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## A Transnational Novel in Disguise: The Influence of Brazil in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

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Grant Michael Andersen

A Transnational Novel in Disguise

Professor Chiles

25 April 2014

**A Transnational Novel in Disguise: The Influence of Brazil in Nella Larsen's *Passing***

While Nella Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, had long been the more widely read of her two novels, in part because of its examination of race from a transnational perspective, in recent years critics have grown increasingly interested in Larsen's second novel, *Passing*, for its commentary on race, class, and sexuality all intertwined in the psychologically complex narrative style Larsen deploys. However, despite the increased attention *Passing* has received there has been little consideration of the transnational dimension of Larsen's second novel. As I intend to demonstrate in this thesis, by focusing on Brian Redfield's desire to relocate to Brazil, we must consider *Passing* as an importantly transnational novel and not just a novel solely focused on Chicago and Harlem. The influence of Brazil on both Brian and Irene Redfield serves to comment on, and critique, the interrelated construction of race and class in the U.S. nation-state. Thus, as I show, we must consider *Passing* alongside other more famous, explicitly transnational novels of the Harlem Renaissance such as Larsen's own *Quicksand*. *Passing* is a novel not only concerned with the specific locale of Harlem but also with the black diaspora that is found in so many corners of the globe.

The narrative style of *Passing*, while opening many doors into the psyche of the focal character, Irene Redfield, proves particularly challenging when approaching the novel from a critical perspective. Some critics have understandably labeled Irene an "unreliable narrator" but Larsen actually utilizes a third-person omniscient narrator that focalizes narration through Irene's

consciousness. Clarifying Larsen's narrative style is important because it impinges on my reading of the novel: Irene is not a narrator who actively withholds information from, or is dishonest with, the reader; rather Irene is often not completely self-aware and honest with herself.

Even though the novel explicitly focuses so much on race, the complexities of the novel have caused many critics to steer away from race as the central concern of the novel. A notable example of this steering away from race in *Passing* comes from Deborah McDowell's essay, "'It's Not Safe. Not Safe at All': Sexuality in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," that places the psychology of black female sexuality – expressed in the latent sexual attraction between Irene and her rediscovered childhood acquaintance, Clare Kendry – as the central concern of the novel. While McDowell's work is very astute and useful, I am more inclined to agree with Jennifer DeVere Brody's claim that "[Passing] is 'all about race' or rather, the mediation of race in relation to sexuality and class" (394), and her essay, "Clare Kendry's 'True' Colors: Race and Class Conflict in Nella Larsen's *Passing*," provides me with an ideal starting point for my own interpretation of the novel. Though I agree that the questions the novel poses about sexuality are important, I choose to focus my writing particularly on race and its relation to class.

Despite the wide variety of angles from which critics have approached *Passing*, one aspect seemingly overlooked by most critics is the frequent recurrence of both Brian's desire to relocate to Brazil and Irene's distaste for the idea. The recurring theme of Brazil in *Passing* seems to demand a reading of the novel with a transnational perspective in mind, much like how critics have approached *Quicksand*. In this thesis, I pose these questions: *How do ideas about Brazil influence the wants and actions of the characters? What does Irene's aversion to relocating to Brazil say about her?* David L. Blackmore does take this approach in his excellent

essay, “‘That Unreasonable Restless Feeling’: The Homosexual Subtexts of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*,” arguing that Brian’s interest in Brazil reveals his latent homosexuality. However, while Blackmore explores how Brazil functions in the novel in terms of sexuality, I want to explore how Brazil functions in the novel in terms of race and its relation to class.

Looking at the contemporaneous discourse regarding Brazil circulating in the United States at the time, particularly short articles I uncovered in black newspapers such as *The Chicago Defender*, reveals reports describing Brazil as a country without a color line and therefore, the articles claim, without a race problem. These ideas about Brazilian racial ideology juxtapose strongly with contemporaneous American racial ideology defined by its sharp color line and belief in biological racial difference. However, as Carla Kaplan writes in her Introduction to *Passing*, by utilizing the racial phenomenon of passing, Larsen’s novel, “questions the very *idea* of race, exposing it as one of [the United States’] most powerful – and dangerous – fictions” (xi, emphasis Kaplan’s). If the U.S. and its “race problem” form the foreground of the novel, Brazil and its freedom from a color line lie in the distant background. However, the occurrences of racial passing in the novel obscure the perspective by demonstrating that race in the U.S. is only a fiction away from functioning like it does in Brazil. The influence of Brazil in *Passing* is much closer than it appears.

Brian’s desire to relocate to Brazil reveals his desire to escape the American color line and Irene’s desire to remain in the U.S. is a testament to how she values “security” as the “most important and desired thing in life” (Larsen 76). The structure of Irene’s security comes from her social status: a middle-class black woman, the wife of a black doctor, and a model for black racial uplift. However, part of Irene’s “security” and social status, as model for black racial uplift, requires her “blackness” in terms of the American color line, something ostensibly absent

from Brazil. Irene's primary aversion to Brazil comes from her need for fixed racial categories: treating the American color line as fact rather than fiction. The reintroduction of Clare Kendry, Irene's black childhood acquaintance, into Irene's life simultaneously introduces the phenomenon of passing as a central concern to both Irene and the reader; Clare is married to a white man and has spent the past twelve years of her life passing. Clare's acts of passing expose the American color line as a fiction, collapsing the distance between the U.S. and Brazil, and Clare even comes to stand in for Brazil in Irene's mind, as her belief that Brian and Clare are having an affair is actually Irene displacing Brian's desire for Brazil onto Clare. *Passing's* narrative that follows Irene's complex relationship with Clare simultaneously details her complex relationship with Brazil. Even though *Passing's* narrative never follows any of the characters outside of the U.S. and Brazil is physically distant, Clare Kendry brings the influence of Brazil into the national sphere, and specifically into Irene Redfield's Harlem home. Critics like McDowell and Blackmore have argued that the complex narrative of *Passing* disguises a story centrally concerned with (homo)sexuality, and now I want to argue that the complex narrative of *Passing* similarly disguises a transnational story centrally concerned with how the presence of Brazil questions the construction of race and class in the U.S. nation-state.

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### **I. "The Most Important and Desired Thing in Life"**

Irene Redfield, a woman who values "security" as the "most important and desired thing in life" (Larsen 76), finds this very desire under constant threat from the "menace of impermanence" throughout *Passing* (72). As external forces threaten to disrupt the structure of her life, Irene reveals, "She wanted only to be tranquil. Only unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband" (76). However, interactions

between Irene and Brian Redfield reveal that tension exists between their respective conceptions of what constitutes the “best good” both individually and for their family, and this tension existed prior to the events of novel – prior to Clare Kendry reentering Irene’s life. During a breakfast conversation, where Brian voices his dissatisfaction with his occupation as a Harlem physician, this pre-existing tension emerges. Brian exclaims how he “hate[s] sick people, and their stupid, meddling families” (40), and this reminds Irene of Brian’s recurring desire to relocate to Brazil, revealing his desire as the source of the tension.

Irene, watching him, was thinking: “It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair.” After all these years to still blame her like this. Hadn’t his success proved that she’d been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn’t he see, even now, that it had been best? Not for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys. Was she never to be free of it, that fear which crouched, always, deep down within her, stealing away the sense of security, the feeling of permanence, from the life which she had so admirably arranged for them all, and desired so ardently to have it remain as it was? That strange, and to her fantastic, notion of Brian’s of going off to Brazil which, through unmentioned, yet lived within him; how it frightened her, and – yes, angered her! (Larsen 40)

Regardless of whether Brian leaves the family or relocates the entire family, the idea of Brazil serves as a threat to Irene that she can “never [...] be free of.” The fruition of either scenario steals away Irene’s “security” as a middle-class black woman in Harlem and wife of a respectable physician. Yet in recognizing the threat of Brian’s desire for Brazil, Irene, at least unconsciously, recognizes the selfishness she imposed on him and the family by keeping them in New York indefinitely.

