's attempts to approximate herself to desired things, by emphasizing the lack and relationality that constitute desire. In so doing, Larsen portrays identity as a process of becoming rather than being.

"Things. Things. Things": Things and a Poetics of Attachment

Larsen's initial portrayal of Helga in her living quarters at Naxos stages a scene of fantasy: it provides a false sense of wholeness by establishing a relationship between

¹⁵Most readings of desire in *Quicksand* either view sexual desire as the primary form of desire in the text, or they read other forms of desire (for material goods, for security, etc.) as signifiers for a latent sexual desire. However, Tate convincingly refutes the tendency of critics to read sexual repression as the "essential desire driving [Helga's] character" ("Death and Desire in *Quicksand*" 250). Indeed, as Johanna M. Wagner points out in her lesbian reading of *Quicksand*, "[Helga] has stronger feelings about her wardrobe than about the men in her life" ("[Be]Longing in *Quicksand*" 131).

Helga's body and the harmonious palette of colorful clothing and décor. Helga is "well fitted" to the "soft gloom" and the mixture of foreign and local, organic and inorganic, arrangements. The narrator describes Helga's room as "furnished with rare and *intensely personal taste*": "a single reading lamp [] dimmed by a great black and red shade," a "blue Chinese carpet," "the bright covers of the books," a "shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums," "the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet," and a "big high-backed chair" (my emphasis, *Quicksand* 35-36).¹⁶ While scholars have suggested that the opening portrait of Helga displaces her body or fragments it,¹⁷ Larsen's language of unity ("intensely personal taste" and "well fitted") provide a sense of cohesion between Helga and her things.

Using the word "attractive" to sum up Helga's appearance, Larsen evokes not only a sense of beauty, but testifies to Helga's magnetic quality, her desire to draw things physically close to her. In "(Be)Longing in *Quicksand*," Johanna Wagner argues, "These 'things' are frequently used as framing devices for Helga Crane" (135). By claiming Larsen "frames" Helga with things, Wagner's observation suggests a still-life that arrests a moment in time as a means to both sustain a sense of the present and make sense of seemingly disparate and unrelated things. Indeed, Larsen uses language of meditation and stillness to draw out the temporality of this moment, describing the "tranquility," the "quiet," and the "intentional isolation" of the scene (*Quicksand* 26). By constructing this still life that extends the novel's present moment and stages Helga in close proximity to

¹⁶ Commenting on the "Chinese carpet" and oriental silk, as well as other Orientalist imagery evoked throughout the novel, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson argues that "Larsen relies on Orientalist representations of African American women to distinguish Helga from the race women at Naxos and Harlem" (31).

¹⁷ For Lauren M. Roseblum, "These objects serve [...] to displace the focus on a woman's body as the center of her identity" (52). For Jenene Lewis, the abundance of artifacts establish Helga "as a physical body" rather than one defined by her "inner qualities" (51).

her carefully curated things, Larsen begins the novel by positing what happiness and representation (especially aesthetic representation) for Helga might look like.

Additionally, Larsen not only immerses Helga literally in the middle of things; she also foregrounds desire for things as the incentive that drives Helga to continually relocate herself. The narrator observes: “All her life Helga Crane had loved and longed for nice *things*. Indeed, it was *this craving, this urge* for beauty, which had helped to bring her into disfavor in Naxos” (my emphases, *Quicksand* 41). The focus on “this craving, this urge” in the second sentence—rather than the “nice things” for which Helga longs—highlights the *act* of desire as the impetus for Helga’s movement in the novel. Throughout the text, variations of this mantra are repeated as Helga increasingly feels alienated in each geographical-social milieu. Reintroducing and revising Helga’s desires in each locale, Larsen draws the reader’s attention to the analogous relationship between the lack that characterizes desire and Helga’s precarious body that cannot fit comfortably in the spaces she inhabits.

Significantly, Larsen refers to “things” throughout the text to represent Helga’s objects of desire, present artifacts, abstract concepts, and Helga herself. In this way, Larsen employs the word *things* to serve various, often contradictory, functions that problematize Helga’s sense of embodiment, staging her as precariously attached to unfulfilled desires and ambiguous “things.”¹⁸ For example, while trying to decide what to wear to a party before departing Harlem for Copenhagen, Helga considers donning a garment that the narrator describes as “the blue *thing*” (my emphasis, 87). However, after Helga escapes that same party, the narrator describes her as “a small crumpled *thing* in a

¹⁸ Wagner makes the same observation, writing, “The ‘things’ Helga desires balance along the tangible and the intangible” (“[Be]Longing in *Quicksand*” 134).

fragile, flying black and gold dress” (my emphasis, 93). When the referent of *thing* switches from clothing to the wearer, it highlights the elasticity of language and its inability to necessarily capture that which it attempts to describe. Commenting on this description of Helga, Laura E. Tanner argues that “Helga emerges representationally as a placeholder constituted by her physical surroundings and the garments she dons. Unable to affirm her own substantiality, Helga turns to the material world to locate and define her identity” (187). While Tanner argues that the word “thing” serves to disembody Helga, I contend that it underscores Helga’s simultaneous lack and excess of embodiment. According to Bill Brown, the word *thing* “denotes massive generality as well as its particularities”; it “designates the concrete yet ambiguous within the everyday”; and it “hover[s] over the threshold between the nameable and the unnamable, the figurable and the unfigurable, the identifiable and the unidentifiable” (“Thing Theory” 4-5). Thus, Larsen’s shifting referents not only obscure Helga’s desires, but emphasize the precarity of her body. They characterize Helga as undefinable and unfigurable, as a body that is not only too particular (she is *neither* white *nor* black), but in excess of the terms used to define categories, and therefore too general (she is *both* white *and* black).

Additionally, by referring to “things” rather than “objects,” Larsen problematizes the relationship between objects of the marketplace and things. Although her books, furnishings, and clothes do in fact have a market value, for Helga they exceed monetary worth.¹⁹ At one moment, the narrator asserts, “Always she had wanted, not money, but the things which money could give,” teasing out the distinction between a commodity (object) and a thing (*Quicksand* 97). Drawing upon Jean Baudrillard, Brown writes that

¹⁹ For Marxist interpretations of *Quicksand* and discussions of commodity culture in the novel, see Anisimova, Karl, Carby, Dawahare, and Chip Rhodes.

the *object* is an othered body, “shamed, obscene, [and] passive,” “alienated, accursed, and part of the subject” (qtd. in “Thing Theory” 7-8). As opposed to a mere object, *thingness* is what

is excessive in objects, [...] what exceeds their mere materialization as objects or their mere utilization as objects [...]. Temporalized as the before and after of the object, thingness amounts to a latency (the not yet formed or the not yet formable) and to an excess (what remains physically or metaphysically irreducible to objects). (4)

Significantly, Helga only uses “object” in reference to money, when she “remembers the unaccomplished *object* of her visit” to her Uncle Nilssen’s home in Chicago (my emphasis, Larsen, *Quicksand* 62), highlighting the way she attempts to “other” money by pushing it into the peripheral. Throughout the text, Larsen counters Helga’s desire for things with monetary necessity: it is a “sordid necessity” that “block[s] her desires” (40-41). For Helga, “to concede to money” is “a superstition that [...] magnifie[s] its power” (41).²⁰ The narrator’s continued emphasis on the difference between money and things participates in Larsen’s poetics of attachment because it suppresses necessity and stresses the fantasy of wholeness Helga attempts to create by accumulating things. Importantly, the narrator, rather than Helga, draws attention to monetary necessity: Helga only refers to money once through dialogue, and the narrator never names her interlocutor.²¹ In this

²⁰ Similarly, after receiving an inheritance check and a brief letter from her Uncle Peter Nilssen, Larsen writes: “Besides the brief, friendly, but none the less final letter there was a check for five thousand dollars. [...] It was stronger than mere security from present financial worry which the check promised. Money as money was still not very important to Helga” (85).

²¹ In New York, the narrator recounts Helga claiming: “Money isn’t everything. It isn’t even the half of everything.” (78).

way, Larsen demonstrates that the dismissal of money signifies class privilege, a privilege to which Helga, in reality, lacks access.

Indeed, Helga rescues objects of commodification from the world of the capitalist marketplace in order to bring them into a “curated hoard of fantasy” (to use Berlant’s words, *Sex, or the Unbearable* 26) in which things mean more to her. In Chicago, she purchases a book and a tapestry purse, “*things* that she wanted but did not need and certainly could not afford” (my emphasis, Larsen, *Quicksand* 64). In effect, through acts of purchase, Helga seeks to de-commodify objects of commercial value in order to construct a fantasy in which they have both material and immaterial significance. Along these same lines, Helga seeks to not only de-commodify artifacts, but her own body, in order to reconcile her own latency and excess. Furthermore, Brown’s comment above on temporalization testifies to Helga’s (and, more broadly, Larsen’s) attempts to represent herself by establishing a narrative and aesthetics that makes sense of the present. Like the present moment itself, which escapes easy definition, Helga’s in-betweenness and outsider status render her elusive.

Through the narrator’s descriptions of Helga’s desires, Larsen reveals the contingency of her optimistic attachments. In the Copenhagen section of the novel, the narrator remarks, “Always she had wanted, not money, but the *things* which money could give, [...] *Things. Things. Things*” (my emphasis, 97). Unable to specifically name Helga’s desires, the narrator describes them as things of attachment that transcend their function as commodities. An object of desire,²² according to Berlant, stands for “a cluster of promises [that] allow us to encounter what’s incoherent or enigmatic in our

²² While Berlant refers to “objects” of desire and attachments, I refer to “things” because of Bill Brown’s aforementioned distinction between objects and things.

attachments [...] as an explanation of our sense of *our endurance in the object*, insofar as proximity to the object means proximity to the cluster of things that object promises [...]" (emphasis original, *Cruel Optimism* 23). In other words, desired things become synecdochic for a constellation of things—both abstract and material, real and imagined—that the subject desires. Helga's objects of attachment include "clothes and furs from Bendel's and Revillon Frères" (Larsen, *Quicksand* 77); "the great ordinary things in life, hunger, sleep, freedom from pain" (153); and, I argue, desire itself. By using optimistic attachments that stand in for broader, unnamable desires, Larsen casts Helga's desire as analogous to her sense of placelessness that results from language's inability to secure Helga's station in society. Helga's attachments are relational "things" rather than discrete objects because she views herself relationally rather than as a singular, absolute subject.

