

“Black Was White”: Urbanity, Passing and the Spectacle of Harlem

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Gillis set down his tan cardboard extension case and wiped his black, shining brow. Then slowly, spreadingly, he grinned at what he saw: Negroes at every turn; up and down Lenox Avenue, up and down 135th Street; big lanky Negroes, short, squat Negroes; black ones, brown ones, yellow ones; men standing idle on the curb, women, bundle-laden, trudging reluctantly homeward, children rattling about the sidewalks; here and there a white face drifting along, but Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere. There was assuredly no doubt of his whereabouts. This was Negro Harlem.¹

This is the first sighting of Harlem for King Solomon Gillis, the protagonist of Rudolph Fisher's story “City of Refuge,” published in 1925 in *Atlantic Monthly*. Gillis has fled the South after killing a white man, and comes to Harlem, “with the aid of a prayer and an automobile” (3) to escape being lynched. His arrival sees him propelled into a carnivorous city of disorienting sounds, speed and subways until, like “Jonah emerging from the whale” (3), he is burped up into a sunny, calm and all-black Harlem. The spectacle of a public space peopled by “Negroes predominantly, overwhelmingly everywhere,” seems to hold a utopian promise: “In Harlem, black was white. You had rights that could not be denied you; you had privileges, protected by law. And you had money. Everybody had money... The land of plenty was more than that now; it was also the city of refuge” (4). However, this vision of plenty and security ultimately proves chimerical for the naïve Southerner who fails

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¹ Rudolph Fisher, *City of Refuge: The Collected Stories of Rudolph Fisher*, ed. John McCluskey Jr, (Columbia, London: University of Missouri Press, 1987), 3. All further references will be to this edition and cited in text.

to see beyond the surface effects of the urban scene. For Fisher, the turned around, “black is white” world of Harlem involves complex issues of racial agency and identification which are central to the narrative of modernity associated with the experience of migration to the North.² In his work – and in that of Bruce Nugent and Nella Larsen, which also form the basis of this article – we find a recurrent focus on the urban scene of Harlem as a space of spectacular and spectacularised desire, and an understanding of racial identity as contingent and performative within this space.

The writings of Fisher, Nugent and Larsen raise important questions about the centrality of urban experience in Harlem Renaissance literature – questions that have rarely been addressed in critical studies of the period. They draw attention to the relationship between African-American writing and critical conceptions of modernity and of that problematically related term, modernism. I am not interested in demonstrating an African-American modernism in the writers and writing I examine. I do want to suggest that the Harlem writing privileged in this article demands consideration in terms which we might *loosely* categorise as modernist: that is, defined through its fascination with the shaping effect of the urban on the formation of subjectivity – a subjectivity often presented as fragmented by this urban milieu, by an understanding of the visual impact of Harlem, and through attention to the imbrication of race and sexuality in the formation of subjectivity. Finally, exploration of the relationship between the urban and African-American writing, and between race (both whiteness and blackness), gender, sexuality and class raises uncomfortable questions about current theoretical models of what has become known as “intersectionality”.³ We need to think anew about the implications of critical (and modernist) fetishization of the fragmented, the contingent or the performative self. By focusing on representations of light-skinned or

² Paul Gilroy has argued that African Americans must be seen as insiders to an essentially Enlightenment narrative of modernization and progress. See Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London, New York: Verso, 1993), chapters 2 and 6.

³ First theorized within legal studies and drawn on extensively by feminist and African-American critics. See Kimberle Crenshaw, “Demarginalising the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics,” *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (1989), 139–67; Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 169–85; Valerie Smith, “Reading the Intersection of Race and Gender in Narratives of Passing,” *Diacritics* 24:2 (Summer, 1994), 43–57. I take issue with some of this work, particularly in terms of how this spatial metaphor is mobilized to explain competing identity claims.

passing women in the novels of Nella Larsen, we shall see that these “impossible” subjects lead us to consider the conservative as well as the radical meanings of the shifting or mutable racial self.