Irene asserts that remaining in New York was best “Not for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for [Brian] and the boys” (40). However, the focalized narration highlights the uncertainty in her assertion. Irene uses too many words trying to appear selfless, almost like she is trying to convince herself, “oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself.” She even contradicts this illusion of selflessness by revealing her true intentions: that she “arranged” this life for her family and “desired so ardently to have it remain as it was” (40). Yet Irene’s desire runs contrary to Brian’s. Having things remain unchanged is not Brian’s idea of happiness, but moving to Brazil means destabilizing the life Irene has “arranged.” The word choice of “arranged,” like an arrangement of flowers, also makes Irene’s marriage and family life seem cold, emotionless and mechanical. It foreshadows future revelations by the focalized narrator that Irene and Brian sleep in different rooms and that Irene has never truly loved Brian (68; 76). The absence of love reduces their marriage to a selfish arrangement for Irene’s “security.” Even if Irene only realizes her selfishness unconsciously, her arrangement has left Brian terribly dissatisfied, stifling what she calls his “queer, unhappy restlessness [...] that craving for some place strange and different” (35).

When Clare Kendry enters their lives, Irene, knowing she prevented Brian from satisfying his “craving” with Brazil, begins to believe his “unhappy restlessness” and “craving for some [thing] strange and different” changes direction towards Clare Kendry. Irene feels that “the one fear, the one uncertainty, that she had felt, Brian’s ache to go somewhere else, [Brazil, has] dwindled to a childish triviality” (67)! Whether Brian actually engages in an affair with Clare or if Irene imagines the ordeal remains unknown to the reader, but to Irene the threat Clare Kendry imposes is very real. Despite Irene’s description of the potential affair as a “childish triviality,” Clare constitutes a “menace of impermanence” equal in magnitude to Brazil as both

threaten to lure Brian away from her. The significance losing Brian would have on Irene's life becomes apparent when examining Brian as a lynchpin in the arrangement of Irene's "security." As David L. Blackmore explains, "Within the hierarchy of Harlem society, [Irene] must identify herself solely in terms of her husband and sons; she is Mrs. Brian Redfield" (479). Irene's middle-class status within this Harlem hierarchy is contingent on her marriage to a well-to-do physician. Blackmore also notes that Irene "depend[s] upon Brian economically for the material goods and comforts necessary to maintain [her] social status" (479). Irene's idea of "security" is decidedly bourgeoisie in nature, where heightened class status and wealth are directly related to increased "security." Therefore, Irene feels she must keep Brian under her control to maintain her middle-class status and, therefore, her "security."

In placing such a high value on "security" Irene simultaneously places an equally high value on class status, and both supersede the importance of all other categorical statuses for her, even race. Carla Kaplan points out that Irene envisions herself as a kind of "race woman" who "[believes] irrevocably in her own infallible 'instinctive loyalty' to [her] race (Larsen 71)" (xx). Even in the presence of John Bellew, Clare's white, bigoted husband, Irene believes she "couldn't betray Clare" as someone who has passed, she "couldn't even run the risk of appearing to defend a people that were being maligned [...] She was bound to [Clare] by those very ties of race" (36). Simultaneously this same "instinctive loyalty" causes her to frequently criticize Clare for leaving the race to pass as a white woman, claiming Clare has "no allegiance" and "cared nothing for [her] race" (6; 36). Irene feels that Clare has betrayed their race for the elevated class status she achieves by passing. Despite having skin light like Clare's, Irene has ostensibly "stayed within the race," a point of pride for her. She even participates in the fictional "Negro Welfare League," a black uplift organization, and proudly tells Clare, "I'm on the ticket



committee, or, rather, I *am* the committee” (Larsen 49, italics Larsen’s). While Irene states this with a tone of exasperation, she desires to call Clare’s attention to the extent of her involvement and importance within the “Negro Welfare League.” Despite all of Irene’s posturing and self-righteousness, in her own way Irene also betrays her race in the name of elevated class status.

Jennifer DeVere Brody makes the claim that “Irene ‘value[s] class over race’ (401), as evidenced by Irene’s desire to ‘distance herself from the [...] working classes’ (399). An example Brody gives of Irene’s desire to distance herself from the working classes occurs during Irene’s shopping trip as she walks through the hot streets of Chicago. Brody notes that Irene is characteristically “shopping for ‘things’ to bring back from her visit – the inevitable material possessions which are necessary symbols of wealth” (399). These “things,” gifts for her boys, help support the external appearance of her family, an even more important symbol of her class status. In the process of shopping, a man on the street faints from the heat causing Irene to retreat as she begins to feel “disagreeably damp and sticky and soiled from contact with so many sweating bodies” (Larsen 8). To Brody, Irene’s discomfort reveals her “desire to distance herself from the ‘sweating masses’ [and] evidence of her distaste for the working classes. She feels a ‘need for immediate safety’ and feeling, faint herself, she hails a taxi” (399). Irene’s idea of “immediate safety” entails a middle-class environment, as she agrees to have the taxi driver take her to the Drayton Hotel. Here Irene distances herself from the “sweating masses” by literally rising above them – a symbolic expression of her elevated class. Yet by distancing herself from the working class, Irene simultaneously distances herself from the people of her race most in need: the people an organization like the “Negro Welfare League” was designed to aid.

Irene’s need to separate herself from the lower classes even cuts across racial lines as evidenced by her attitude towards communicating with her domestic workers Zulena and Sadie.

Irene “secretly [resents]” when Clare, while visiting, spends time engaging Zulena and Sadie in “talk and merriment,” with what Irene deems “an exasperating childlike lack of perception” (Larsen 57). Even though Irene postures herself as a “race woman” this attitude reveals Irene as first and foremost a middle-class woman. She finds it inappropriate to hold a friendly conversation with her domestic workers, regardless of their shared race. Irene’s self-imposed disconnect from lower-class black society also disconnects her from the epicenter of the “race problem” in America. She finds herself so far away from lower-class black society that she can selectively expose her children to the brutalities of racism, at least to an extent. During a family dinner, before the party at the Freeland’s apartment, Brian discusses a lynching in front of the boys, Ted and Junior, and Irene tells him, “It was really inexcusable for you to bring up a thing like [lynching] at dinner. There’ll be time enough for [Ted and Junior] to learn about such horrible things when they’re older [...] You’re not to talk to them about the race problem” (73). Despite Irene’s “instinctive loyalty” to the race and her desire to defend “a people that were being maligned” (71; 36), she seems at most superficially involved in the most volatile issues facing her race, especially those among the lower classes.

While it is readily apparent that Irene “value[s] class over race,” Brody moves from here to claim that “Race is that element which, to [Irene’s] mind, hinders one’s pursuit of wealth and happiness” (401), and that Irene “desire[s] to be ‘white’” (400). While race may act as a limiting factor in one’s pursuit of wealth in America, it does not necessarily limit Irene’s pursuit of happiness in security. In stark contrast to Brody, in fact, I want to argue that instead of Irene having a desire to be white, her “blackness” plays a crucial part in constructing her middle-class status and “safety” that she “so ardently wants to have remain as it [is]” (Larsen 40). Irene has skin light enough to pass, and as Brody notes she’s even comfortable in doing so. When Irene

agrees to go to the Drayton Hotel “[she] passes; and yet, neither the omniscient narrator nor Irene comment upon this transgression [...] It is so natural for Irene to pass that she is not even conscious that she is doing so” (399). Irene has the capability to easily shed the racial categorization holding her back from her “pursuit of wealth” but she chooses not to do so. She chooses to subject herself to a “lesser” racial status in order to secure her class status and therefore her “security.”

Irene’s primary desire for “security” trumps any potential desire she might have “to be white.” While not being white keeps Irene from the upper tiers of class status she still uses her “blackness” to help construct a middle-class status. This is best exemplified in her leadership position on the ticket committee within the “Negro Welfare League.” From this position, along with the marriage she “arranged” to a successful black doctor, Irene became a role model for black progress and welfare. Irene also associates with prestigious white intellectuals, such as the writer Hugh Wentworth, affirming her class status from both sides of the color line. Irene wants to stay as close to the color line as possible, making sure she can differentiate and distance herself from lower-class black society without passing over the color line into the anonymity of being just another white woman. Irene’s “security” is contingent on her position to the color line and this position is the very thing the “menace[s] of impermanence” in her life threaten to destabilize. Irene does not fear Brazil and Clare just for their ability to fracture her family; she fears them as convergent threats capable of destabilizing both racial and class boundaries.