Similarly, Larsen's use of free indirect discourse constructs desire as a compulsion to belong, forming what Berlant calls a "poetics of attachment." Larsen's use of free indirect discourse in *Quicksand* reveals a gap between fantasy and the possibility of its realization. Significantly, Helga never verbalizes her desires through dialogue: instead, they are always elucidated by the narrator. Additionally, Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport aptly point out that the narrator's abundant references to Helga's silence "makes her a representative of the threatening, unknowable, and thereby also aestheticized Other" (239). In this way, while Helga is the protagonist of the text, the narrator's invocation of her desires serves to decenter her identity as *she* becomes a synecdoche for the cluster of promises that define her desire and her precarious sense of self within given spaces. According to Tanner, Larsen's use of free indirect discourse

“symbolically relocates the shifting physical parameters of Helga’s identity in spatial rather than corporeal terms” (190). Along these same lines, Hutchinson argues that “[w]hen Larsen shifts from Helga as the central conscious [...] to a more ‘objective’ narrative mode, it is usually to dramatize Helga’s relation to her immediate environment” (226). As both Tanner and Hutchinson make clear, the relationship between Helga and the narrator not only serves to decenter Helga, but parallels the relationship between Helga and her material environment. Indeed, through the “circulation of merged and submerged observational subjectivity” (Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* 26), free indirect discourse in *Quicksand* paradoxically positions Helga as both an agent and an object trapped by normative systems. Paralleling this narrative strategy, Larsen’s use of geographical impasses similarly problematizes Helga’s status within changing locales, highlighting the challenges of political and aesthetic representation.

“An Intimation of Things Distant”: Narrative and Geographic Impasses

Larsen uses Helga’s temporary inhabitation of various locations—Naxos, Chicago, New York, Copenhagen, and Alabama—to articulate the precarity of Helga’s body, which is constituted by her desire for things. Resisting natural descriptions of the landscapes, Larsen’s places are primarily defined by interiors, fashion, and visual art. Similarly, Helena Michie observes, “Many chapters open with a reference to color that serves as an index of location, a sign of place and placement” (139).²³ In so doing, Larsen creates a discursive or aesthetic geography rather than a natural one, so that Helga’s desire for things becomes a map by which she characterizes places by material culture

²³ On a different aesthetic level, Anna Brickhouse convincingly argues that Larsen “cultivate[s...] a series of allusive literary landscapes,” an “intertextual geography” in which place metaphorically represents “perilous territories of American literary history” (535).

and social groups. Within each of these locations, Helga reiterates her desires (through the mediation of the narrator), as if invoking them brings them closer to realization. Sherrard-Johnson argues, “In each setting, [Helga’s] desire to invent herself differently is interrupted as the spectatorial gaze transforms her into a commodity, confirming that internal reinvention, without societal change, leads to alienation” (32). Sherrard-Johnson’s observation of Helga’s desire for self-reinvention suggests that Helga’s sense of self is process-oriented, a mode of becoming rather than being. Significantly, Larsen achieves this sense of becoming-self and becoming-other by locating Helga’s various reasons for movement in elusive optimistic attachments. Thus, Helga feels compelled to move forward—she is always reaching *toward* something.

Larsen explores desire as a condition of living in-between through Helga’s traversal of various spaces. Berlant describes these moments of “temporary housing” as “impasses” (*Cruel Optimism* 5). According to Berlant, the “impasse” refers to “a time of dithering from which someone or some situation cannot move forward” (4). It is a means “for encountering the duration of the present, and a specific term for tracking the circulation of precariousness through diverse locales and bodies” (199). In *Quicksand*, the impasse functions on a geographical and narrative level because, throughout the novel, place serves not only as a physical space that Helga’s body occupies, but also as a metaphor for social location. But, whereas a standard reading of the novel might identify moments of travel (such as when Helga moves to and from Chicago, or to and from Copenhagen) as examples of impasse, I argue that each place Helga occupies exemplifies Helga’s impassivity, a “stretched-out present”: from Naxos, to Chicago, to New York, to Copenhagen, and finally, to Alabama. According to Jeanne Scheper, who describes Helga

as a modern *flâneuse*, “Moving suggests a language for theorizing indeterminacy and foregrounding performance as an act of establishing identity in spaces of in-betweenness” (688).²⁴ She later adds: “Crane passes between places and through communities, rather than passing for an identity in one place or another” (693). Scheper’s apt use of “pass” in both a physical and ontological (racial, sexual) sense illuminates the way Larsen interrogates material and immaterial structures of power through mobility and precarity. In addition, “pass” suggests Helga’s attempts to escape impasses by moving between and outside of geographical and ontological categories. However, Larsen reveals that Helga’s own desires are cruelly optimistic because Helga’s in-betweenness resists comfortable, secure narratives of race, gender, and sexuality.

Larsen initiates Helga’s journey that ends back in the South in Naxos, where Helga’s desire to find a community in which she belongs is structured by her opposition to Naxos’s notions of “racial uplift.” Larsen contrasts these ideologies through fashion imagery and color. She juxtaposes Helga’s “vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules” and her love for “elaborate” clothes of “dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft luxurious woolens or heavy, clinging silks [...], [o]ld laces, strange embroideries, dim brocades” with Naxos’s “irreproachably conventional garments”: “Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown, unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks” (*Quicksand* 35-36, 51-52).²⁵ Michie argues that

²⁴ About the *flâneuse* or *flânerie*, the female *flâneur*, in *Quicksand*, Scheper argues that “Larsen defines the female subject of modernity by examining the relationship of subjectivity to relocation and mobility. In doing so, Larsen delineates the material complexities of that quintessential figure of modernism, the *flâneur*, or the public stroller and mobile observer of modern effects. As a woman on the move, Helga Crane represents something at times imagined to be impossible, a modern *flâneuse* or female *flâneur*” (679).

²⁵ Hutchinson illuminates the historical aspects Naxos’s rigid rules of uniformity, comparing them to Larsen’s uniform as a student at Fisk University and the uniforms required at the Tuskegee Institute, where Larsen served as the Head Nurse from 1915-1916 (62-63, 100-101). See also Goldsmith 265 and Sheehan 123.

Naxos's uniforms suggest "not merely the elimination of colored clothing, but of 'colored' people, of their difference from mainstream culture. It is as if by dressing colorlessly, these women not only hide but undo or erase their own color" (141). Further, and more broadly, Naxos's dress codes participate in a larger notion of "racial uplift" informed by the perpetuation of white racist ideologies. Helga's proposed manifesto, "A Plea for Color," would combat such aesthetics of oppression by reversing the "color line" of sartorial rules. As Larsen's use of aesthetics and politics makes clear, both political and aesthetic representation in Naxos require conformity, uniformity, and erasure.

Although Helga apparently affronts Naxos's moral and material regulations, she nonetheless helps sustain them. Margaret Creighton, a colleague at the school, urges Helga to stay at Naxos because "[They] need a few decorations to brighten [their] sad lives" (Larsen, *Quicksand* 49). Posing as a representative of a collective body, Margaret admits that Helga's difference sustains normativity by disguising Naxos as inclusive rather than exclusive. However, as the word "decoration" (an image that resurfaces in Copenhagen) implies, Helga must be objectified if she wants to retain a semblance of belonging.

Against the bleak political-aesthetic backdrop of Naxos, the narrator's reiteration of Helga's desires casts Naxos as a geographical impasse, because while Helga embraces relationality and difference, Naxos enforces uniformity. As Helga sits in her room considering her decision to leave Naxos, the narrator speculates:

But just what did she want? Barring a desire for material security, gracious ways of living, a profusion of lovely clothes, and a goodly share of envious admiration, Helga Crane didn't know, couldn't tell. [...]

Happiness, she supposed. [...Her] conception of it had no tangibility. She couldn't define it, isolate it, and contemplate it as she could some other abstract things. (Larsen, *Quicksand* 45)

Although the grammar of the narrator's answer seems to *exclude* material attachments, the reader realizes that these things constitute or stand-in for the "abstract" things Helga may or may not desire. "Barring" material objects, that is, is not to exclude them, but to say these are the things Helga can identify within her constellation of desire. Tate argues that the narrator's questions "project [a fundamental lack that characterizes desire] onto an imaginary place" ("Death and Desire in *Quicksand*" 250). As Tate makes clear, the narrator's invocation of Helga's desires attempts to create a space that accommodates Helga's in-betweenness. Additionally, as I stated above, Larsen also formulates desire as synecdochic, relational, and contingent. Both lack and relationality not only inform Helga's desires, but Helga's identity; and Larsen's development of an aesthetic and language that attempts to capture this in the Naxos section of the novel emphasizes Helga's impossibility of belonging. In other words, Larsen's framing of Helga's desires within the social/aesthetic climate of Naxos reveals Helga's desires to be incompatible with larger social forces. As she finds in Chicago as well, securing a stable existence requires adhering to the social norms that stabilize the color line—both literally and figuratively. For this reason, both Naxos and Chicago represent impasses for Helga: she must conform to their rigid standards, "carefully" donning "the plainest garments she possesse[s]" (Larsen, *Quicksand* 63), in order to meet her temporary needs to survive.

Whereas Helga's relationship to Naxos is staged by the opposition of her bright aesthetic choices to the drab, oppressive uniform of Naxos, in Harlem, she finds herself

initially complemented by Anne Grey's aesthetic. Describing how the "historical things mingled harmoniously and comfortably with brass-bound Chinese tea sets, luxurious deep chairs and davenports, tiny tables of gay color, [and] a lacquered jade-green settee with gleaming black satin cushions," the narrator describes Anne Grey's home as "in complete accord with what [Helga] designated as her 'aesthetic sense'" (76). In this section of the novel, the impasse manifests itself in Helga's mirroring of Anne Grey, by which Helga's aesthetic imitations parallel assimilationist ideologies of race. In this way, her desire to be like Anne stands-in for the modes of aesthetic and political representation in Harlem.