A SPECTACLE IN COLOUR

Understanding of Harlem as spectacle in Renaissance writings has undoubtedly been delimited by the influence of studies such as Nathan Huggins’s *The Harlem Renaissance* (1971) and David Levering Lewis’s *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (1981) which contend that Harlem was at least as much a construction of the white imagination as it was the site of black cultural expression or freedom.⁴ The “Harlem” presented in these texts, which have in many ways defined what we understand the Harlem Renaissance to be, is shaped by a nationalistic conception of an (essentialized) black subject characteristic of the early seventies Black Arts movement. The legacy of the Black Arts aesthetic has had profound ramifications for what defines the Harlem Renaissance and for what constitutes “authenticity” in black cultural production and African-American canon-building.⁵ However, if we move away from this exclusively racial criteria for assessing the period, the picture looks quite different and perhaps the experiences offered in Harlem’s legendary exotic spaces should not wholly be dismissed.⁶ Harlem was not by any means a

⁴ This view has been very common as a judgement of the ultimate failure of the Harlem Renaissance. See Jervis Anderson, *This Was Harlem* (New York: Farrar, Straw & Giroux, 1982); Nathan Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (New York, London: Oxford University Press, 1971); Bruce Kellner, “‘Refined Racism’: White Patronage in the Harlem Renaissance,” in Victor A. Kramer, ed., *The Harlem Renaissance Re-examined* (New York: AMS Press), 93–106; David Levering Lewis, *When Harlem Was In Vogue* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). This critical position has been questioned of late, see George Hutchinson, *Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (Cambridge, Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 1995) and Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995).

⁵ The literature on black “authenticity” and the black vernacular is extensive. For key interventions see: Houston A. Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology and Afro-American Culture* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980); Paul Gilroy, *Small Acts* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1993); Stuart Hall and Paul Du Gay, *Questions of Cultural Identity* (London, Thousand Oaks: Sage, 1996); bell hooks, *Yearning: Gender and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround Press, 1991); Kobena Mercer, *Welcome to the Jungle* (New York, London: Routledge, 1994).

⁶ The work of Lillian Faderman and Eric Garber points out the importance of gay subculture within Harlem in the 1920s. Lillian Faderman, *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992); Eric Garber, “‘A Spectacle in Color’: The Lesbian and Gay Subculture of Jazz Age Harlem,” in Martin Baum Duberman et al., eds., *Hidden From History* (New York: New American Library, 1989).

free expressive space, but interesting commentaries on agency and identity do emerge out of the conscious treatment of the urban scene as visual spectacle.

This can be seen very clearly if we take as an example Rudolph Fisher's 1928 novel *The Walls of Jericho*.⁷ A popular success, though one which has received very little subsequent attention, Fisher's novel is a satirical account of the racial and class composition of Harlem, "from the rattiest rat to the dicktiest dickty" (37) which parallels the story of a "passing" light lawyer's move from Striver's Row to an exclusively white neighbourhood, with the story of Shine, a down-to-earth, dark-skinned furniture removal man, and his romance with the beautiful brown "Sheba," Linda. This slight story provides occasion for numerous set-pieces of racial display played out across a clearly hierarchized and internally divided community, and, in the longest section of the novel, Fisher presents a grand ball which works critically to spectacularize racial identity. This runs across five chapters, but I shall quote just a section here:

There is at least one occasion a year when Manhattan Casino requires no decoration – the occasion of the General Improvement Associations Annual Costume Ball. The guests themselves are all the decoration that is necessary. This is not only because many of the guests attend in costume, but also because, of all the crowds which Manhattan Casino holds during the year, none presents a greater inherent variety. There is variety of personal station from the rattiest rat to the dicktiest dickty... The bars are down. This is for the Race. One great common fellowship in one great common cause... So swept the scene from black to white through all the shadows and shades. Ordinary Negroes and rats below, dickties and fays above, the floor beneath the feet of one constituting the roof over the heads of the other. (37–39)