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## II. Racial Ideology in the United States and the Influence of the Foreign Periphery

The idea of Brazil functioned as a subtle but powerful force in the racial discourse of the 1920s. Newspaper articles with sensational titles such as “Brazil Wants Educated Black Men,” “Writer Says Brazil Has No Color Line,” and “Race Prejudice Is Unknown In Brazil” began appearing in *The Chicago Defender* in 1916, 1925, and 1928 respectively. These articles, ranging from front-page headline articles in weekend editions to short articles in the back pages of daily issues, describe Brazil as almost utopian. The article, “Writer Says Brazil Has No Color Line,” quotes the renowned anthropologist Melville Herskovits who states that even though slavery existed in Brazil more recently than in the United States “there is no stigma attached to Negro blood...and there is no race problem in Brazil.” The article, “Race Prejudice Is Unknown In Brazil,” claims that citizens of Brazil of various races and classes simply identify themselves as “Brazilian.” Lastly, the article, “Brazil Wants Educated Black Men,” goes so far as to call Brazil “the elysian field of the black people,” where “[blacks] have achieved the highest degree of proficiency in every department of human endeavor” while simultaneously living in harmonious equality with whites. While these articles provide only relatively limited explorations of Brazilian racial ideology, they represent the prevailing representation of Brazilian racial culture in America. By way of *The Chicago Defender*, an immensely popular newspaper aimed at primarily middle-class black readers, the idea of a Brazil free of race prejudice spread its way around the country.

[illegible]

Meanwhile the color line in the United States of the 1920s was often theorized as an insurmountable color wall, but in practice it proved highly permeable. Stories regarding the growing number of light skinned blacks passing as white citizens began to appear in white and black newspapers with increasing frequency. These articles claimed that multitudes of black people crossed the color line on a daily basis with estimated totals of five thousand black people “crossing the color line” each year (“Crossing” 117), with 75,000 passing in Philadelphia alone (“75,000 Pass” 123). Many whites and blacks responded to the phenomenon of passing with fear and hysteria. For whites the fear came from the possibility of undetected blacks all around them, while many blacks viewed passing as a betrayal of race, an idea that supports the fixity of racial categories and ultimately strengthens the divide between races. However, in some popular discourse the phenomenon of passing sparked hope for the deconstruction of fixed racial categories. The article, “Careful Lyncher! He May Be Your Brother,” from *The Philadelphia Tribune*, a newspaper aimed at black readers, simultaneously mocks fear-mongering articles warning whites to be careful whom they marry and argues that the existence of such extensive passing breaks down the “‘you can tell by their walk, you can tell by their talk, you can tell by their uncouth manners’ theory of the white man” (124). That so many succeeded in passing demonstrates more similarity than difference between the two races, providing a convincing argument that if passing blacks could succeed in the white world, then as *The Philadelphia Tribune* article, “3,000 Negroes Cross the Line Each Year,” implies, why should “the doors of all professions and trades...[not be] opened wide enough for [all blacks] to get [through] without having to ‘pass’” (111).

In spite of such arguments questioning the validity of fixed racial categories, white resistance responded with further efforts to reinforce and police the color line. For example, *The*

*Pittsburgh Courier*, a newspaper aimed at black readers, reports on Virginia's efforts to police the color line in the article "Virginia Is Still Hounding 'White' Negroes Who Pass." The article states that Virginia's Bureau of Vital Statistics "discovered a spontaneous and widespread movement of ['near-white Negroes'] to secure official recognition as white through birth, death, and marriage registration. In response the Bureau "began a systematic effort to combat this movement," and "an act of the 1924 legislature...[made] it a felony to make registration certificate[s] false as to color or race " (126-127). Such resistance among whites towards passing, like these events in Virginia, centered on passings perceived potential to "damage" American society. White America created increasingly broad and severe ways to restrict inclusion into the white "race," because as distinctions between white and black became increasingly difficult to make, the "threat" to "white racial purity" became even greater.

The primary "threat" the white United States found in the phenomenon of passing was the potential for non-consensual miscegenation, where whites were deceived into believing their spouse was white and then conceived children "tainted" by "black blood." Many white people (incorrectly) believed their ancestry to be free of any "black blood" and feared that the introduction of blood from this "inferior" race would "degenerate" future offspring. Carla Kaplan claims the belief that fundamental and biological differences exist between whites and blacks that go beyond phenotype and personality "goes to the heart of the nation's historic 'one-drop rule' of hypo-descent" (xvi). A child of mixed race parents legally inherits the non-white, minority racial categorization, a racial ideology based on exclusion from the white majority in order to maintain "white racial purity." In addition Kaplan points out that a change in the 1920 census helped set the stage for the perceived increase in passing:

The 1920 census had reinforced and underscored [the “one-drop rule” of hypo-descent] by dropping the category ‘mulatto’ and insisting that every American be one thing or the other,” black or white. Such moves made the job of policing ‘the color line’ both more urgent, and more difficult. (xvi)

Due to the continuum of visual racial markers people express, the practical difficulty presented in such an either/or understanding of the color line makes the events of *Passing* and other passing narratives, both real and fictional, possible. Despite many instances of passing exposing the impracticality and even danger of such fixed racial categories, the continued policing of the color line and such actions like Virginia’s “act of the 1924 legislature” demonstrates continued mainstream and governmental support of either/or racial categories. In addition, various theories on how to detect passing blacks began to emerge. In his book, *Negro to Caucasian, Or How the Ethiopian Is Changing His Skin*, Louis Fremont Baldwin comments that some theories claimed “one drop of Negro blood [is detectable] from an appearance of the finger nails, or from a microscopic examination of the back, along the line of the backbone” (116). While Baldwin and contemporary common sense debunk these theories as scientifically unfounded, their existence further reinforces the idea of an inflexible color line in the United States.

Perhaps the most significant interaction between the phenomenon of passing and rigid U.S. racial ideology occurred through the sensational Rhinelander 1925 court case. Shortly after his marriage to Alice Jones, a cab driver’s daughter, the millionaire Leonard “Kip” Rhinelander, under pressure from his family, filed an annulment suit against his wife claiming that she deceived him into believing she was white – a case he ultimately lost. Part of what led to the explosion in popularity of this case is that it exemplified just how much “damage” the “threat” of passing could cause through non-consensual miscegenation. Ironically, perhaps the best



explanation of the “damaging” potential of passing comes from *The Chicago Defender* article, “Kip’s ‘Soul Message’ Notes Read,” written by Archie Morgan. The matter-of-fact writing style and vague wording Morgan uses in his front-page article from the November 28<sup>th</sup>, 1925 issue of this black newspaper makes it unclear whether he accepts or merely identifies certain aspects of the American theorization of the color line. The article states:

Leonard Kip Rhineland, heir to \$100,000,000, who married Alice Beatrice Jones, a member of our group, is a direct descendant of the famous Huguenots. If there ever existed such a thing as blood of distinction it is evident that none could be more properly classed as such than that which flows through the tender veins of this young scion of society.

There are hundreds of millionaires in America and hundreds of thousands of independently rich Aristocrats, but of this vast number of so-called members of purest of blue bloods there probably are none who can trace their ancestral deliverance, which will correspond with that pure strain of aristocracy of which Mr. Rhineland is identified.

The article identifies the idea of “blood of distinction,” although it correctly questions its existence – “if there ever existed such a thing” – because almost nobody can actually claim a purely white European ancestry. However, Morgan notes that if an exception exists, nobody could be “more properly classed” as purely European than Leonard Rhineland. This idea of pure European descent that Rhineland embodies represents the core fear whites have of passing – black blood unknowingly getting mixed into “superior” European bloodlines. The “threat” of passing creates the possibility that even a Rhineland is allegedly capable of unknowingly taking, in Morgan’s words, “a bride whose blood was ‘tainted’ with that of a former sub-

dominant race.” Morgan’s use of quotations around “tainted” indicate his disagreement with the negative description but his use of the phrase “former sub-dominant race” has interesting implications. While it is evident Morgan believes blacks are no longer “sub-dominant” his wording makes it unclear whether or not he believes blacks comprise a distinctly different race than whites. Whether or not Morgan supports the rigid separation of the races through the American color line, his ambiguous stance reinforces the normativity of such a separation in the U.S.