In fact, Helga's desires become predicated on Anne Grey's stability in the upper-class Harlem social set. Yet, as Sherrard-Johnson aptly observes, "[Larsen's] depiction of Anne as 'almost too good to be true' and 'almost perfect' accentuates both the illusory nature of such models and the difficulty of living up to them" (27). The narrator revises Helga's desires voiced in the first and second chapters of the novel by making them more concretely materialistic and modeling them explicitly on Anne Grey's possessions:

Someday she intended to marry one of those alluring brown or yellow men who danced attendance on her. Already financially successful, any one of them could give to her the things which she had now come to desire, a home like Anne's, cars of expensive makes such as lined the avenue, clothes and furs from Bendel's and Revillon Frères, servants, and leisure.

(Larsen, *Quicksand* 77)

The phrase, "The things which she had *now* come to desire," reveals how Helga must establish herself contingently on the desires of those who have a more secure place in the

social-geographical location she occupies. Larsen's temporalization of Helga's desires through the adverb "now" suggests the stretched-out present that characterizes the impasse. While this allows Helga to temporarily sustain a fantasy that her desires can be fulfilled, she gradually realizes that Harlem society performs an erasure of black identity through the "aping" of white society: she observes how Anne "ape[s] their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. [...] Theoretically, however, [Anne] stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid" (80). Hutchinson argues, "Anne's wholesale contempt for all whites buttresses the color line [...]. Her name, Anne Grey, suggests the dependence of her own 'black' identity on an abject whiteness within" (231). Hutchinson's poignant remark about "abject whiteness" gestures toward the fundamental lack in desire that separates *desire for* something from *possession of* it. When it becomes clear to Helga that Anne's aesthetic and politics do not fulfill Helga's need for things and desire for belonging, but merely mask her precarity, she turns to Copenhagen with the expectation that her foreign relatives will embrace her otherness.

In Copenhagen, racial discourse establishes alterity, like Naxos; but rather than silencing the black female body through subdued hues, the racialized aesthetic of Copenhagen exoticizes the black female body.²⁶ Michie aptly observes, "In [Copenhagen], difference is staged, exaggerated, and commodified as Helga is produced and promoted for the marriage market" (142). As with her arrival in New York, Helga initially feels closer than ever to achieving her desires and embraces her alterity. For her, Copenhagen represents "the realization of a dream that she had dreamed persistently ever since she was old enough to remember such vague *things* as daydreams and longings"

²⁶ For discussions on transnationalism and Transatlantic Modernism, see Laura Doyle, and Anne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport.

(my emphasis, Larsen, *Quicksand* 97). Larsen's apt use of "realization" here carries a double-meaning that becomes crucial to Helga's identity: in one sense, "realization" signifies Helga's apparent moment of insight as to what she desires; in another sense, "real-ization" indicates a process of fantasy becoming real.

However, Helga's interactions with her relatives, the Dahls, and the painter (and prospective suitor), Axel Olsen, urge her to confront not the realization of a dream, but the *reality* of her "exact status" as a body marked by its foreignness. Larsen's phrase "exact status" characterizes difference in Copenhagen not as a mode of becoming, but a fixed identity that establishes a firm subject-object alterity. In other words, for the Dahls and Axel Olsen, difference indicates an exceptional body that stands apart from the ordinary, rather than a condition of identity. The Dahls insist on dressing Helga in "striking things, exotic things," and "bright things [that] set off the color of [her] lovely brown skin" because she is "a foreigner, and different" (98). Olsen similarly attempts to render Helga as the exocitized Other by painting her portrait, which he calls "the true Helga Crane. Therefore—a tragedy" (119). The portrait vaguely recalls the still life of Helga at the beginning of the novel; but whereas Larsen's initial portrayal of Helga reflects Helga's fantasy, Olsen's portrait of her projects others' fantasies onto her. Anne E. Hostetler argues, "As the portrait makes clear, Helga's understanding of her racial self is mediated through cultural artifacts and constructs created by others" (36). As a black woman in Copenhagen, Helga lacks control over her aesthetic and political (self-)representation. Positing the portrait as the "true" Helga, Axel Olsen aestheticizes and generalizes Helga, rendering her body abject. Lunde and Stenport claim that, in Copenhagen, Helga is "presented as a cosmopolitan, delocalized foreigner of dark

complexion [...], as a generally exoticized and eroticized Other” (232). Her aestheticization and generalization recall that of the abject woman’s in “Freedom”; and the narrator’s delineation of “things” in this section of the novel similarly works to disembody her.

When Helga purchases “things” that she wants, they effectively function as what Jacques Lacan calls the *objet petit a*. When the Dahls purchase a new wardrobe for Helga, the narrator observes, “The *things* spread out upon the sedate furnishings of her chamber [...] make[] a startling array”: “batik dresses,” “dresses of velvet and chiffon,” “turbanlike hats of metallic silks, feathers, and furs” (my emphasis, *Quicksand* 103). According to Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick, the *objet petit a* describes an object that substitutes for the lack felt by desire, “where the small *a* serves to distinguish the contingent ‘other’ object of desire from the all-pervasive Other” (27). The presence of *objet petit a* “points to absence.” In the case of clothing, this “absent presence” not only gestures toward the absence of that object of desire, but to “the absence of the body.” They note that the “absent presence” evoked by clothing as *objet petit a* can be observed especially in “clothes without bodies” (29). In *Quicksand*’s Copenhagen, the clothing, strewn passively on the furniture, functions as an *objet petit a* for Helga. She feels perturbed at her “exact status in her new environment” as a “decoration,” a “curio,” a “peacock” (Larsen, *Quicksand* 103), because the clothes emphasize the absence of her real desires as well as the absence of her *self*. They “startle” her because they point to the immateriality of her body as a result of her objectification and as a result of her failure to secure the things she desires. In fact, it could even be argued that the clothing (as the *objet petit a*) for Helga mirrors Helga for the Dahls. Helga is their *objet petit a* for

upward social mobility: they hope she will “secure the link between the merely fashionable set to which they belonged and the artistic one after which they hankered” (120).

For Helga, Copenhagen begins as an impasse that allows her to sustain her desires; however, following her encounter with Axel Olsen, she responds with flight. Hostetler posits that “Helga’s illusion at the beginning of the novel is that she can create herself through a careful arrangement and selection of artifacts [...]. But as the novel progresses, it becomes clear that her aesthetic sense is passive [...].” (36). Hostetler’s observation that Helga’s “aesthetic sense” becomes “passive” illuminates why Copenhagen functions as an impasse: Helga cannot move forward or act, so she merely performs her expected role. As for Copenhagen itself as a geographical impasse, Lunde and Stenport suggest that, because the Dahls and Axel Olsen refuse to engage Helga in dialogues about race (at one point, Helga’s Uncle Poul calls it “foolishness” [Larsen, *Quicksand* 120]), Larsen “temporarily dislocates” Danish society (232). Copenhagen thus represents an in-between space for Helga where acceptance requires erasure of origins. For this reason, Helga’s objectification by Olsen and the Dahls leads her to revise her desires: “She understood [her father’s] *yearning*, [...] his *need* for *those things*, *not material*, indigenous to all Negro environments” (my emphasis, 122). In underscoring her new longing for immaterial things, Helga simultaneously collapses need with desire. However, Helga’s new desires that essentialize need-based, immaterial desires as characteristically black desires, prove to be toxic in their own ways.

The final chapters of the novel, which depict Helga’s brief return to New York and her final settling down in Alabama, characterize more starkly than others a sense of

the impasse. Shortly following her return to New York, Helga finds herself wandering “aimlessly, [with] no definite destination” after Dr. Anderson, her principal at Naxos, has rejected her sexual advances. She feels as if she has “forfeited [her desires] forever. Forever. Forever” (137). The narrator describes how Helga has “an instantaneous shocking perception of what forever mean[s] [...] leaving an endless stretch of dreary years before her” (137). In the midst of crisis, Helga can no longer envision her desires, which promised a firm trajectory of her life. The repetition of “forever,” broken by periods, evokes a contradictory sense of ongoingness and finality. The atmosphere of purposelessness that characterizes the impasse continues throughout the remainder of the novel as a result of Helga’s intuition that her desires—for things, for belonging, for difference as a condition of relation—are impossible.

When she stumbles into a Church service in New York City and joins the congregation, the narrator observes: “The thing became real” (142). “The thing” that becomes real is never clear in the novel, but I argue that it signifies the moment when Helga eschews her optimistic attachments and decides to live without the fantasies that sustain her. From this moment forward, Larsen conflates “things” with nothing and embodiment with intangibility. Indeed, when Helga moves to Alabama, she now feels as if “*Nothing*. Simply *nothing*” matters to her (my emphases, 143). Yet because she manages to *express* the concept of “nothing,” she perhaps feels its lack more than ever. Quoting Lacan, Brown writes, “The Thing [...] names the knowable, the unimaginable *no-thing* within both the psychical and physical exteriority”; “nothing” is “the existence of emptiness at the center of the real that is called the Thing” (“Thing Theory” 171). Helga conflates the “Thing” that becomes “real” to “nothing,” because she realizes that

her *fantasies* of wholeness are the closest she will ever come to obtaining her desires. She is convinced that “[t]his one time in her life [...] she had not *clutched a shadow and missed the actuality*” (my emphasis, Larsen, *Quicksand* 146). While Helga abandons her desires or “shadows,” she embraces religion as an “actuality.” The narrator describes how “she had found, she was sure, the *intangible thing* for which, *indefinitely*, always she had craved. It had received *embodiment*” (my emphases, 148). This “intangible thing” that becomes real works to not only supplant Helga’s desires for material things, but to dull her senses; the final chapters describe how this “intangible thing” blurs Helga’s body and her perception of the world: “obliterating,” “softened,” “subdued,” “reced[ing],” “vagueness” (148, 150). Her religion “shield[s] her from the cruel light of an *unbearable reality*” (my emphasis, 153). Religion becomes a strategy for survival by replacing lack and radical negation that characterizes Helga’s desire and her precarious body. However, because Helga eventually realizes religion itself is intangible—an object of attachment that takes on a different form—Helga returns to her fantasies.