The scenes documented across these central chapters in the novel lampoon white racist understandings of blackness. The text identifies three types of "fays" (39): those who come to enjoy themselves, and just get on with it; the "professional uplifters," (39) determined to be broad minded; and the newcomers, drawn by Harlem's legendary license, hence giggling and ogling with barely concealed racism. More significantly, as we can see from the section above, the spectacular scene presents race as something which is crucially mediated by class and gender location, and as something which is understood by the narrator to require the performance of racial identity as well as understanding of class and gender

⁷ Rudolph Fisher, *Walls of Jericho* (1928; rept. London: X-Press, 1995). All references will be to this edition and incorporated in the text.

location within an inter- and intra-racial hierarchy. So, what is fascinating is the heterogeneity of Harlem, but also the understanding of this heterogeneity as spectacle and performance: “The guests themselves are all the decoration that is necessary” (37).

Most importantly, these scenes demonstrate an acute awareness of the spectrum of reactions to this scene on the part of black and white spectators, which runs from nonchalance to unease. These reactions to “Harlem,” at one level documenting class-bound snobbery and the appropriate presence of “fays” who construct the scene as exotic and erotic spectacle, are simultaneously a part of the performance of a great Harlem event. The text also notes the shifting markers of blackness used by each “type” of white participant, from the epithet “Negro” used by the dedicated dancers, to the uplifters’ use of “darker brother,” to “nigger” used by the ogling newcomers. This registers an internal diversity (and implicit racializing) of whiteness which matches the spectrum of colours of blackness the novel insists upon, divisions which speak of class, gender and political arrangements as they also mark the context-dependent meanings of race – whiteness as well as blackness. This complex reaction to Harlem as a commodified and spectacular site of desire for both black and white spectators/performers (because the text insists upon the simultaneity of these apparently opposed identities) facilitates the text’s *ironic* assessment of the scene.

This fascination with, and indeed exploitation of, the spectacle of Harlem finds its most outrageous expression in the short story “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” by Bruce Nugent, whose work also exhibits an obsessive fascination with looking relations, decadence and the city scene. Nugent’s piece was published in 1926 to considerable uproar in *Fire!!*⁸ This magazine represents the most deliberate attempt during the Harlem Renaissance to foster an African-American modernism. It drew together a number of the younger Harlem artists and was a self-conscious attempt to break with the orthodoxes of race writing in the period, in thematic and stylistic terms. Wallace Thurman clearly saw it as aesthetic position-taking, stating, “*Fire!!* would burn up a whole lot of old, dead, conventional Negro–white ideas of the past, *épater le bourgeois* into a realisation of younger Negro writers and artists.”⁹ The magazine featured

⁸ “Smoke, Lilies and Jade,” *Fire!! A Quarterly Devoted To the Younger Negro Artist* 1:1 (November 1926) rept. in Nathan Huggins, *Voices From the Harlem Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 99–110. References will be to the reprint and will be incorporated in the text.

⁹ Quoted in Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1940), 235–36.

an aesthetic credo which began, “FIRE...weaving vivid, hot designs upon an ebon-bordered loom and satisfying pagan thirst for beauty unadorned” and the front cover was a stark geometric representation of a Sphinx in blocks of red and black by Aaron Douglass, emphasizing that this challenge to accepted models of African-American writing was conceived of as a stylistic break as much as a change in subject-matter. It also echoed key modernist motifs of primitivism and exoticism, reconceptualized from an African-American perspective.¹⁰

The magazine’s combination of art, poetry, polemic and distinctly salacious fiction certainly provoked reaction from the African-American intelligentsia, though not generally a favourable one and it was Nugent’s story which caused the most universal offence. “Smoke” is written in free indirect discourse and eschews conventional punctuation, joining fragmented observations through sets of ellipses. There is little narrative progression; the text working instead through the repetition of key phrases, colours, and feeling, forcing a synathetic attention to the words; the result is a kind of empty artificiality conveying a decadent and delirious city scene. The story’s fragmented meanderings are, it becomes clear, the disconnected musing of the superbly camp Alex, as he pursues a night-time existence and sexual relationships with a white man called Beauty and a black woman called Melva. Alex’s bisexual and interracial relationships are made possible by an attitude to the city that insists on the pleasures of this urban environment.