32 PAGES

**PETITION COOLIDGE FOR PLACE IN CABINET**

USE CLASSIFIED  
OF THIS EDITION

**Chicago Defender**

WORLD'S GREATEST WEEKLY

**NATIONAL EDITION**

VOL. XXX, NO. 31 CHICAGO, ILL., SATURDAY, NOVEMBER 14, 1931

# ‘NOT GUILTY,’ DR. SWEET TELLS JURY

## “MICKEY” THOMAS, NOTORIOUS GUNMAN, KILLED KIP’S ‘SOUL MESSAGE’ NOTES READ

### GUN TOTER SLAIN IN FIGHT

**DR. SWEET  
GOES ON  
STAND**

**NOTED SINGER  
IS KILLED IN  
WESTERN CITY**

ON WAY TO COURT



ANNULMENT SUIT ENTERS  
FINAL STAGES AS STATE  
COMPLETES ITS EVIDENCE

KIP'S Young Wife Weeps When She Is Forced  
to Appear Here Today, Before  
Grand Jury

CHURCH FOLK  
FLEEDED BY  
EX-SOLDIER

Grand Is Predicted In  
Building Project

Movement On to Demand Cabinet  
Post for Race; "Special" Jobs Taboo

DR. R. MOTON IN  
JOHNS HOPKINS  
PORTFOLIO

Within the very pages of *The Chicago Defender* during the Harlem Renaissance one might find anti-passing articles, which support the fixity of racial categories; articles like “Kip’s ‘Soul Message’ Notes Read,” which reinforce the normativity of the color line; and articles about Brazil offering an alternative racial ideology free from a color line. The Harlem Renaissance marked a time of great disagreement over racial conceptions, even among members of the same race. However, considering both the reportedly increasing numbers of people choosing to “pass” at the time and attempts at policing the color line growing increasingly sensational but ineffective (i.e. the Rhinelander Trial), the American conception of race certainly appeared broken and inadequate. For those dissatisfied with rigid American racial ideology the calling of Brazil from the periphery of racial discourse seemed to offer an appealing alternative.

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### **III. Assuming Familiarity**

While the appeal of Brazil as a country ostensibly free of a color line interested many black Americans during the Harlem Renaissance, this idea of Brazil found its most captivated audience amongst educated middle and upper class blacks. These people formed the primary readership of black newspapers like *The Chicago Defender*, where they found articles such as, “Brazil Wants Educated Black Men,” highlighting the country’s former black president H.E. Nilo Pecanha, and claiming that “[blacks can achieve] the highest degree of proficiency in every department of human endeavor [in Brazil].” In *Passing*, Larsen presents Irene and Brian Redfield as an educated and successful middle-class couple, aware of the culture and politics around them, one that would include a familiarity with the idea of Brazil presented in the aforementioned *The Chicago Defender* articles. While critics like Mark J. Madigan have picked up on Irene’s lone remark about the Rhinelander case (Larsen 71) arguing, “Larsen’s offhand

manner of referring to the Rhinelander case assumes a familiarity on the part of her readers” (388), Larsen’s more pervasive references to Brazil, including Brian’s desire to relocate there, are equally likely to “assume a familiarity on the part of her readers,” a “familiarity,” I argue with the contemporaneous idea that Brazil has no color line. While the Rhinelander case may have been more sensational, this idea of Brazil also received ample attention in black newspapers like *The Chicago Defender*.

The city of Chicago even plays an important role in both the novel and the Redfield’s lives making their awareness of *The Chicago Defender* articles espousing Brazil’s racial tolerance more probable. Not only does Irene reconnect with Clare on a visit to Chicago, it is also where both of them were raised. In addition, Larsen implies that Brian comes from Chicago as well. When Clare first recognizes Irene on the rooftop of the Drayton “Irene trie[s] vainly to recall where and when this woman could have known her. There in Chicago. And before her marriage. That much was plain. High School? College? (Larsen 11). After Irene recognizes the woman as Clare the two women converse and Irene “[tells] Clare about her marriage and removal to New York” (15). While the Redfield’s live in New York and the reader only ever witnesses Brian there, these passages seem to imply that Irene’s marriage to Brian occurred in Chicago and moving to New York happened afterwards. Larsen even characterizes Brian as a reader of newspapers presenting the reader with the image of him reading the “morning paper” during breakfast (38), and later, during a family dinner, he brings up an article he read in the “evening paper” about a lynching (72). Clearly, Larsen characterizes the Redfields as the highly literate, black middle-class consumers of newspapers who would, therefore, be familiar with the ways these (however idealistic) notions about Brazil circulated throughout black periodical discourse.

Larsen portrays American familiarity with this idea of Brazil as so pervasive within the novel that even Clare's white, racist husband, John Bellew, views South America as a point of interest and congregation for blacks. When at tea with Clare and John Bellew, Irene mentions Brian's interest in South America to which John responds, "'Coming place, South America, if they ever get the niggers out of it. It's run over--'" (31). If even John Bellew, a man presumably far removed from black cultural discourse, possesses the idea of Brazil as a country open to blacks, then surely educated black people, like the Redfields, do as well. When talking about the importance of Larsen's reference to the Rhinelander case in *Passing*, Mark J. Madigan observes that "what was once common knowledge now demands some explanation" (388), and the same clearly applies for understanding the importance of Larsen's use of Brazil as a recurring theme in the novel. In *Passing*, Brazil represents an alternative racial ideology to the fixed-racial categories present in the United States, and its place in the novel carries significance far beyond Brian's yearning for a change in locale.

Most of what the reader learns about Brian's desire to relocate to Brazil comes from the third-person narration focalized through Irene who attributes almost any restlessness Brian reveals as a manifestation of this desire. Only once in the novel does Brian explicitly express his desire to leave the United States: during a family dinner, before the party at the Freeland's apartment. At this dinner Brian "speaks bitterly" about a lynching he read about in front of his boys, Ted and Junior. This conversation ensues:

"Dad, why is it that they only lynch coloured people?" Ted asked.

"Because *they* hate 'em son."

"Brian!" Irene's voice was a plea and a rebuke.

Ted said: "Oh! And why do they hate 'em?"

“Because they are afraid of them.”

“But what makes them afraid of ‘em?”

“Because—“

“Brian!” (Larsen 73, emphasis mine)

As I have explained above, this topic of conversation in front of the boys invokes Irene’s ire, and she tells Brian “It was really inexcusable for you to bring up a thing like [lynching] at dinner. There’ll be time enough for [Ted and Junior] to learn about such horrible things when they’re older” (73). However Brian believes in the exact opposite approach, retorting, “You’re absolutely wrong! If, as you’re so determined, they’ve got to live in this damned country, they’d better find out what sort of thing they’re up against as soon as possible” (73). Brian’s assertion that black people are lynched because “*they* hate ‘em” effectively conveys the damaging effects of a strict color line: to be black in America means to be “hated” by the rest of “them,” i.e., white people. The division of the color line imposes an “us versus them” mentality on both sides of the color line. The struggle for power between these two groups creates a constant state of fear supporting Brian’s opinion that whites “hate” black people because they are “afraid” of them. The results of a strict color line make America a “damnable” place to Brian.

At the conclusion of their dinnertime argument Brian says to Irene, “I wanted to get [the children] out of this hellish place years ago. You wouldn’t let me. I gave up the idea, because you objected. Don’t expect me to give up everything” (74). Here Brian states his desire to leave America, which had only previously been revealed through Irene. In the context of their argument, Brian’s statement indicates that his rationale for wanting to leave the U.S., and the reason he considers it a “hellish” place, comes from his disdain for U.S. racial ideology. While Brian does not explicitly state that he wants to relocate to Brazil in this argument, the reader

knows through Irene that this is the specific country he has in mind. That Brian wants to move to Brazil does not represent a simple desire to move someplace or anyplace different than the United States. Given the contemporaneous idea that Brazil has no color line, Brian's specific interest in that country demonstrates his desire to escape from the American color line to the alternative racial ideology Brazil ostensibly offers.

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#### **IV. The "Security" of the Color Line**

As much as Brian desires to leave America to escape the color line, Irene adamantly wants to remain in the U.S. where the structure of the color line – and her relative position to it – helps contribute to the "security" of her middle-class status. When Irene fully accepts her suspicion that Brian and Clare are having an affair, she begins to think of strategies to keep Brian "by her side [...] For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in the land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil and would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys" (Larsen 76). As both Brazil and Clare threaten to disrupt her "safety" by taking Brian away from her Irene remains staunchly entrenched in the defense of her American middle-class values. Irene's claim that "she belong[s] in the land of rising towers" expresses her continual desire to "rise above" the lower classes, like she symbolically does when ascending to the roof of the Drayton. If, as I argue, Irene utilizes her relative position to the color line to help construct her middle-class status, then her middle-class worldview should in turn reflect the structure of the color line.