Ultimately, Larsen reveals that Helga’s optimistic attachments are cruel because they are simultaneously *too* possible and *impossible*. In “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom,” Elizabeth Grosz theorizes the possible as “the retrospective projection of a real that wishes to conceive of itself as eternally, always, possible”; it “can only be gleaned from its actuality, for the possible never prefigures the real” (147). Helga attempts to aestheticize her life and to make her desires possible by accumulating things and forming narratives that make sense of her life. However, in Alabama, she can only try to “retrieve all these agreeable, desired things” through retrospection (my emphasis, Larsen, *Quicksand* 161-162). As Grosz’s quote makes clear, Larsen uses retrospection in

these final moments in the novel as a way for Helga to sustain desire. Furthermore, it allows Helga to return to a scene of fantasy, of ontological wholeness and belonging. However, as Hutchinson argues, “Helga’s personality lacks unity and coherence—it lacks identity” (224). While for Hutchinson, as for Larsen, Helga’s lack of a secure identity leads to Helga’s resignation to a permanent impasse, it might also be read as an identity that is always becoming-self and becoming-other. Thus, I would argue that Larsen aims her critique of identity politics at hegemonic systems rather than Helga herself.

Ending back in the South, *Quicksand* moves in a parabola. In this regard, the impasse is useful not only for thinking about the individual spaces that Helga inhabits throughout the text, but about the nature of the novel itself. For, as Berlant points out, *impasse* is another word for *cul-de-sac*: “In a cul-de-sac one keeps moving, but one moves paradoxically, in the *same space*. [...] [I]t marks a delay that demands activity. [...] That delay enables us to develop [...] all kinds of radical negation” (Berlant’s emphasis, *Cruel Optimism* 199). Yet while Berlant sees negation as a potentially positive, transformational force, Larsen’s novel ends bleakly, and, as some critics have argued, tragically.²⁷ But because Helga’s desire for “things” organizes the plot of the novel, and because Helga manages to sustain that optimistic attachment until the very end, I read her ending in Alabama as not tragic, but rather as another moment of the impasse. Additionally, in having Helga traverse these political and aesthetic terrains that represent facets of identity crises, Larsen indicates that Helga’s crisis is both universal and particular. And, in fact, given her biographical resources used to construct such impasses, Larsen herself creates a “stretched-out present” so that the novel functions as a type of narrative impasse.

²⁷ See Sheehan 141; Brickhouse 556-557; Hutchinson 238-239; and Davis, *Nella Larsen* 274-275.

Returning to the letter from Larsen to Van Vechten quoted at the beginning of this chapter, Larsen's text raises the question of the degree to which her life and work were connected. Thematically, both reveal the significance of material culture in the self-formation of identity and form a fabric between the discursive and the material. In "The Letters of Nella Larsen to Carl Van Vechten: A Survey," William Bedford Clark highlights this connection when he writes, "[Larsen's] letters [...] provide us with an implicit portrait of their author; and a survey of the Larsen file yields rare insight into the creator of characters like Helga Crane and Clare Kendry," as if to suggest that Helga and Clare are textual mirrors of Larsen herself. Yet Clark's article also indicates the importance of letters to Larsen. Significantly, Larsen's second and final novel, *Passing*, not only "opens" with a letter; it begins in the middle of *things*.

Chapter 3 – “A Vital Glowing Thing”: Encountering Self and Other in *Passing*

“Madame X,” or whatever you want to call her, is a modern woman, for she smokes, wears her dresses short, does not believe in religion, churches and the like, and feels that people of the artistic type have a definite chance to help solve the race problem.

- Thelma E. Berlack, “New Author Unearthed Right Here in Harlem,”
from *The New York Amsterdam News*, May 23, 1928 (149-150)

Thelma E. Berlack’s description of Larsen (whom she names at the end of the profile) as the vague “Madame X” figures her as a universal everywoman (“a modern woman”). “Unearthing” her, as if pulling her from the quicksand of obscurity, Berlack nonetheless presents her as a collective body, a representative “race-woman.” The excerpt above, too, cites Larsen’s belief that aesthetics can incite the necessary changes to solve a crisis of representation that is not only aesthetic but political. Indeed, speaking to the “definite chance” that “people of the artistic type” have “to help solve the race problem,” the profile urges the reader to consider the political dimensions of *Quicksand* (published shortly before Berlack’s article), but also *Passing*, which was published shortly thereafter. Both *Quicksand* and *Passing* explore the politics of the color line and how they problematize the mixed-race woman’s sense of belonging. But whereas Helga Crane in *Quicksand* identifies herself as black throughout the novel and never passes, Irene Westover Redfield and Clare Kendry Bellew—the two dual protagonists of *Passing*—both pass, albeit for different reasons. While Irene and Clare both identify as black, Irene passes as white for convenience, whereas Clare passes as white out of necessity.

For Larsen, the act of passing reveals recognition itself to be a type of misrecognition. Using dual protagonists, Larsen explores themes of relationality, nonsovereignty, and misrecognition that emphasize the precarity of Irene’s and Clare’s

bodies.²⁸ Precarity, for Larsen, is characterized by a sense of danger that one will at any moment be recognized or misrecognized and by a sense of desire for that same (mis)recognition. By juxtaposing recurrent themes of danger and desire in moments of encounter throughout the text, Larsen highlights the tension between belonging and resistance to social norms that motivate the passing subject. This chapter tracks scenes of Clare and Irene's encounters, which begin as scenes of passing (misrecognition) and gradually become scenes of nonsovereignty.²⁹ I focus on the "encounter" as an event and a narrative device because it organizes the three sections of Larsen's book, which are named "Encounter," "Re-Encounter," and "Finale," respectively. I argue that the first section, "Encounter" depicts scenes of "encountering other" through objects and social spaces: specifically, letters and hotels. Significantly, this is the only section of the novel in which characters pass. By focusing the first section on Clare, Larsen implies that passing is a mode of living in relation and acknowledging nonsovereignty. In "Re-Encounter," on the other hand, Larsen concentrates on Irene's moments of "encountering self" *through* Clare, using motifs of mirrors. I argue that, in "Re-Encounter," Irene confronts her own desires, (in)security, and sense of belonging and loyalty to "the race." Irene's fashioning of narratives that attempt to make sense of the ongoing crises in her

²⁸ I use Lauren Berlant and Lee Edelman's definitions of nonsovereignty and negativity developed in their book on queer theory and affect theory, *Sex, or the Unbearable*. For Berlant and Edelman, "negativity" describes "the psychic and social incoherences and divisions, conscious and unconscious alike, that trouble any totality or fixity of identity. It denotes, that is, the relentless force that unsettles the fantasy of sovereignty." Similarly, "nonsovereignty" refers to "the psychoanalytic notion of the subject's constitutive division that keeps us, as subjects, from fully knowing or being in control of ourselves and that prompts our misrecognition of our own motives and desires." They add, "to encounter ourselves as nonsovereign [...] is to encounter relationality itself, in the psychic, social, and political senses of the term" (Preface, viii). Distinguishing between nonsovereignty and negativity, Berlant writes that negativity "derives from a philosophical and psychoanalytic engagement," while nonsovereignty "derives from traditions in political theory that traverse social and affective relationality" (2).

²⁹ Berlant and Edelman define the encounter as "an episode, an event, in its fantasmatic scene, and the myriad misrecognitions that inform the encounter and define its limits" (Preface, viii). The encounter forces the subject to come to terms with a sense of relationality (viii).

life (both personal and collective, mundane and life-changing) makes the idea of Clare's abrupt death unbearable for her. As both Irene and Clare's subjectivities unravel via a sense of relationality and nonsovereignty, Clare dies at the end—but the cause of death remains unclear. While I concur with other scholars that there is no ending more "true" than the others, I examine the possibility that Clare's death is accidental because such a reading enables the reader to better understand the way nonsovereignty and relationality, fundamental concepts to the act of passing, threaten Irene's—and the reader's—sense of security.

Through the characters of Irene and Clare, Larsen dramatizes the persistence of the color line that stabilizes racial categories, yet she also complicates it. Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, distinguishing the trope of passing from the different but related trope of the tragic mulatta, similarly notes that "because racial passing frequently accompanies change in class status, passing is sometimes thematized as the taking of new, not necessarily racialized, identity in various locales" (12). Jacquelyn McLendon defines passing as "any form of pretense or disguise that results in a loss or surrender of, or a failure to satisfy a desire for, identity—whether racial, cultural, social, or sexual" (158).³⁰ For many scholars like McLendon, the act of passing reinforces essentialized categories of identity because it requires identifying *with* and *against* binary terms. Citing Elaine Ginsberg, Candice M. Jenkins writes that "the very notion of 'passing' might be understood to imply that 'identity categories are inherent and unalterable essences:

³⁰ About the historical reality of the act of passing (as opposed to its representation in fiction), George Hutchinson writes, "For the most part, the passing character in the fiction returns to the black race in the end. However, in real life, African Americans who crossed the color line most often did not return. [...] While there is probably no way to document such claims, it seems certain that the vast majority of those who crossed into the white world remained there" (182). Hutchinson's observation urges the reader to examine the movements of passing in Larsen's novel, in which characters pass back and forth.

presumably one cannot pass for something one *is not* unless there is some other, pre-passing, identity that one *is*” (emphasis in Jenkins, 137). Similarly, Rebecca Nisetich observes that “the act of passing serves to reify a binary view of race: whether or not the passer subverts the validity of the color line, the act of crossing over proves that the line exists” (357). In other words, although the act of passing transgresses social norms, it nonetheless proves that identity categories exist, supporting essentialized notions of racial, sexual, and gendered boundaries.