If Alex rarely gets off his couch, where he puffs contentedly on a cigarette held in a red and green jade inlaid cigarette holder, when he does it is to move through the anonymous modernist city space of the *flâneur*. Moving from one briefly articulated bohemian scene to another he encounters the various array of Harlem’s literati, all presented as endlessly substitutable names which flicker across Alex’s consciousness; an errant progress which leads him to a chance street encounter with a stranger, whom he christens Beauty:

the echo of their steps mingled...they walked in silence...the castanets of their heels clicking accompaniment...the stranger inhaled deeply and with a nod of content and a smile...blew a cloud of smoke...Alex felt like singing...the stranger knew the magic of blue smoke also...they continued in silence...the

¹⁰ The recent exhibition at the Hayward Gallery, London, *Rhapsodies in Black*, clearly reveals the extent to which Harlem artists both drew on modernist motifs and critically interrogated them. See David A. Bailey’s introduction to the exhibition book and the essays “Re/Birth of a Nation” by Richard J. Powell, and “Harlem on our Minds” by Henry Louis Gates Jr., *Rhapsodies in Black: Art of the Harlem Renaissance* (London: Hayward Gallery, 1997), 10–13, 14–33, 160–67.

castanets of their heels clicking rhythmically ... Alex turned in his doorway ... up the stairs and the stranger waited for him to light the room...no need for words...they had always known each other...as they undressed by the blue dawn...Alex knew he had never seen a more perfect being...his body all symmetry and music...and Alex called him Beauty (105)

The delight the text exhibits in Alex’s idleness and the frank celebration of interracial homo- and bi-sexuality was a step too far for many contemporary commentators. Dean Graves, of the *Baltimore Afro-American*, in an article headlined, “Writer Brands Fire!! As Effeminate Tommyrot” documents his pleasure at tossing the first edition of the magazine into the fire!

Nugent’s piece depends most crucially on the elaboration of desire as the exchange of looks between characters in a city space which is both commodified and aestheticized; being and looking urbane is Alex’s primary goal. In its obsessive cultivation of the rare, the beautiful and the artificial, and its understanding of identity as nothing more than the chance encounter or the surface apprehension of difference, Nugent’s story is exceptional within Harlem Renaissance writing. Indeed, we might say thankfully so, in that Alex’s exceptionalism seems to offer little except a rampant snobbery, and intellectual one-upmanship. However, I am unwilling to let the story go that easily. Perhaps the fact it was so vilified at the time (and since) is what appeals to me, and perhaps we should not dismiss too quickly one of the only explicit representations of homosexuality generated within Harlem Renaissance culture (despite the number of central figures who were gay).¹¹ But, more than this, the spectacular urban playground, which is so fundamental to Nugent’s story, is something which is refracted (as we saw with Fisher) through a range of writings and writers in variously provocative ways. Most persistently, as in the two examples so far, this concentration on the urban fabric of Harlem is a focus on a scene of desire, which undermines the fixity of racial subjectivity. In the final two sections of this article, I turn to Nella Larsen’s novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929),¹² which exhibit a similar self-consciousness about the commodified urban scene which forms their context. This moves toward an appreciation of the racial (or indeed gendered) self as performative, most explosively and problematically through exploration of the figure of the passing woman.

¹¹ Isaac Julien’s 1989 film *Looking For Langston* still remains the most comprehensive, if elliptical, examination of the sexuality of major Harlem Renaissance figures. It is fitting that Nugent’s text is taken as inspiration for a sexual fantasy within the film.

¹² Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* and *Passing* (1928; 1929; rept. London: Serpent’s Tail, 1989). All references will be to this edition and incorporated in text.