Irene's middle-class worldview reflects the structure of the American color line in ways that often conflict with her image of herself as a "race woman." Her judgment of Clare Kendry's character reveals Irene's ostensible subscription to the fixed racial categories the color line

creates. As stated earlier Irene condemns Clare's act of passing as a betrayal of the "black race," claiming that Clare has "no [racial] allegiance" and "care[s] nothing for [the black] race" (6; 36). In Irene's mind Clare can either align with and support the "black race," or the "white race" – "us or them" – allowing for no grey area between the two races much like the American conceptualization of the color line. Additional evidence of Irene's subscription to fixed racial categories comes from her discussion with Hugh Wentworth at the Negro Welfare League dance. When Wentworth cannot determine Clare's race, Irene tells him that "Nobody can [...determine race] by looking" but instead claims race is determined by things that cannot "be registered" and that are "not definite or tangible." (55-56). According to Carla Kaplan, Irene's belief that differences between races exist that cannot "be registered" simultaneously evokes America's "historic 'one-drop rule' of hypo-descent" and imitates "the discourse of some of the most notorious white racists of her day," in particular the white-supremacist Lothrop Stoddard (xvi; xx-xxi). Kaplan claims that Irene's statement about racial distinctions that cannot "be registered," along with the binding importance she places on racial loyalty, reflects Stoddard's "well-known view [...] that while racial 'characteristics' and 'endowment' 'were elusive of definition' and 'difficult to describe' there were, nonetheless, 'definite' distinctions which bound one to 'racial duty'" (xxi). Despite Irene's posturing herself as a "race woman," the color line structures her racial ideology so much that she sounds like many white proponents of the color line.

Much like other scientifically unfounded theories for how to detect race, such as appearance of the fingers or microscopic examination of the back, Larsen discredits Irene's belief that she can distinguish race based on indefinite and intangible characteristics before she even makes her statement to Wentworth at the Negro Welfare League dance. On the rooftop of



the Drayton Hotel Irene notices a woman staring at her, and not only does Irene initially fail to recognize the woman as Clare Kendry but also she fails to recognize her a black woman, believing her to be a white woman instead, all the while wondering if the other woman has detected Irene's own "true" race. However, instead of recognizing the occurrence as an example of the inadequacy of binary racial categorizations, after identifying the woman as Clare, Irene thinks to herself that Clare has "Negro eyes" (21). Irene's identification of physical racial traits directly contradicts her later statement that "Nobody can [...determine race] by looking" and seems like a reactionary response to failing initially to identify Clare's race. Clare's act of passing that successfully deceives Irene represents a slippage in Irene's binary understanding of race and she responds by pinning Clare back into one category by assigning her the trait of "Negro eyes." All of these examples indicate an extensive pattern of Irene's need for structure and fixity in the world.

Irene's expectation that everything should act in accordance with its categorization even carries over to trivialities like the changing of seasons. As her year in constant contact with Clare Kendry progresses into December Irene thinks that the "mild weather" was not "a bit Christmasy" (59). She then expands upon this meteorological anomaly by revealing that "She didn't like it to be warm and springy when it should have been cold and crisp, or grey and cloudy as if snow was about to fall. The weather, like people, ought to enter into the spirit of the season" (59). Just as Irene expects the fixed categories of months to carry with them a certain kind of weather, Irene expects a white or black individual to possess certain characteristics, act a certain way, and carry certain allegiances. Things or people, like Clare Kendry, categorized in one way but acting out of accordance with their categorization invoke Irene's ire, and Brazil's supposed absence of a color line removes a crucial structure in forming racial categorizations.

The reported absence of the color line in Brazil removes the ideological structure that not only shapes Irene's racial perceptions but also helps her attain the "security" she desires. As I argue Irene uses her "blackness" to help construct a middle-class status. Irene holds a leadership position within the "Negro Welfare League," marries a successful black doctor, and associates with white intellectuals. She acts as a role model for black progress and welfare by "rising above" lower-class black society without passing over the color line into the anonymity of being just another white woman. From Irene's standpoint, a life in Brazil represents the removal of many of the pillars structuring her racial ideology and middle-class existence. The reported absence of the color line renders organization like the "Negro Welfare League" unnecessary, makes association with white intellectuals no more "prestigious" than black intellectuals, eliminates racial allegiances, and makes any "indefinite" and "intangible" characteristics that may define race irrelevant. For someone who places such value on structure and fixity, Irene views Brazil as unstructured (both in terms of race and, thus, class), exotic, and maybe even savage.

When Irene's thinks about Brazil and Brian's desire to relocate there she often attaches terms like "queer," "fantastic," and "unreasonable" (35; 40; 52). Before Irene returns home from Chicago and the reader learns exactly where Brian wants to locate, Irene describes his desire as a "craving for some place strange and different" (35). While the reader has yet to learn that the "strange" place referred to is Brazil, Irene does possess this information and therefore views Brazil as a "strange" place. As someone who claims she "grew from [American] soil," it seems easy to ascribe Irene's discomfort with Brazil to a discomfort with anything non-American, a fear of the foreign. However, Irene possesses a surprising level of comfort with traveling to Europe, perhaps because most of Europe shares with the United States a culture structured by

white dominance. Irene may view European culture as a precursor to the United States and its culture of “rising towers” while Brazil represents a more “alien” culture. On top of the Drayton when Irene struggles to identify the woman talking to her as Clare she thinks, “Surely she’d heard those husky tones before [...] a voice remotely suggesting England. Ah! Could it have been in Europe that they had met?” (12), revealing that Irene has spent time in Europe, and that presumably includes England. Later in the novel Irene and Brian have an argument over what Irene calls the “queer” ideas about sex their son Junior has learned in school. After the argument Irene’s thoughts disclose she had started the conversation as a way to suggest “some European school for Junior next year,” as if European school will serve as a corrective for the “queer” ideas Junior learned in American school (42). Interestingly Irene describes both Brazil and Junior’s ideas about sex with the word “queer.” According to Judith Butler in her book, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex,”* at the time of *Passing*’s publication the word “queer” encompassed “an array of meanings associated with the deviation from normalcy” (176). Irene’s preference for Europe to Brazil and its “deviation from normalcy,” and her proposal of European school as a corrective action for Junior’s “queer” ideas about sex demonstrates how Irene associates Europe with normativity.

Within the context of the racial hierarchy the American color line imposes, Irene’s association of Europe with normativity and Brazil with “queerness” exposes the meaning behind her distaste for Brazil. The theorization of the American color line associates European culture with “refinement and intellectualism” while associating Africa and other “darker skinned” areas of the world with “savagery and simplemindedness.” Knowing the extent that the American color line structures Irene’s racial ideology, if she associates European culture with normativity

then she presumably associates the cultures of Africa and other “darker skinned” areas of the world with “savagery and simplemindedness,” as evidence in the text suggests.

After Irene takes a phone call from the white novelist Hugh Wentworth in front of Clare, Clare makes the comment that his writing is “sort of contemptuous [...] as if [Hugh] more or less despised everything and everybody.” To this Irene responds, “I shouldn’t be a bit surprised if he did [despise everything]. Still, he’s about earned the right to. Lived on the edges of nowhere in at least three continents. Been through every danger in all kinds of savage places” (49). In this statement Irene echoes the racial hierarchy the color line imposes. Knowing how Irene sees the white dominated United States as “the land of rising towers” and associates the white dominated Europe with normativity, then these “dangerous” and “savage places” on the “edges of nowhere” she refers too must be located in the “darker skinned” areas of the world – places with cultures that deviate from European traditions, perhaps Africa, Asia, and/or South America. In Irene’s mind, Brazil, and perhaps all of South America, may qualify as a “dangerous” and “savage place” on “the edge of nowhere.”