Presenting a more nuanced understanding of the act of passing in Larsen’s novel, Lori Harrison-Kahan views passing as a means of “being and becoming”: “The trope of passing, despite its often tragic endings, was used by Larsen as a strategy of self-making, a way to constitute female identity in resistance to stereotypical representations” (123).³¹ As a mode of “being,” the act of passing describes someone pretending to be something one *is not*. This is what Irene does. Irene’s acts of passing as white on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel and in the Bellew’s hotel room preserve oppositional identity categories because she views her identity as a heterosexual, black, middle-class woman as secure. For Irene, passing is a mode of disguise rather than transformation. As a mode of “becoming,” the act of passing describes someone who successfully challenges identity categories altogether. This is, in fact, what Clare Kendry does. Clare challenges the structure of passing itself because she passes as an act of transformation, of becoming-

³¹ Josh Toth makes a similar claim: “Derived from the Latin *passus* (‘to step or pace’), ‘passing’ connotes transience, the sense of being between places, of being neither inside nor outside (yet *both* inside *and* outside) a particular space or grouping. Passing is not to have been already let ‘passed’; it is not to be before *the pass*, nor is it to be safely on the *other side of the pass*. Simply, passing suggests a mode of *becoming* rather than a mode of *being*. As regards a text that is significantly titled *Passing*, this is an important distinction. Although it is obviously interested in the issue of race, and racial ambiguity, Larsen’s text—like the concept of passing itself—evokes a more general ontological threat of transience and instability” (57). Yet I prefer to use Harrison-Kahan’s definition in my chapter, because it suggests that passing is *both* being *and* becoming rather than only becoming.

more and becoming-other. As both a potential mode of disguise and transformation, the act of passing forces a subject to exist relationally through recognition and misrecognition, predicated on the (in)ability to read visual codes. Sherrard-Johnson writes:

[...] *Passing* presents moments of racial recognition and misrecognition that create the sustained motif of a muddled color line and dispel the notion that whiteness is physiologically impossible to penetrate. [...] Recognition of the passer as either white or black is reliable only to the extent that the observer has a trained eye sensitive to the visual encoding of race. Yet those visual codes are difficult to concretize. (38)

Indeed, Larsen's novel problematizes vision as a reliable sense for "detecting" racial identity categories. Thus, Larsen reveals the act of passing to be wholly relational: it is an encounter between two bodies that each demand recognition or misrecognition from the other. While Mary Helen Washington argues that, for Larsen, the act of passing signifies "the life lived without the supports other black women clung to in order to survive in a white-dominated, male-dominated society" (34), Charles Larson writes that passing is "not something that attracts only those daring enough to attempt it; it also fascinates those who do not, as if there is some kind of *vicarious involvement* impossible to ignore" (82). While Washington and Larson posit almost opposite analyses of the act of passing, taken together, their assertions reveal the way that living relationally through passing postures the body as both strange and familiar.

Encountering Other: Scenes of Passing as Relationality and (Mis)Recognition

Opening in the middle of *things*, with a letter from Clare to Irene that transports Irene back to their encounter on the Drayton Hotel's rooftop, Larsen thematizes relationality through the narrative structure and the motifs of artifacts, ensembles, and assemblages, demonstrating the closeness and separation that being in relation entails. Additionally, "Encounter" has a symmetric organization. It begins and ends with letters to Irene from Clare, which enclose two hotel scenes: the first, on the rooftop of the Drayton Hotel, and the second, in the Bellew's hotel room at the Morgan. This narrative enclosure folds the intimacy of the letter into the anonymity of hotel spaces, which are, significantly, the only scenes of deliberate racial passing in the text. In this way, Larsen stages the act of passing not only through encounters between human subjects, but also through the narrative structure itself, urging the reader to consider textual and material mediation as impetuses for confronting nonsovereignty.

The letter functions as a site of the encounter, in which "the estrangement and intimacy of being in relation" (to use Berlant and Edelman's words, viii) disrupt Irene's sense of subjectivity. On the one hand, Irene "immediately know[s] who the sender [is]"; on the other hand, the narrator describes the letter as "out of place and alien" (Larsen, *Passing* 5). A "thin sly thing," "mysterious," with "no return address" and written in purple ink on "Italian," "[f]oreign paper," Larsen stresses the sense of estrangement Irene feels towards the letter. In fact, Helena Michie writes that the letter's appearance "represents an attempt on Irene's part to construe Clare as 'foreign,' to persuade herself that she and Clare live in different worlds" (152). This simultaneous sense of familiarity and unfamiliarity pose relationality as the condition of Irene's subjectivity. As a result,

Irene feels threatened: the narrator alludes to danger and apprehension eight times in the first chapter. She is certain, for example, of the “danger [...] the letter’s contents [will] reveal” because it is “of a piece with all she knew about Clare Kendry. Stepping always on the edge of danger” (Larsen, *Passing* 5). The mounting feeling of danger with which Irene responds serves to characterize Clare’s risk-taking (“the hazardous business of passing” [17]) and Irene’s attempts to secure herself in the world, surfacing from a sense that Clare’s body is simultaneously too close and too far. Irene feels *too close* to Clare in that the materiality of the letter renders Clare’s body present; yet she feels *too far* from Clare in that she cannot control her, like the letter that disrupts an otherwise “ordinary” morning (5).

The letter not only highlights the precarity of Irene and Clare’s bodies; it also serves as a narrative device that explores how danger and desire become structuring themes of the plot. Miriam Thaggert observes that “Clare’s insistent letter writing propels the action of the story” (“Racial Etiquette” 519). More specifically, I would suggest that Clare’s *desires* drive the plot because they force Irene into relationality with Clare, emphasizing the precarity of their bodies. Furthermore, Larsen dramatizes danger and desire not only through the relationality of desire, but the obscurity of Clare’s letter. Larsen not only draws attention to Clare’s ambiguous wording; she substitutes several sections of the letter with ellipses:

For I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help *longing to be with you again*, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life....You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of *that other* that I once thought I was glad to be

free of.... [...] ³² and it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't know, perhaps, have this terrible, *this wild desire* if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago.... (my emphases, *Passing* 7)

Functioning as rhetorical placeholders for desires that cannot be named, the ellipses illuminate the precarity of Clare's subjectivity and desires. Harrison-Kahan similarly argues that "the conflation of identification and desire yields an ambiguity that is manifest both in the words of the letter and in its form" (115). For Thaggert, "The erasure of words, a withholding, acts as a kind of lexical striptease; the presence and absence of certain words only heighten the erotic effect of the letter" ("Reading the Body" 79). Thaggert's observation not only accounts for the possibility of lesbian desire and the gaze intimated in the letter, but perhaps implies that the act of passing is relational. Clare's "pale life" is overshadowed by a vague "other" life, emphasizing how her passing forces her to live an unanchored existence that is constantly reaching *toward* a fantasy—whether toward a previous existence or a future ideal. With this in mind, the ellipses, then, reinforce the "lack" or negativity that characterizes desire.

I argue that passing, then, might itself be manifestation of the "impasse." In her lecture "Living in Ellipsis," Berlant argues that "ellipses highlight the condition of living without an anchor to fantasies"; they "emerge at the place where the unknown meets the unknowable." As Clare intimates in her letter and explains more fully on the rooftop of the Drayton, passing allows Clare to pursue the things she desires. On the rooftop of the Drayton, she tells Irene that she passes because she "want[s] *things*. [She] knew [she] wasn't bad-looking and that [she] could 'pass'" (Larsen, *Passing* 19). Considering passing as a type of "impasse," a means of living "in-between" to sustain desire, I read

³² Ellipses without brackets are from the original text; ellipses with brackets are my own omissions.

Clare's passing not as opportunistic so much as a means of embracing nonsovereignty. It is this quality of relationality, of living contingently, that makes the possibility of accidental death possible.

While Clare's ellipses substitute for living with negativity, Irene's refusal to respond to Clare represents her attempts to maintain a firm standing of the world. As Gregory Askew writes, "Above all else, Irene longs to be safe, longs to maintain the security of her bourgeois existence" (315). Irene decides to counter this letter and others from Clare with "silence for their answers": "[S]he decided it was, after all, better to answer *nothing*, to explain *nothing*, to refuse *nothing*; to dispose of the matter by simply not writing at all" (my emphases, Larsen, *Passing* 44). Although Irene supposes that silence and "nothing[ness]" separate individuals, they in fact bind them together. Because negativity characterizes relationality, Irene's repetition of "nothing" paradoxically forces her to encounter Clare. Similarly, Irene's insistence that they are strangers reinforces their connectedness: "Actually they were *strangers*. *Strangers* in their ways and means of living. *Strangers* in their desires and ambitions. *Strangers* even in their racial consciousness" (my emphases, 44). Irene intends for the repetition of "strangers," like "nothing," to stress the void that physically ("ways of living") and mentally ("in their desires and ambitions...in their racial consciousness") separates them. Invoking Irene's thoughts, the narrator's repetition of "nothing" and "strangers" attempts to render nothingness and estrangement as realities through reiteration, which works for Irene to make desires feel more tangible. However, the void, the force of negativity, not only separates Irene and Clare, but binds them together—like language itself. Indeed, the plural form of "strangers" refers to *both* Irene *and* Clare.

“Enveloped” by the two letters Irene receives from Clare, the two hotels scenes in “Encounter” similarly serve as scenes of relationality in which Larsen explores passing as an act of misrecognition. The first depicts Irene and Clare’s encounter after twelve years on the top of the Drayton Hotel. The second hotel scene portrays Clare, Irene, and an acquaintance from school, Gertrude Martin, meeting in the Bellew’s hotel room for tea, only to be interrupted by Clare’s racist husband, John Bellew, who playfully calls his wife, “Nig.”³³ Both hotels are white, upper-class spaces in which proper dress and décor mask the improper bodies of Irene, Clare, and Gertrude. Because hotels represent simultaneously public and private spaces in which strangers and acquaintances mingle, they highlight the ways that spaces contextualize and designate proper and improper bodies. The women’s ensembles and the assemblages—composed of memories, artifacts, and rumors—serve as sites that characterize passing as a type of misrecognition by imposing narratives on bodies to make them visually readable.

Through ensembles and setting, Larsen creates a poetics of misrecognition that finds its parallel in a poetics of ornament. I use the word *ensembles* deliberately, because, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, it not only refers to “[a] woman’s dress, hat, etc., as a complete whole,” but, more generally, “together, at the same time.” In this way, it emphasizes the fantasy of wholeness created by clothing, as well as the “togetherness” of clothes that bind bodies through social codes. On the rooftop of the Drayton, Irene observes that a mysterious woman’s (whom she later recognizes as Clare) clothes are “just right for the weather,” conveying how harmoniously she blends with her

³³ John Bellew explains that he calls his wife “Nig” because, “When [they] were first married, she was as white as—as—well as white as a lily. But [Bellew] declare[s] she’s getting’ darker and darker” (Larsen, *Passing* 29). Interestingly, Larsen originally intended to title the novel *Nig*, which would have emphasized Clare as the protagonist of the text (Hutchinson 294). For discussions on interpellation, see Harrison-Kahan, Catherine Rottenberg, and Nell Sullivan.

environment (Larsen, *Passing* 9). Thaggert contends that, in this section, Irene participates in a language of fashion: “The correspondence between scent and color, between a woman’s perfume and her clothes, is, as [Meredith] Goldsmith points out, reminiscent of the language of ads” (“Racial Etiquette” 514). Similarly, Michie writes,

[T]he more general allusion to the propensity of summer clothes to be ‘mussy’ marks an identification of Irene with the unknown woman, a sense of a common feminine problem, an inhabitation, however brief, of the body of the other woman. [...]it suggests a female self constructed out of difference and opposition that takes the form of a subtle dialogue between colors. (148)

In this way, Irene fashions a narrative about Clare that designates her body as a proper body. That Irene notices Clare’s clothing before she studies her facial features and demeanor indicates that clothing and setting inform her initial knowledge of the other. Tellingly, Irene examines her own hat, makeup, and dress for potential wardrobe malfunctions when she realizes the woman returns her stares (Larsen, *Passing* 10).³⁴ Catherine R. Mintler argues, “Since how Irene is dressed in this scene signifies both race and class, clothing usually assists Irene’s successful passing for white in what is white public space” (179). Clothing thus participates in a fantasy of wholeness that Irene perceives in Clare, and that Irene expresses anxiety about when it comes to her own projection. A crack in a unified image—a backwards hat, a streak of powder—that upsets social codes is enough to be recognized as an improper body.