“AN OBSERVER WOULD HAVE THOUGHT”... SPECTACLE,
RACE, GENDER

Quicksand is concerned with the rise and ultimate demise of Helga Crane, a light-skinned woman of Danish and African-American parentage. The story is ostensibly one of the mixed-race woman's inability to discover any viable sense of racial community, but Helga has perhaps as much in common with the alienation of the itinerant artist or outcast figure of classic modernism. Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, is the story of two light-skinned women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Clare, a childhood friend of Irene, has passed into white society, only to be prompted to return to her race after accidentally meeting Irene in a hotel in Chicago; a return which proves to have disastrous consequences. Irene (who narrates much of the novel) becomes increasingly obsessed by Clare. This fascination is displaced on to a plot of heterosexual jealousy, and discussion of the dangers of passing – both of which are unconvincing narrative ploys. The highly ambiguous ending where Clare fatally tumbles out of an open window does not resolve these conflicting narrative trajectories, but what it does do is suggest that Irene (for whatever reason) is dangerously implicated in Clare's mysterious death. Both of Larsen's texts focus on that class of people Du Bois famously called the “talented tenth,” and this, combined with their persistent attention to women who pass out of the race, has ensured that they have been consigned to the rearguard of the Harlem movement, not quite qualifying as “race writing.” Her work has in recent years enjoyed something of a renaissance as black and white feminists have explored the peculiar sexual politics of Larsen's work.¹³ But how one reconciles her radical analysis of sexual identity with a racial politics often reactionary in the extreme has remained a puzzle; one I shall attempt to tease out here.

Larsen's texts show a self-consciousness about the spectacle of the urban and the negotiations that are possible within this scene. *Quicksand* and *Passing* are structured around a series of overdetermined moments of racial and sexual spectacle. The looks exchanged between characters and

¹³ Of the many recent articles on Larsen, see particularly, Judith Butler, “Passing, Queering: Nella Larsen's Psychoanalytic Challenge,” in *Bodies That Matter* (New York, London: Routledge, 1993), 167–86; Ann DuCille, “Blues Notes on Black Sexuality,” in John C. Fout and Maura Shaw Tantillo, eds., *American Sexual Politics* (Chicago, London: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 193–219; Mary Esteve, “Nella Larsen's ‘Moving Mosaic’: Harlem, Crowds, and Anonymity,” *American Literary History* 9:2 (Summer 1997), 268–86; Claudia Tate, “Death and Desire in *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen,” *American Literary History*, 7:2 (Summer 1995), 234–60.

between the woman and her own image carry the burden of complex constructions and disarticulations of racial, sexual and gender identifications. Larsen’s texts make crucial points about the “intersectionality” of race, gender, sexuality and class. First, that this intersection will always be a point of the pulling away, not the confluence of different identity formations; that this will be the site of danger, of incompatible demands, of conservative as well as radical impulses, indeed even of violence. Further, this site is seen as one where the subject may substitute one form of understanding of the self with another, in a manner which suggests the “intersection” as a model which obscures, or covers over difference, as a series of disjunctive moments, rather than (as it is often described) being the site where incompatible forms of difference, different registers or demands, are seen simultaneously as a kind of heightened awareness of the subject’s complex location within ideological formations.

This disjunctive understanding of subjectivity is peculiarly enabled by the texts’ focus on and awareness of an urban scene of commodified social relations. This can be seen if we look at *Quicksand*, which gives us a central character, Helga Crane, as self-consciously decadent as Nugent’s outrageous Alex. *Quicksand* shows Helga as a subject who presents and experiences herself primarily as visual spectacle. In doing this, Larsen goes beyond tracing the persistent attempts on the part of the dominant white culture to objectify African-American women as the object of exotic and erotic attention, towards speculation about the (limited) freedoms these narratives might offer through their focus on black female sexuality. Larsen exhibits a critical investment in these structures of objectification that is inextricably linked to her critique of them. *Quicksand* is a complex study of the difference in political terms between *being* a particular kind of subject and *looking* like one. Racial, sexual and class identities are constructed as visual pictures which can be substituted for one another and which do not necessarily fix, or essentialize, Helga.