Irene’s negative view towards these places on the “edges of nowhere” is emblematic of an internal conflict facing many African Americans. According to Michael A. Chaney in his essay, “International Contexts of the Negro Renaissance,” the Western portrayal of Africa as an “exotic” land of “primitive culture [...] supposedly both anterior and inferior to European traditions,” served as a “mark of shame” from which many African Americans wanted to distance themselves (52). Simultaneously, according to Chaney, many African Americans felt “a sense of diasporic connectedness to African history, politics, and culture,” resulting in a “conflicted sense of Africanity” where African Americans simultaneously affirmed and disavowed their connections to Africa (52). The importance Irene places on racial allegiance and

her self-perception as a “race woman” seemingly affirms her own “sense of diasporic connectedness to Africa;” however, her perception as an American, middle-class woman causes her concurrently to disavow Africa as a “dangerous” and “savage place” ultimately distancing herself from it. Even if Africa is not included among the “edges of nowhere” where Hugh Wentworth lived, the fact that they surely constitute “darker skinned” areas outside of European tradition leaves Irene in a similar position.

While contemporaneous racial critics such as W.E.B. Du Bois and contemporary racial critics such as Brent Hayes Edwards both explore the connection many of the “darker races of the world” share in their experience of white oppression, Irene subverts this potential connection by maligning the “darker races” as “dangerous” and “savage.” As Du Bois famously stated, “the color line belts the world,” and Edwards in his book, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism*, expands upon this sentiment. Using Du Bois’s terminology Edwards explains that “the ‘Negro problem’ in the United States is only a ‘local’ phase of a much greater problem” – the problem that all the “‘darker races of the world’” form a “larger population of the colonized and oppressed” (2). While Irene only directly comments on the white and black “races,” she does express a desire to “defend a people being maligned” (Larsen 36). In the context of the shared oppression among many of the “darker people of the world,” Irene’s desire to “defend a people being maligned” certainly pertains to African Americans but could also demonstrate a desire to defend those “maligned” throughout the world. However, Irene ironically subverts this possible transnational connection by maligning many of the “darker people of the world” by calling their places of living “dangerous” and “savage” implying the people share these qualities as well.

Even though Irene may seem like a woman split between racial allegiance – affirming her “sense of diasporic connectedness to Africa” – and middle-class allegiance – disavowing her African background for its association with “savageness” – critics such as Brody, Kaplan, and myself, have aptly demonstrated that Irene only postures herself as a “race woman” and instead values class and “security” over race. Therefore, Irene’s ideology and actions lean further towards distancing herself from her “supposedly anterior and inferior” connection to Africa rather than embracing it. Irene acts out her valuation of class over race through her constant desire to distance herself from the lower classes, a desire that manifests itself even within her own “race,” for example her disapproval of Clare making conversation with her domestic workers Zulena and Sadie. Larsen even offers hints that Irene associates lower-class blacks with “exoticness,” linking her desire to distance herself from the lower classes to her desire to distance herself from connections to Africa and the “exoticness” associated with it.

Returning to Irene’s relationship with her domestic workers, the narration focalized through Irene, provides an insightful window into how Irene perceives them, particularly Zulena. When Irene and Brian sit down to a breakfast after Irene’s visit to Chicago the narrator states that “Zulena, a small mahogany-coloured *creature*, brought in the grapefruit” (Larsen 38, emphasis added). The degrading use of the word “creature” in the narration focalized through Irene implies a kind of categorical inferiority she sees in Zulena. The two women’s difference in class status can partially explain why Irene perceives Zulena as inferior. That Irene makes efforts to distance herself socially from her domestic workers, exemplified by her disapproval of Clare making conversation with them, substantiates the idea that Irene views them as “creatures” categorically below herself. However, the word “creature” inherently implies a kind of “exoticness” and “danger” that ties into Zulena’s name, an “exotic,” non-European name that

may have roots in an area of the world that Irene perceives as a “dangerous” place on “the edge of nowhere.” To Irene, Zulena represents the intersection of lower-class status and “exoticness” and she responds with an intensely strong desire to create distance between them by labeling Zulena a “creature,” implying a kind of “danger” present in her. The “danger” that a close association with Zulena brings Irene closer to not only the lower classes, but also to the “exoticness” associated with Africa from which she also wants to distance herself.

Additionally, Irene needs Zulena in her home – as a worker, not a guest – to help constitute her social position as a model of black racial uplift. Irene’s need for Zulena shares similarities with how Judith Butler describes John Bellew’s need for Clare. Before Bellew knows that Clare is black he often refers to her as “Nig,” a term that Butler claims, “holds in place both the rendering of Clare’s blackness as an exotic source of excitation and the denial of her blackness altogether” (171). Butler also writes that “although [Bellew] claims that he would never associate with African-Americans,” his fetishization of Clare as “Nig” demonstrates that “[Bellew] requires the association [with African-Americans] and its disavowal [...] to display his own racial purity” (172). Similarly, in order for Irene to serve as a model of racial uplift in the United States where the color line labels blacks as “inferior,” she needs certain blacks to embody this “inferiority” in order to delineate her own “superiority.” Irene requires the association of Zulena in her house, as a lower-class worker with an “exotic,” non-European name, and the disavowal of Zulena as a “creature,” in order to display her own “superiority” as a middle-class black woman of “refined” culture.

Another instance of Irene associating lower-class blacks with “exoticness” occurs during the Negro Welfare League dance. In an attempt to convince Clare not to attend, Irene describes the dance as a “public thing” where “all sorts of people go, anybody who can pay a dollar, even

ladies of easy virtue looking for trade” (50). Irene knows and expects the dance will attract a wide variety of people both white and black from varying social classes. Despite dancing with some people and conversing with even more (53), Irene remembers few details from participating in the dance itself, as if she found it insignificant. Instead one of the few things Irene explicitly remembers about the dance is a conversation she has with Hugh Wentworth during a “free half-hour when she had dropped into a chair in an emptied box and let her gaze wander over the bright crowd below” (54). Like her ascension from the Chicago streets to the top of the Drayton, Irene once again finds a way to rise above the common masses comprised of “anybody who can pay a dollar,” symbolizing both her elevated class status and importance within the Negro Welfare League as head of the ticket committee. That she has a conversation with the white novelist Wentworth in the elevated position of the box only further reinforces the symbolization her elite status.

During their conversation in the box, Wentworth, upon seeing who he believes is the “white” Clare and the dark Ralph Hazleton dancing, comments to Irene that white women seem to prefer dancing with black men saying, “‘these – er – ‘gentlemen of colour’ have driven a mere Nordic from [women’s] mind[s]” (54). He substantiates his claim using his wife as an example, telling Irene “Have I laid eyes on her tonight except in spots, here and there, being twirled about by some *Ethiopian*? I have not” (54, emphasis added). Wentworth’s choice of the word “Ethiopian” simplifies these black men into representatives of the African “Other,” offering some “exotic” appeal to the white women at the dance and driving “mere Nordics” from their minds. While Wentworth may say this ironically, indeed Irene shows no signs of perturbation or objection over Wentworth’s terminology, his use of “Ethiopian” still reveals underlying associations the word carries and, perhaps unknowingly, he perpetuates. Wentworth later



specifies that white women tend to rave about “unusually dark” black men (55), like the dark Ralph Hazleton dancing with the “white” Clare, and this seems to point the appellation of “Ethiopian” at those who qualify as “unusually dark.” Dark skin itself seems to evoke associations with Africa and becomes the object of eroticization and “exoticfication.”

The “exotic” appeal of dark skin to white people, though unnamed, continues to structure Irene and Wentworth’s conversation. Wentworth attributes white women’s preference for dancing with “Ethiopians” to more than just supposed black male dancing prowess but “some other attraction” (55), and his inability to name the attraction implies something more “exotic.” Irene’s seeming agreement with Wentworth’s attribution indicates her own association of “exoticness” among the darker black men Wentworth jokingly refers to as “Ethiopians”:

I think what [white women] feel [around darker black men] is – well, a kind of emotional excitement. You know, the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant to you; something so different that it’s really at the opposite end of the pole from all your accustomed notions of beauty. (55)

Irene’s statement reinforces her subscription to fixed racial differences by basically describing white “exoticization” of blacks as a natural reaction. She finds it natural that a white woman would experience “emotional excitement” in the presence of a dark skinned black man, finding him both “strange” and “repugnant,” and implying that some fundamental difference exists between them. Even though Irene adds that she knows “coloured girls who’ve experienced the same thing – the other way around naturally,” that she acknowledges perceived “exoticness” among dark skinned blacks as a natural reaction for whites seems contradictory for someone who wants to distance herself from associations with the “exotic” (55). However, Irene has already distanced herself from associations with the “exotic:” she is a middle-class, light skinned black

woman having a conversation with a white novelist about the “exotic Ethiopians,” with the “anyone who can pay a dollar” located below them. To utilize Butler’s model again, Irene needs the darker skinned members of the dance to embody “exoticness” in order to mark her own “normativity.”