³⁴ Johanna M. Wagner observes that “race does not cross [Irene’s] mind until there is no other alternative. It is a remarkable juxtaposition between the title of the novel *Passing*, which implies race as no less than *the* major theme, and the absentminded protagonist who pinpoints the issue only after she has ruled out all else” (“In Place of Clare Kendry” 143). I disagree with Wagner, arguing that Irene inspects her clothing first because she finds imperfect presentation threatening to her performance of passing.

Larsen's use of fashion to juxtapose and mirror the bodies of Clare and Irene creates a parallel between the phantasmagoric quality of fashion and passing. In *The Arcades Project*, Walter Benjamin quotes Henri Focillon from *Vie des formes* on fashion as phantasmagoria:

[Fashion] invents an artificial humanity which is not the passive decoration of a formal environment, *but that very environment itself*. Such a humanity [...] takes, as its ruling principle, the poetics of ornament, and what it calls '*line*'...is perhaps but a *subtle compromise between a certain physiological canon...and imaginative design*. (My emphases, 80)

Clare's clothing, which harmonizes with the weather and, later, "suit[s] Clare and the rather difficult room to perfection" at the Morgan Hotel, invents a type of body that, in becoming "the very environment itself," characterizes nonsovereignty through simultaneous excess and lack (Larsen, *Passing* 24). In this sense, the "line" in Benjamin's "poetics of ornament" refers not only to the "lack" between the real and the ideal that fashion attempts to embody, but the "color line"—the "lack" of racial category—that bifurcates black and white skin, a line on which Clare is always standing. Thaggert argues that fashion not only aids the act of passing, but is analogous to it, because it is a "quality notoriously difficult to quantify and describe, a recondite quality that only those 'in the know' can identify" ("Reading the Body" 67). While, for Thaggert, the similarities arise from the ambiguity that rhetorics of race and fashion employ, I would add that they both allow the body to perform across established lines of race, class, and gender.

Through Clare's "fantasmagoric" fashion and passing, Larsen characterizes passing as a type of racial (mis)recognition. Dani Cavallaro and Alexandra Warwick

write that fashion “guarantee[s] a cohesion and plentitude based not on the reality of corporeal unity but on the dream of a total communion between the physical apparatus and the specular image, i.e. on misrecognition” (41). When Irene fails to recognize the “attractive-looking woman,” she suspects that “the trick which her memory had played her [*sic*] was for some reason more gratifying than disappointing to her old acquaintance, *that she* [Clare] *didn’t mind not being recognized*” (Larsen, *Passing* 12). To pass is thus to be both recognized and misrecognized. On the one hand, to pass is to be recognized (by both dominant and subordinate groups) as an acceptable or proper body in a particular racialized space; in this sense, passing as recognition demands that a body is acknowledged by other bodies as unexceptional. Judith Butler’s distinction between marked and unmarked bodies is poignant here: “[W]hat can be seen, 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” (“Passing, Queering” 420). In other words, to pass—to be recognized—is not to be seen, but to be invisible. Larsen’s use of double negatives in this instance testifies to the negation that Clare seeks in order to successfully pass. And Irene’s reliance on ensembles and rumors participate equally in that misrecognition. In “National Brands/National Body: *Imitation of Life*,” Berlant argues that “each woman returns the other to her legally ‘other’ body by seeing her, and seeing through her—not to another ‘real’ body, but to other times and spaces where the ‘other’ identity might be inhabited safely” (111). Larsen thus uses clothing not only as a site of misrecognition, but as a site of temporal/spatial displacement in order to situate an improper body in its proper temporal/spatial setting.

Like ensembles, which paint a real body as a whole image and also tie that body relationally to others through misrecognition, assemblages that form cohesive narratives out of discrete parts attempt to anchor precarious bodies.³⁵ For Irene, assemblages occur not only in material things (clothing, décor, and setting), but in memories and rumors. While Irene fails to understand how Clare can “break[] away from all that [is] familiar” by permanently passing, she nonetheless refuses to ask Clare about the past twelve years of her life, preferring instead to rely on rumors about Clare’s various appearances in white, upper-class spaces (Larsen, *Passing* 18). Irene has “a vague suspicion” as to Clare’s life for the twelve years they remain out of touch, “[f]or there had been rumors” (13).³⁶ Similarly, upon receiving Clare’s letter, Irene is transported back to an image of Clare’s childhood: Irene “*seem[s]* to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together” (my emphasis, 5).³⁷ Irene bases what she *wants* to know about Clare on a combination of objects and rumors that have been re-collected into a coherent narrative that satisfies Irene’s fantasies of Clare’s childhood and adolescence. Irene might recall a blue sofa in the Kendry’s home, a “pathetic little red frock,” and stories or evidence of physical and/or verbal abuse, but she does not witness

³⁵ Jane Bennett defines assemblages as “ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts. [...] An assemblage is never a stolid block but an open-ended collective, a ‘nontotalizable sum.’ An assemblage thus not only has a distinctive history of formation but a finite life span” (*Vibrant Matter* 24). She also writes that “to form alliances and enter into assemblages” is to “mod(e)ify and be modified by others” (22).

³⁶ The narrator describes: “There was the one about Clare Kendry’s having been seen at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white. And *dressed!* And there was another which told of her driving in Lincoln Park with a man, unmistakably white, and evidently rich. [...] There had been others whose context Irene could no longer recollect, but all point in the same glamorous direction. [...] And then they would all join in asserting that there could be no mistake about its having been Clare, and that such circumstances could only mean one thing. Working indeed!” (Emphasis original, Larsen, *Passing* 13-14)

³⁷ George Hutchinson suggests that Clare Kendry’s experience with dressmaking was tied to Larsen’s own mother’s occupation as a dressmaker (40). He further adds that when Nella Larsen herself was growing up, she was more than likely presented to clients as a servant or apprentice rather than a daughter, since her blackness stood out in an all-white household (41).

the event she claims to “see” (6). Like the rumors that Irene later recalls on top of the Drayton hotel, which assemble brief glimpses of Clare with white men and women at expensive hotels into narratives of her possible occupation as a prostitute, Irene’s recollection of a specific moment in Clare’s childhood is a “fantasmatic staging” (to use Berlant and Edelman’s words, viii). Jordan H. Landry comments on the way “narrative conditions [Larsen’s characters’] vision. [...] Larsen shows that knowledge, vision, and stories all work together to give credence to false beliefs” (34). The rumors are, in fact, a type of misrecognition. Irene *needs* and *desires* to fabricate stories about Clare’s childhood, because anchoring Clare in a knowable scene helps Irene secure her own identity. These scenes of assemblages become significant to the end of *Passing*, because they demonstrate Irene’s need to assemble objects, actions, and people into narratives of the other so that she herself can feel safe. Thus, the possibility of accidental death at the end of the novel stands in opposition to what Irene considers bearable.

Yet, by forming such stagings, Irene and the other characters who create rumors about Clare are only able to “look *through* [her],” so that even Clare feels “uncertain whether [she is] actually there in the flesh or not” (Larsen, *Passing* 15). Significantly, Irene experiences a similar feeling after the Negro Welfare League dance when she suspects that Brian’s gaze negates her existence, as if she were “a pane of glass through which he stared” (61). Eventually, even she cannot see herself: “The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her mind. Impossible for her to put into words or give it outline, for, prompted by some impulse of self-protection, she recoiled from exact expression” (my emphasis, 63). In this moment, Larsen reveals the way that such stagings, which attempt to negate relationality

by emphasizing singularity, in fact force the subject to confront nonsovereignty. For behind the cohesive image is the nonsovereignty that the fantasy of wholeness is always trying to cover up. Following scenes of passing that dramatize moments of encounter other, the scenes in “Re-Encounter” use motifs of mirroring to stage Irene’s confrontation with her own nonsovereignty that results from her acts of passing with Clare.

Encountering Self: Scenes of Mirroring as Nonsovereignty in “Re-Encounter”

If the first section of the novel forces Irene to confront Clare’s desires and precarity, “Re-Encounter” stages scenes of mirroring that force Irene to encounter herself; her desire for security urges her to come to terms with her own nonsovereignty. In contrast to the hotels of “Encounter,” the private rooms in “Re-Encounter” emphasize Irene’s introspection. Nell Sullivan notes that several critics have pointed out that intimate scenes between Clare and Irene take place in Irene’s bedroom; more specifically, and more importantly, Sullivan indicates, they take place in front of Irene’s mirror (378). Indeed, “Re-Encounter” opens with Irene angrily examining her relationship with Clare as she dresses in front of a mirror (37). She is preoccupied with her own “defence [*sic*] of the race to which she belonged”; her feeling of duty to Clare, to whom she feels “bound [...] by those very ties of the race”; and Clare’s own lack of caring “for the race” (36). The second chapter, again, positions Irene in front of the mirror when Clare surprises Irene with a visit, and renders obscure “the woman before her” in the mirror, emphasizing the gradually indistinguishable differences between the two (46). Their conversation concerns the dangers of passing, with Irene imploring Clare not to attend the Negro Welfare League dance because “it’s terribly foolish” and “not safe” (46-47). In fact, Irene

doubles back: not only is the act of passing as white dangerous, but “this coming back” is an equally “dangerous business,” recalling Irene’s earlier observation about “the hazardous business of passing” (47). Irene’s inversion seeks to conflate passing with returning, themselves acts of mirroring. These images of mirroring and crossing back and forth, Jessica Rabin writes, are reflected in Larsen’s narrative strategy: “Larsen’s text continually crosses back over itself, particularly through the use of flashback” (133). Emphasizing this movement of “back” and “forth,” the “Re” in “*Re-Encounter*” signifies Irene’s movement from encountering other to encountering self, which requires crossing back over a line that itself constitutes negativity.