The construction of this kind of visual economy and the consequences this has for grasping the meanings of race in Larsen’s work can be charted quite precisely at the very beginning of the novel. *Quicksand* opens with Helga sitting in her bedroom in the “soft gloom” of evening. This scene, narrated in the third person, is described in detail:

Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom. Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-

colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. (1)

The bedroom is, from the first, represented as an exotic space, one that has been furnished by Helga's "rare and intensely personal taste" (1). Colours, objects and arrangements are of the utmost importance, both to the construction of Helga as a beautiful object amongst a panoply of beautiful things, and for the construction of the narrative style itself, which builds up by the layering or progressive addition of rare and precious items. This is a domestic interior where the icons of western culture jostle with the icons of orientalism. It also functions as a bohemian space, where the collectable signs of oriental exoticism are carefully arranged to define the western subject as decadent, artistic and modern: this space seems paradigmatically white.

This description, then, could be taken to suggest that Helga is defined by her position in commodity culture, and signifies a fairly elitist class positioning which allows her to disavow her blackness. However, the next paragraph complicates the scene in a way that suggests a self-conscious manipulation of the objectification that appears to be taking place. In this paragraph, the object of aesthetic attention is Helga herself. She becomes an object in this room that is fitted to, but also by, her need(s):

An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade. A slight girl of twenty-two years, with sloping shoulders and delicate but well turned arms and legs, she had, nonetheless, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold *négligé* and glistening brocaded mules, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was – to use a hackneyed word – attractive. (2)

The opening phrase, "An observer would have thought," significantly alters interpretation of the description which directly follows it. It suggests that the voyeuristic perspective provided by the third-person narrator, which one would expect in conventional narrative objectification of the female form, is here insufficient. Larsen builds a further and excessive level of mediation into this structure of looking. It is "an observer," not the narrator or the reader, but someone else, someone who is defined by their special interest in looking, who "would have thought" about Helga and her environment in this apparently objectified manner. The description of Helga as object is presented as a scene where the act of looking itself is foregrounded. What seems to be at first a conventional delineation of the woman as aesthetic object is destabilized by the overdetermined presence of the mediating gaze of this imagined external observer.

There is a beautifully ironic acknowledgement of this structural doubling in the middle of the second paragraph. The narrator, not the observer, provides the comment that Helga is “to use a hackneyed word – attractive.” The irony lies, of course, in the fact that the whole description is hackneyed in the extreme; in fact, the designation “attractive” is the least hackneyed aspect of it. But this displaced acknowledgement propels attention back to the act of looking. It confirms the fact that Helga is actively constructing this scene for a particular kind of gaze she knows only too well. Helga manages to circumvent her objectification, at least temporarily, because the narrator colludes with her in identifying very explicitly the gaze that would perform this objectification and positing a position beyond it. Neither Helga nor the narrator are wholly encapsulated within this economy of objectification. Some part of each of them is elsewhere, observing, critiquing and parodying this schema of looking. What this commitment to a visual economy of looking and performance facilitates becomes apparent as the novel progresses. Whenever Helga is compelled into any singular identification, when she finds herself straying into a place of authenticity, she evades the attempt to contain her by asserting herself as spectacle, and by moving decisively from one performance of identity to another. I want to describe this as a “passing” structure whereby the narrative style is marked by an indeterminacy at least as significant as the racial indeterminacy of the central figures of Larsen’s novels.

This assertion of the self as spectacle, and the accompanying resistance to any definition of the self as authentic is developed as the text progresses. A particularly interesting example can be seen in chapter 11 that takes place in a Harlem nightclub. One night, after a dinner party, Helga reluctantly follows her friends to the nightclub. She knows, and is disgusted by, the kind of spectacle she is supposed to form a part of:

the reek of flesh, smoke, alcohol, oblivious of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She [Helga] was drugged, lifted, sustained by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened herself in her determination to get away. She wasn’t she told herself, a jungle creature. (59)

Whilst she dances, Helga experiences herself as participating in an authentic sense of racial belonging, which is described as narcotic and ecstatic, a kind of primitivist regression. It is an intense bodily experience

in which Helga has lost control of the economy of spectatorship that she was negotiating at the beginning of the novel. She is “oblivious” to everything except her own sensuous enjoyment. The experience of dancing is hyperbolized in such a way as to suggest this is a primitivist fantasy of authentic blackness – note, for example, the use of key primitivist terms, “childishness,” “jungle,” “wild,” “murky.” Helga’s “authentic” moment is it seems, curiously close to someone else’s fantasy of blackness.