Though Irene makes efforts to distance herself from associations with Africa and its perceived “exoticness” and “inferiority,” she at least superficially still embraces her “race.” Instead of using her light skin to pass over into “whiteness” she embraces her “blackness” in the name of “racial allegiance.” Even though many whites may interpret dark skin as “exotic” or emblematic of Africa, many dark skinned blacks play important roles in Irene’s life. Irene’s husband Brian has dark skin, she takes pride in the dark skin one of her sons has, and her friend Ralph Hazleton, the man who sparks Wentworth and Irene’s conversation at the dance, has dark skin. However, in addition to their dark skin these men also share middle-class culture and status, what Irene truly values. Brian is a doctor, and Hazleton is part of Irene’s social circle. In Irene’s mind Brian and Hazleton’s socioeconomic accomplishments successfully distance them from any “exotic” associations their darker skin may bring them. While Irene vocalizes affirmations of her “racial allegiance,” often while vilifying Clare, she only acts in ways that promote her as a model for black racial uplift distinct and separate from the black lower classes and associations with an African past. Even her desire to send Junior to Europe for school serves as a method for creating distance from such associations. In the eyes of the dominant American culture an education in Europe gives Junior the cultural capital to both help him succeed socio-economically and to disassociate from “inferior” African culture. However, a country with no color line does not assume inferiority among its black citizens, and requiring no need for models

of racial uplift takes away the “security” of the privileged position upon which Irene structures her life.

For Irene, Brazil may constitute a “savage” place on the “edge of nowhere,” and for someone so indoctrinated in the middle-class culture of the United States, relocating to Brazil may mean becoming the “exotic other” from which Irene so desperately wants to distance herself. Additionally leaving the United States, the “land of rising towers,” for anyplace other than Europe, the precursor to those “rising towers,” represents a relative decline in socio-economic status to Irene. Yet Irene’s greatest aversion to Brazil stems from its ostensible absence of a color line, and without it, the foundation for her socio-economic position becomes unstable. To again draw on Butler’s insights, Irene’s desire to be a model for black racial uplift requires a culture that views blacks as “inferior.” She cannot be a model for racial progress without certain blacks embodying this “inferiority” and without the constant disavowal of her relation to them and to any qualities associated with black “inferiority.” In Irene’s mind the qualities that reflect “inferiority” consist of “exoticness” and lower-class status. However, in the country where the *Chicago Defender* article, “Race Prejudice Is Unknown In Brazil,” claims that its citizens of various races and classes simply identify as “Brazilian,” blacks cannot be “exotic others,” but rather similar equals as fellow “Brazilians.” While a class hierarchy in Brazil will undoubtedly still exist, without the perception of black people’s inherent “inferiority” the lower classes should ostensibly feature a more fair distribution of both black and white members. Married to a doctor, Irene and her family could easily achieve middle-class status again in Brazil, but without the “security” of Irene’s privileged social position – a position contingent on the existence of the color line.

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## V. Present and Close Danger

What has kept critics from considering Larsen's *Passing* from the perspective of a transnational novel of the Harlem Renaissance is that the events of the novel all occur in either New York or Chicago. Brent Hayes Edwards claims that famous, explicitly transnational novels such as James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, and Larsen's first novel, *Quicksand*, all set crucial scenes outside of the United States because "it is as though certain moves, certain arguments and epiphanies, can only be stages beyond the confines of the United States" (4). For example, Hayes argues that "the contention in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* is that a transnational foray is necessary to undo the 'fixed' and 'static' nature of the 'Negro question' in the United States" (43). In other words, a "transnational foray" may help individuals rethink the "fixed" and "static" racial categories imposed by the American conceptualization of the color line. While contemporaneous racial discourse of the 1920s presents Brazil as a location capable of producing such "epiphanies," in *Passing*, Brian's desire to relocate there only serves as a specter. The idea of Brazil haunts Irene, but it poses no immediate challenge to her "fixed" conceptualizations of race. However, unlike what Larsen does in *Quicksand*, instead of moving Irene outside of the United States to allow "certain moves, certain arguments and epiphanies," in *Passing*, Larsen has the influence of Brazil and its reported racial ideology come into the national sphere and confront Irene through the vector of Clare Kendry.

By transgressing the boundaries of both race and class, Clare's actions embody Irene's perception of Brazil's racial ideology and how it might affect her. The first description of Clare shows a young girl "sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father [a janitor]...raged...up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses"

(Larsen 5). As Jennifer DeVere Brody notes, “this brief description provides the reader with much information about Clare’s background and class. She was poor and [after her father’s death and] until her marriage she worked as a domestic for weekly wages at the home of her white aunts” (398). Irene, however, has always been a member of the middle-class and “had all the things [Clare] wanted [as a child] and never had had” (Larsen 19). Irene’s association with the lower-class Clare, along with her disavowal of Clare as “never really one of [her childhood] group” (14), helped delineate her status among the rising black middle-class. For Clare, remaining “loyal” to her race likely meant staying forever stuck within the lower classes, helping to form the foundation that establishes Irene’s privileged position. Brody explains that by passing over the color line and marrying the rich, white, international banking agent, John Bellew, Clare “rose rapidly...and in so doing surpassed Irene in terms of class and material wealth” (398). Clare defies the restrictions imposed by the color line – much as Brazil ostensibly removes them all together – and in doing so reveals the instability in the structure of Irene’s privileged status, collapsing the boundary between Irene and lower-class blacks. Without the oppression of the color line, the poor Clare who was “never really one of [Irene’s] group” has suddenly risen above Irene socio-economically, and presumably others could too.

Clare also subverts the color line and its resulting class structure through her own passion and affection for black people that transcends class divides. Even though Irene judges Clare as a “selfish [...] cold, and hard” woman with “no allegiance” who cares “nothing for the race” (Larsen 6; 36), as Carla Kaplan points out, from the beginning of the novel evidence is presented that “Irene is misjudging Clare” (xx). Kaplan claims that Irene’s own memories of Clare as a child demonstrate, “if [Irene] will only [recognize] it, Clare’s fierce racial ‘allegiance’ and personal ‘loyalty’ to fellow blacks” (xx). Irene remembers:

[When Clare was] driven to anger, she would fight with a ferocity and impetuosity that disregarded or forgot any danger; superior strength, numbers, or other unfavourable circumstances. How savagely she had clawed those boys the day they had hooted her [black] parent and sung a derisive rhyme, of their own composition, which pointed out certain eccentricities in his careening gait! (Larsen 6)

Even after Clare “betrays” her race, rapidly ascending into the upper classes by passing, Brody makes the point that “Clare maintains a clear sense of her prior identity [in terms of both race and class]. Her Gatsbyesque ascendance to the upper-echelons of white society is undercut by her patriotic (not patronizing [like Irene’s]) racial sympathies” (398). When Clare runs into Irene on the roof of the Drayton it gives her an opportunity to reestablish a link to her black past. Clare expresses her racial longing to Irene saying, “You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (Larsen 51). Despite Clare’s persistence in trying to spend time in Harlem and reestablish a relationship with Irene, she views Clare’s desires as insincere and “selfish.”

Irene believes that Clare only uses her as a “means to an end,” and as she tells Brian, “I have no intention of being the link between [Clare] and her poorer darker brethren” (36; 39). However, in making this statement Irene fails to recognize two things: that Clare was once one of Irene’s “poorer [black] brethren,” and that Irene actually tries to limit any possible connections between herself and her “poorer darker brethren” in order to construct her privileged social position. Clare, who “maintains a clear sense of her prior identity,” comfortably associates with the black lower classes without the restrictions and assumed “inferiority” required by Irene’s middle-class ethics. Larsen begins to highlight the difference between how Irene and Clare view the lower classes as early as their meeting on the roof of the Drayton.