The narrator’s descriptions of Irene and Clare before the Negro Welfare League dance dramatizes this sense of encountering self and other. Irene’s rhetoric of fashion, which merges objective descriptions of Clare’s dress (e.g., “black taffeta”) with evaluative adjectives (e.g., “exquisite” and “flaunting”), forms a narrative about Clare’s body that merges the ideal and the real. Recalling the “things [...] she remembered [which] seemed [...] unimportant and unrelated,” a collection of “unconnected things” that “fade[] to a blurred memory, its outlines mingling” with the past and future, Irene fashions a narrative out of discrete images that provide a sense of wholeness to both Clare’s and Irene’s own bodies (Larsen, *Passing* 53, 56). When Irene discovers Clare waiting for her downstairs with Brian before they attend the Negro Welfare League dance, the narrator describes Clare and Irene’s appearances:

Clare, exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet; [...] Irene, with her new rose-coloured chiffon frock ending at

the knees, and her cropped curls, felt dowdy and commonplace. She regretted that she hadn't counseled Clare to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous. (53)

On the one hand, scholars have argued that Clare is depicted as the passive Other, and Irene the subject, because the narrator's perspective intimates Irene's thoughts rather than Clare's, and the sentence describing Clare lacks a verb. Meredith Goldsmith, for example, writes, "While Larsen renders Clare as a static object, description without action, her description of Irene renders her painfully embodied; one can sense her embarrassment even in her exposed knees" (282). Yet I would disagree that Larsen portrays Clare as a "static object." Describing Clare's clothing as "flaunting" and "shining," and at each hotel as "fluttering" and "floating," respectively, Larsen gives Clare the quality of an apparition who both inhabits and does not inhabit either space, and whose identity is constantly in flux (*Passing* 9, 24). As I mentioned, Clare passes as an act of transformation rather than disguise. In this sense, the participles aid Larsen's presentation of Clare as unidentifiable because they characterize her appearance as perpetually becoming, as exceeding fixed description. Feeling ordinary next to Clare's "exquisite," "flaunting," and "graceful" appearance, Irene projects a fantasy of wholeness onto Clare that she locates specifically in Clare's clothing.

Not only does Irene attempt to conflate a fantastic image of Clare with the materiality of her body; she also seeks to close the gap between Clare's body and her own to secure her sense of a unified self. Berlant observes that Irene "desire[s] to occupy, to experience the privileges of Clare's body, not to love or make love to her, but rather to wear her way of wearing her body" ("National Brands/National Body" 112). In this sense,

Roland Barthes's concept of "identity and otherness" in the rhetoric of fashion illuminates Irene's perception of self, other, and sovereignty. For Barthes, this "double postulation" of "individuation or multiplicity" occurs when a subject (Irene) projects a fashion narrative onto another body (Clare); and, as a result, the subject experiences both a "dream of identity" and a "dream of play" (254).³⁸ In one way, Irene experiences a "dream of identity" through her encounter with Clare because she wishes to distinguish herself *from* Clare by commanding the same misrecognition. However, this identity can only be validated by another person or community. Thus, the "dream of identity" produces a tension between Irene's attempt to project her individual self and the requirement that this self represent the socially acceptable.

Simultaneously, Irene experiences a "dream of play," in which she admires Clare's transformational powers because of her multiplicity, evidenced by the several adjectives at play, some contradictory ("flaunting" and "graceful"), some complementary ("stately" and "graceful"). In fashion rhetoric, the presence of several characteristics of a person "multiplies the person without any risk to her of losing herself, insofar as, for Fashion, clothing is not play but the sign of play" (257). In fact, Cavallaro and Warwick argue that clothing itself performs this multiplicity because of its nature as a collage, or, I would say, an *ensemble*: it is a "dramatization of the inevitable coexistence of rupturing and reparative drives," enacting "the fundamental disunity upon which any identity rests" (39). For this reason, Clare's clothing and passing become sources of power (Barthes 256). For Irene, Clare's simultaneous elegance and flaunting, her embodiment of a transformational myth, reflect Clare's performance of passing. On the transformative

³⁸ Barthes defines the "dream of identity" as the desire "to be oneself, and to have this self be recognized by others" (255). The "dream of play" is characterized by the motif of disguise, a "transformational myth" (256).

nature of Clare's passing, Butler writes, "It is the changeability itself, the dream of a metamorphosis, where that changeableness signifies a certain freedom, a class mobility afforded by whiteness that constitutes the power of that seduction" (420). Clare's ability to "play," to multiply herself and demand misrecognition by passing as white or "returning back," represents Clare's perpetual becoming-self and becoming-other, her resistance to a secure identity. However, these acts incite danger and envy in Irene because they force her to confront nonsovereignty and exist relationally.

Clare's passing "back" and "forth" as an act of confronting nonsovereignty endows her with a vitality that exceeds the subject-object relationship on which Irene depends for her security. I have deliberately referred to Barthes's concept of play because it finds an analogy in Jane Bennett's discussion of nonidentity,³⁹ which, in my paper, is synonymous with nonsovereignty (*Vibrant Matter* 13). According to Bennett, "play" describes the act of "detecting and accepting" nonidentity by acting as if one *knows* nonidentity, even though nonidentity is unknowable (15). Jennifer DeVere Brody distinguishes between "play passing" and "principled passing," in which Clare playfully passes and Irene only passes occasionally (400). To consider passing "playful," then, illuminates the way that passing engages the subject directly with nonsovereignty. Clare's acts of passing "back" and "forth" dramatize this play of nonsovereignty, and thus give her a vitality that exceeds Irene's attempts to classify her as object/other. While Irene engages in a *dream* of play, she herself never actually "plays" or pretends to know nonsovereignty. Thus, Irene must eradicate Clare to restore her security.

³⁹ Drawing upon Theodor Adorno, Bennett defines nonidentity as "that which is not subject to knowledge but is instead 'heterogeneous' to all concepts"; a "presence that acts upon us: we know we are haunted [...] by a painful, nagging feeling that something's being forgotten or left out"; "the inadequacy of representation" (*Vibrant Matter* 14).

“Death by Misadventure”: Vitality and Nonsovereignty in “Finale”

I have attempted to demonstrate how Larsen, through Clare, presents passing as a deliberate posturing of oneself as nonsovereign. For this reason, I read the ending of Larsen’s novel as a confrontation with nonsovereignty. “Finale,” the third section of the novel, concludes with Irene, Brian, and Clare attending a party at Felise and Dave Freeland’s Harlem penthouse. As Harrison-Kahan observes, the atmosphere of the Harlem party reverses the scene on the rooftop of the whites-only Drayton Hotel, contrasting a “white heaven” to a “‘free land’ for blacks” (134). Arriving at the party, John Bellew intrudes with the express purpose of confronting Clare’s blackness, which he has discovered relationally when he encounters Irene and Felise Freeland (the latter who does not “pass”) on the street, and realizes his wife has not only been attending Harlem parties, but is herself black. From this moment forward, the narrator obtusely recounts the events: Clare standing poised by a window, Bellew approaching Clare angrily, Irene grabbing Clare’s arm, and, finally, Clare falling to her death. Drawing upon Bennett’s concepts of vitality and deodands, I argue that considering the possibility of Clare’s death as accidental allows the text itself to be read as an encounter with nonsovereignty.

Among readings of potential endings of the novel, most scholars suggest that either Irene or John Bellew murders Clare.⁴⁰ A few, however, have ventured that Clare commits suicide.⁴¹ Claudia Tate, providing the fullest examination of potential endings,

⁴⁰ Michie concretely claims, “[...It] is not John Bellew who pushes Clare out of the window, but Irene” (150). See also: Pile 36, Toth 67-69, Washington 354-355, Brody 348, Rabin 137, Larson 87, and Landry 45.

⁴¹ Miriam Thaggert suggests that “the ambiguity of the ending allows for the possibility that Clare chose this dramatic way to make her exit” (“Racial Etiquette” 520). Additionally, according to Larson, “Hugh M. Gloster and others have suggested” that it is a suicide (*Invisible Darkness* 85). Tate considers this possibility, arguing, “[...] Clare surveys the fragments of her life, [...] leaving behind a painful situation

touches on the possibility that Clare's death was accidental ("Nella Larsen's *Passing*" 348). However, the most accepted readings now argue that the ambiguity of the ending is intentional, and that any reading that posits one outcome over the others as the "correct" ending misses the point.⁴² I agree with this last view because Larsen's deliberate open-endedness unsettles notions of closure, implicating no one character and all three: Irene, Clare, and John. But I'm interested in further examining the possibility that Clare dies accidentally, because it lends itself to a materialist reading that resists a teleological trajectory and the imposition of narrative, which I have been tracing throughout my thesis. Further, as Tate aptly points out, it is the "least satisfying ending" (348); and I'm interested examining why and how an ending is unsatisfying to both the reader and the characters.

While scholars have largely dismissed the possibility of an accidental death, the novel contains more suggestion of it through dialogue, narration, and narrative strategy than previously examined. For one, major moments of (mis)recognition in the novel occur coincidentally: the opening encounter on the Drayton rooftop and Bellew's recognition of Irene and Felise both occur by chance. Further, the legal discourse—in particular, witness testimony and official statements—that pervades the last section of the novel concludes Clare's death is an instance of "misadventure."⁴³ Indeed, as a witness,

which she cannot alter. [...]he is utterly alone, and suicide is the ultimate escape from the humiliation that awaits her" ("Nella Larsen's *Passing*" 349).

⁴² Sherrard-Johnson writes, "[...]the actual impetus of [Clare's] fall is absent. [...] To implicate the reader in the ambiguity of the ending, Larsen omits a description of Clare's exit, but the apparition haunts Irene and the reader" (47). Deborah McDowell reads the ending as "an act of narrative 'dis'-closure, undoing or doing the opposite of what [Larsen] has promised" (qtd. in Landry 44). See also: Toth 67-69.