Eventually, Helga refuses the seductions of a dangerously “real” racial understanding of herself, preferring instead in the second half of the scene a strongly sexual identification with a passing woman, Audrey Denney, whom she sees dancing in the nightclub with Robert Anderson, her former principal and object of some apparent desire on Helga’s part. Again, we see a kind of passing structure to the narrative and the conventions of normative sexual as well as racial identifications are thrown into crisis. As Helga watches Audrey dancing with Anderson, the “disinterested curiosity” and “envious admiration” (62) she had felt as she reflected on Audrey’s trick of passing during the evening are “augmented by another more primitive emotion” (91). The ostensible meaning is that she feels jealous of Audrey’s relationship with Anderson, but meaning slides as the content of her desiring gaze raises the ghost of what psychoanalysis during and after the twenties saw as the primitive, archaic sexual desire of women for each other.

What is important here is that the envy associated with passing, the desire to refuse racial belonging and the adoption of a decidedly conservative attitude to racial matters, is inextricably linked with the possibility of making a sexual identification that is both transgressive and radical. This possibility, seen through examination of these moments of commodified urban desire, explores the way in which every performative negotiation is at least partly an attempt to solve problems located at another level of identification.

PASSING ENCOUNTERS, CITY SCENES

The significance of desire and urban spectacle, and the peculiar indeterminacy of the visual field in these African-American city stories can be seen even more clearly in Larsen’s second text, *Passing*. Visual indeterminacy is, of course, the provenance of the “passing” subject. As Mary Ann Doane suggests (as part of a reading of the “passing” film

Imitation of Life), “the mulatta, whose looks and ontology do not coincide...always signifies a potential confusion of racial categories and the epistemological impotency of vision.”¹⁴ We can see this in the first scene we meet Clare Kendry, the passing woman, as Irene recalls unwillingly the meeting that sets the novel’s tragic course of events in motion. After losing contact for many years when Clare opts to pass for white, Irene bumps into her accidentally in the rooftop café of the Drayton hotel. The scene initiates a necessary doubleness of looking relations that persists through the novel, and it is this that allows the elaboration of desire (between women). The scene begins, “This is what Irene Redfield remembered” (146). Irene’s memories are presented as a series of visual tableaux, and she figures as observer and observed in the scene; we are presented with a female voyeur, watching the city and the people in it. Irene has been shopping on a blisteringly hot summer’s day and, after almost fainting on the street, she is rescued by a “Samaritan” (147) of a taxi driver. He reads Irene – wealthy, laden with bags, in a glamorous shopping street, hailing a cab – as white and immediately takes her to the Drayton where there is a cool rooftop café. So, Irene’s presence in the Drayton is dependent on a prior recognition as white, and her tacit acceptance of that position. The deceptions of vision, and the disjunction between appearance and identity, are foregrounded. The possibility of this misrecognition depends on the urban scene that Irene moves through and carefully recreates as she remembers. There is a stylistic fascination with the visual spectacle of the city; buildings, car tracks, automobiles, shop windows. Later in the passage Irene adopts a camera’s-eye view surveying the panorama of the city from the roof of the hotel. She gazes down “at the specks of the cars and people creeping about in streets, thinking how silly they look” (148) and her view seems to penetrate further than the eye can see, reaching the “undetected” (148) horizon. Irene’s adoption (temporarily) of a white subject position seems to produce a celebration of the city laid out before her and an ability to see but not be seen; a structure which obviously echoes her passing status. The pose Irene adopts once she is in the café recalls again the decadent protagonist of Nugent’s story:

The tea, when it came, was all that she had desired and expected. In fact, so much was it what she had desired and expected that after the first deep cooling drink she was able to forget it, only now and then sipping, a little absently, from the tall green glass, while she surveyed the room about her. (147)

¹⁴ Mary Ann Doane, *Femme Fatales: Feminism, Film Theory, Psychoanalysis* (New York, London: Routledge, 1991), 234.