⁴³ According to a 1906 copy of *The Justice's Manual and Police Guide*, "Death by misadventure arises where a man doing a lawful act, without any intention of hurt, unfortunately kills himself or another" (Stephen 116-117). A footnote in the Norton Critical Edition of *Passing* similarly defines "misadventure" as "an unfortunate event, something untoward or unlucky" (82).

Irene repeatedly returns to the possibility of accidental death, a point I will address shortly.

Clare's "dangerous" position—her physical stance at the window and her ontological precarity—and her vitality place her both within and outside of structural forces, urging the reader to consider Clare's place in a system in which structure and agency are mutually constitutive and at odds. The moment depicting Clare's death contains language that describes fragmentation, upending of structures, precarity, and vitality:

Clare stood at the window, composed as if everyone were not staring at her in curiosity and wonder, as if the *whole structure of her life* were not lying in *fragments* before her. She seemed unaware of any *danger* or uncaring. [...]

One moment Clare had been there, a *vital glowing thing* [...]. The next she was gone. (my emphases, Larsen, *Passing* 79)

Larsen's use of "vital [...] thing" presents Clare in excess of the social structures—the "whole structure of her life"—that mark her body as *either black or white*. In fact, Clare's vitality fragments the "structure" imposed on her. Regarding the "agency-versus-structure" debate, Bennett elucidates the way social theory has typically defined agency and structure:

[...A] structure can only act negatively, as a constraint on human agency, or passively, as an enabling background or context for it. Active action or agency belongs to humans alone [...]. Actors are 'socially constituted,' but

the 'constitutive' or productive power of structures derives from the human wills or intentions within them. (*Vibrant Matter* 29)

Yet Clare's own vitality and "thingness" complicate the notion that her body is "socially constituted." Indeed, through passing, Clare not only acts transgressively *within* the system, but *outside* of it; and this ability to act *outside* allows her to break the confining structure of her life. It also validates the idea that the social structure itself cannot cause Clare's death, but that something outside of it leads to a non-teleological, inconclusive ending.

With this in mind, I argue that the window lends itself to a reading of accidental death. Significantly, the original ending of the novel states the official cause of death as "death by misadventure," concluding on the word "window" (Larsen, *Passing* 89).⁴⁴ The window, then, becomes a witness to the crime and a witness to the text. As Bennett argues, objects can function as witnesses and become "*vital* to the verdict" (my emphasis, 9). In legal terms, she writes, they are called "deodands": "In cases of accidental death or injury to a human, the nonhuman actant [...is a] deodand (literally, 'that which must be given to God')" (*Vibrant Matter* 9). The deodand, then, stands as a placeholder for the unknown murderer or murder weapon; it marks negativity itself, just as "death by misadventure" fills in for an unidentifiable cause of death. Significantly, the deodand is, in this instance, a window. As a threshold, the window functions as a marker between the

⁴⁴ The conclusion of the original two printings of the novel reads, "Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: 'Death by misadventure, I'm inclined to believe. Let's go up and have another look at that window'" (82). See footnote 8, page 82, *Passing: A Norton Critical Edition*. According to the Norton Edition, this ending was omitted in Alfred A. Knopf's third printing and many subsequent reprints (82). The editor Carla Kaplan adds, "It is unknown whether these sentences were dropped in that printing at Larsen's request or simply as a printer's error" (82). Yet Sullivan, citing Mark Madigan, claims that Larsen instructed the final paragraph to be removed "to add ambiguity and suspense to the ending" (383).

outside and inside, but it signifies placelessness; it constitutes part of a structure, but provides an exit from it.

Accidental death, Larsen reveals, is both unbearable and the only bearable explanation to Irene precisely because it disrupts all notions of agency and security. Most scholars have ignored the emphasis that Irene places on the possibility of an accidental death, yet she repeatedly returns to it as the explanation. After Clare has fallen from the window, Irene briefly flips through the possibilities in her head:

What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not—

[...] And, indeed, both were true.

“It was an accident. A terrible accident,” she muttered fiercely. “It was.” (emphasis original, *Passing* 80)

The language in this passage shifts among *either/or* (“one or the other”), *neither/nor* (“Not—”), and *both/and* (“both were true”), itself creating ambiguity and performing the tension between exclusivity and inclusivity that characterizes the act of passing. For Irene, any conclusion other than accident or suicide is unthinkable. The “Not—” indicates a double negation: the word “not” is followed by the unnamable. Additionally, one of Irene’s last statements in the novel reads, “She fell, before anybody could stop her” (82). To admit, even to herself, that she or Bellew *could* have killed Clare would constitute an admission of guilt, because the verbalization of the possible enacts it.

As I briefly mention above, the novel, like Clare’s death, has two (or more) possible conclusions. The second ending of the novel omits the final paragraph, so that the novel concludes with Irene fainting: “Then everything was dark” (82). Indeed, as

Sullivan suggests, Larsen probably omitted the ending to heighten the ambiguity (383), since “death by misadventure” provides an explanation, however true or untrue it ultimately is. Given this information and the intentionally misleading descriptions that lead up to Clare’s fall, most scholars argue that the cause of her death is unclear. Yet, as I also mention, they tend to glide over (or altogether ignore) the “unsatisfying” possibility of accidental death. This suggests to me that *no* definite ending urges not only Irene, but the reader, to confront his or her own nonsovereignty.

In this way, Larsen constructs a novel that not only narrates the precarity of the black female body and the problems of aesthetically representing that body; she, more importantly, creates a text that forces the reader herself to encounter that same feeling of precarity—a simultaneous sense of fear and desire for misrecognition. In other words, her novel does not merely *depict* precarity; it *enacts* it. In so doing, Larsen dramatizes the experience of *becoming* “Madame X,” a “modern woman” who both inhabits the present moment and escapes it.

Conclusion

While I read biographical materials from Nella Larsen's life alongside her fiction, I do not aim to imply that her fiction gives clues to those gaps in her biography. In fact, Larsen uses gaps and silences in her fiction precisely to thematize the unknowable, uncategorizable, unnamable things that she herself witnessed and experienced. Rather, I aim to illustrate the way Larsen explores the connection between materiality and textuality, and the negativity existing between the two that characterizes Larsen's own identity as a woman "both black and white yet neither." Through her short stories and novels, Larsen experiments with narrative strategies, aesthetics, and motifs that do not seek to fully represent her experiences, but, instead, seek to thematize misrecognition and nonsovereignty. Furthermore, Larsen's explorations of materiality and tensions between biography and fiction indicate the way she formulates desire and identity as modes of becoming. Not only do her protagonists evolve throughout their narratives, but Larsen's writing style and her texts themselves continue to take on new meanings.

Despite the fact that Larsen never comfortably fit into the Harlem Renaissance and eventually disappeared from the scene, she continues to be branded a writer of the Harlem Renaissance for her use and subversion of the tropes of passing and the tragic mulatta narrative. At the same time, she problematizes these discourses not only to represent authentic African-American identity, but to question altogether what constitutes "authenticity" and what mechanisms identify a certain body as black, white, both, and/or neither. Indeed, Larsen was *both* a writer of the Harlem Renaissance *and* not. With this observation in mind, I argue that she manages to balance particular experience and

universal experience, offering ways of negotiating what constitutes her present moment, as well as what constitutes our own.

If materialist theory investigates humans' relationships to the material world, affect theory explores how we individually and collectively negotiate that place. In this sense, I would describe Larsen's texts as materialist and affective because she develops a poetics of becoming. In fact, I describe her fiction as "becoming" rather than "being" because she does not posit fixed, knowable endings for her characters or readers.

Through the interplay of materiality and narrative, Larsen's stories and novels theorize new ways of thinking about identity politics. Thus, not only do materialist and affect theories illuminate Larsen's treatment of identity politics in her work; equally, her work allows readers to develop a language for examining materiality and affect in the present-day.

For this reason, I have used lenses of twenty-first century affect and materialist theories to suggest that Larsen's treatments of freedom, crisis, and precarity are incredibly relevant to the present moment. While scholars such as Jane Bennett, Elizabeth Grosz, and Lauren Berlant approach identity politics through very different modes of analysis, they explore the crisis and precarity that characterize political and aesthetic discussions of identity: whether through avenues of narrative (Berlant), of discourses on freedom (Grosz), or of humans' relationships to their environments (Bennett). Reading Larsen's early twentieth-century exploration of these themes in the twenty-first century illuminates the way Larsen was already negotiating these very discourses of defining self and other. Her fiction interrogates the tension between individual and collective freedom, as well as the concept of freedom itself as discursive. Similarly, she investigates

individuals' relationships to their material—both artificial and natural—environments, observing the ways humans shape and are shaped by our encounters with the world of things and commodities. Finally, she works through various methods for aestheticizing crisis, precarity, desire, and the present moment. For this reason, Larsen's work is still very much "vital" in all senses of the term.

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Washington, Mary Helen. "Nella Larsen: Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance." *Passing: A Norton Critical Edition*. Ed. Carla Kaplan. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2007. 350-356. Print.

Curriculum Vitae

Education

Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC

MA in English, May 2015

Graduate Assistantship

Justus and Elizabeth C. Drake M.A. Student Award for Excellence in English

University of North Texas, Denton, TX

B. A. Honors in English, August 2012

Concentration in Literature, Minors in French and History

Summa Cum Laude & Distinguished Honors Scholar

Professional Experience

Graduate Assistant, August 2013 – Present

Wake Forest University Writing Center, Winston-Salem, NC

Legal Assistant, 2011 – 2013

Freeman Mills PC, Dallas, TX

Student Assistant, 2009 – 2011

Willis Library, University of North Texas, Denton, TX

Published Work

“Shutters Shut and Open: Gertrude Stein and Photography”

The Eagle Feather Issue 9, 2012, University of North Texas

Presentations

“Turning Borders into Bridges,” November 2014

“The Future is Now: Exploring 21st Century Teaching Ideas with the Next Generation of English Teachers,” 2014 NCTE Annual Convention, Washington DC

“Feminist Approaches to Sustainable Fashion,” March 2014

Sustaining Feminisms Symposium, Wake Forest University, Winston-Salem, NC