The role of the urban dilettante is here appropriated, as in Nugent, to suggest an adoption of decadence that seems at once inappropriate but also the condition for the elaboration of desire and a suggestion of the instability of identity.

If Irene's experience of café society is pleasurable, her encounter with Clare suggests the traumas of misrecognition. They encounter each other through the exchange of intensely prolonged glances. Irene has been staring at Clare, she looks again only to find Clare staring back and Irene begins to blush. It's the classic visual cliché, "eyes meet across the room":

Very slowly she looked around, and into the dark eyes of the woman in the green frock at the next table. But, she evidently failed to see that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare. Her demeanour was that of one who with the utmost singleness of mind and purpose was determined to impress firmly and accurately each of Irene's features on her memory for all time, nor showed the slightest trace of disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny. (149)

So, the observer becomes the observed, and it is difficult to decide whether Clare's stare is threatening or inviting. This confusion is felt by Irene as a threat, and yet is immediately dismissed as such:

Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro? Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, fingernails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth and equally silly rot.¹⁵ (150)

Absurd indeed, since Irene has failed to detect that the person looking at her is also a passing Negro. Identity is not a matter of ontological distinction, what you can see, but is a much more muddy epistemological question of what one knows, or thinks one knows. There is no truth hidden behind Clare's "strange, languorous eyes," (150) instead a defamiliarization of vision and identity. In this scene this is activated by troping on the visual clichés of (white) heterosexual romance, which is racialized and sexualized differently through the indeterminacy of the visual field.

The utilization of visual clichés we see in this scene might well be a useful way to read the problematic ending of the novel. Critical opinion has been substantially divided on this point. Even in positive accounts of

¹⁵ See Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations in Interracial Literature* (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 142–62, 246–84, for detailed analyses of these "absurd" racial beliefs and their employment in passing narratives.

the novel, the ending is regarded as a failure. Larsen, it is suggested, could not find a satisfactory means of concluding the story so she disposes of the troublesome Clare out of the window. This is read as a disappointing turning away from the issues of race and sexuality that are raised throughout the novel. If, on the other hand, we see the final scene as a logical development of the problematics of difference in the visual field, and the distinction between knowing and seeing difference, then the ending may make more sense.

The novel ends when Clare is discovered by her racist husband, John Bellew, at a party with the Redfields. Bellew, who has persistently denied Clare’s racial heritage (whilst perversely reiterating it by calling her “Nig”) reads her as black because of her context. This revelation is denied, however, by Irene’s visual perception of the scene that paradoxically encodes Clare as white most strongly at precisely the moment she is exposed as black. The trauma of this contradiction seems to incapacitate Irene as narrator and results in the brutal erasure of Clare from the narrative; an angst-ridden expulsion of the threat this ambivalence embodies:

What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly.

One moment Clare had been there, a vital, glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone. (239)

Clare is there, a glowing, flaunting image, which codes her as white in contradiction to the howl of her husband: in a flash she is gone. The narrative cuts to “the rush of feet down long flights of stairs” (239) then back to Irene who is left alone and frozen to the spot in the room. There is a strong sense that what has been erased is the threatening nature of Clare’s image. As this is Irene’s construction of Clare, this affirms her complicity with Clare’s death as it secures the priority of the visual field:

Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. The beauty that had torn at Irene’s placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. (239)

This allows, finally, appreciation of the complexity and motivation for the obsession with looking, how to look, and visual spectacle in the novel. It is the means by which the text negotiates the terrain of racial, sexual and gender identity. Like all the texts examined in this article, *Passing* is an articulation of the conflictual nature of identity and desire presented as a meditation on the power of the image. It explores the impossibility of

reading identity, and the conflict between what a subject knows itself and others to be, and what it, and others, appear to be. These texts represent a testing of the limits of racial and sexual identities, the instability of these categories and the pleasures and dangers of this instability within the urban scene.