While sitting at her table, Irene looks down at the “specks of cars and people creeping about in the streets below [and thinks] how silly they look” (9). Irene turns the physical distance between her and the streets into a symbolic expression of her elevated class – how “silly” all the people look going about their work and errands while Irene drinks tea. Brody comments that while “this constant need to move ‘away from’ and ‘above’ is characteristic of Irene and those things associated with her,” Clare, who “occupies [the] same space in the text [as Irene], *never* looks askance at ‘those below’” (400, emphasis Brody’s). Clare does not seek to distance herself from the lower classes; instead she collapses the distance by treating them as equals. In doing so Clare collapses the distance between her poor, “black” past and her wealthy, “white” present. If Irene’s character is defined by her singular adherence to fixity, Clare’s character is multitudinous and dynamic.

Clare displays her dynamic racial mobility every time she goes back and forth between spending time in Harlem and with John Bellew, and she displays her dynamic social mobility whenever she spends one of her visits to the Redfield household engaging in “talk and merriment with [the domestic workers] Zulena and Sadie” (Larsen 57). These occurrences cause Irene to express exasperation over what she considers Clare’s “childlike lack of perception” in treating Zulena and Sadie like friends (57). While Irene needs the association of Zulena and Sadie in her household to constitute her privileged status she simultaneously needs to disavow them by labeling friendship with them as inappropriate for a woman of elevated class. Yet Clare, who shares a socio-economic background with Zulena and Sadie, transgresses the current class boundary between them, and this transgression only demonstrates the sincerity in her desire “to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh.” Even though Irene claims that she does not want to be the “link between [Clare] and her poorer darker brethren,”

ironically, Clare becomes the link between Irene and “her poorer, darker brethren.” Not only was Clare once one of Irene’s “poorer brethren” but Clare’s friendship with Zulena and Sadie minimizes the distance between Irene and them. Irene can no longer disavow Zulena by thinking of her as just a “small mahogany-coloured *creature*,” but instead must consider her a much closer friend of a friend (38, emphasis mine). Once again Clare’s actions parallel the potential effects of how Irene perceives Brazil’s racial ideology. By minimizing the social distance between Irene and her domestic workers, Irene can no longer disavow them as “inferior” to construct her superiority. The equalizing effect Clare’s friendship with Zulena and Sadie has functions similarly to how reportedly Brazilians of various races and classes simply identify as “Brazilians” (“Race Prejudice”): Irene, Zulena and Sadie all fall under the identification of “friends of Clare” regardless of their class status.

Clare’s refusal to conform to the boundaries of race and class Irene relies on to delineate her position as a model for black racial uplift causes her to view Clare as a threat to her “security.” Although Irene also transgresses the color line by allowing herself to pass in certain situations, she refuses to acknowledge the insufficiencies in fixed racial categories that her experience with passing exposes. Instead she minimizes its significance calling it a matter of “convenience,” and in some situations seems unconscious that she is even passing. For example, when Irene meets Clare at her room in the Morgan hotel and finds that she also invited their mutual childhood friend, the similarly light skinned Gertrude Martin. When Irene sees Gertrude, the wife of a white butcher, she expresses perturbation over two things. For one, it seems odd to Irene that “the woman Clare was now should have invited the woman that Gertrude was” (Larsen 24). Once again, Clare’s defiance of class boundaries frustrates Irene as she finds it “odd” and inappropriate that Clare, the wife of an international banking agent, would invite Gertrude, the



lower-class wife of a butcher, to a social gathering. Additionally, upon seeing Gertrude who, like Clare, has also married a white man, Irene thinks to herself: “‘Great goodness! Two of them’” (24). However, Irene admits to herself “it couldn’t [be] truthfully said that [Gertrude] was ‘passing’” because her husband, Fred, was aware of Gertrude’s racial background prior to their marriage. Still, in this situation, Irene feels “outnumbered” and alone “in her adherence to her own class and kind; not merely in the great thing of marriage, but in the whole pattern of her life as well” (24-25). Irene reiterates the value she assigns to fixed racial and class boundaries, but fails to realize that in this situation she is passing as well. Irene knows Clare is actively passing so by agreeing to come to tea at her presumably white hotel, and to potentially meet her white husband and daughter means that she agrees to come under the assumption that she also must pass to accommodate the situation. While passing in this situation Irene meets Clare’s white, racist husband, John Bellew, and even though the ensuing scene serves as one of the most discomfiting but effective condemnations of the limitations of the American color line, Irene only views the experience as a danger and threat to her “security.”

When John Bellew arrives at the hotel room and greets Clare as “Nig,” Irene and Gertrude are rightly offended and startled having both held the assumption that Bellew was unaware of Clare’s racial background. When Clare asks Bellew to explain why he calls her “Nig,” Irene perceives in Clare’s eyes a “queer gleam, a jeer, it might be,” as if she believes Clare is setting up a joke or trying to affront her, and in a way she is (28). Bellew explains that when he and Clare first met she was “white as a lily” but now she’s “gettin’ darker and darker” (29). Clare then asks him, “what difference would it make if, after all these years, you were to find out that I was one or two per cent coloured?” invoking the American racial ideology of hypo-descent. Bellew then responds, “you can get as black as you please as far as I’m

concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" – an absurd and biting ironic statement that reveals much about the limitations of the American color line (29).

Bellew evidently believes in hypo-descent, that only "one or two per cent" of "black blood" is enough to "degenerate" a person. Ironically, though Bellew claims to care not about Clare's skin color because he believes race is determined by fundamental biological characteristics, the only characteristics that have ever marked Clare's race for Bellew are visual. As Judith Butler explains, Clare passes by both having light skin and by refusing "to introduce her blackness into conversation, and so withholds the conversational marker which would counter the hegemonic presumption that she is white [based on her light skin]" (171). When Bellew first met Clare he presumed her race based on her light skin and on the light skin of her white aunts, and at the present moment in the Morgan hotel he presumes Irene and Gertrude's race based on their light skin and association with the "white" Clare. Without any of these women revealing their "true" race through "conversational markers," only their appearance and association with one another marks them as white for Bellew. According to Butler, even what exposes Clare's "true" race to Bellew at the end of *Passing* comes from a visual association: "this disassociation from blackness that [Clare] performs through silence is reversed at the end of the story in which she is exposed to Bellew's white gaze in clear association with African-Americans" (171). Only the visual association of Clare among other blacks ultimately reveals her "true" race to Bellew. Even though the ideology of the American color line is based on fundamental biological differences between races, the reality that visual markers provide the primary means of identifying race renders the boundaries of the color line ineffective. Not only is Bellew completely unaware that he let "niggers" into his family but also he is unknowingly

speaking of his disdain for black people while surrounded by them. Due to the continuum of visual racial markers people express, containing people within the boundaries of a racial binary becomes impossible.

In response to this discomfoting but revealing “joke” that exposes the ineffectiveness of the color line Irene laughs:

She laughed and laughed and laughed. Tears ran down her cheeks. Her sides ached. Her throat hurt. She laughed on and on and on, long after the others had subsided. Until, catching sight of Clare’s face, the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke, and for caution, struck her. At once she stopped. (Larsen 29)

Irene laughs the hardest because she understands Clare’s position better than she can admit to herself, and perhaps better than anyone else in the room. Irene knows how it feels to transgress the color line because she frequently allows herself to pass for matters of “convenience.”

Undoubtedly, when she has passed into ostensibly white areas or situations, she has at least overheard negative stereotypes towards blacks that her successful passing in these white areas or situations refutes, but could only afford a “quiet enjoyment” of this refutation lest she reveal herself. However, instead of finding in her laughter towards Clare’s “priceless joke” the conscious acknowledgement that she too cannot be fully defined within a binary racial system, she looks at Clare and sees only the threat she presents to her:

[Irene] turned an oblique look on Clare and encountered her peculiar eyes fixed on her with an expression so dark and deep and unfathomable that she had for a short moment the sensation of gazing into the eyes of some *creature* utterly strange and apart. A faint sense of danger brushed her, like the breath of a cold fog. (29, emphasis mine)

Suddenly Irene is on the defensive having realized the threat to the color line, and thusly, her privileged status, Clare and her “priceless joke” present. Whether or not Clare truly means to accost Irene by threatening the foundation of her privileged status remains unknown, but Irene interprets Clare and her actions as threatening. Irene’s use of the word “creature” to describe Clare echoes her use of it to describe Zulena – in Clare, Irene also perceives the qualities of “exoticness,” “danger,” and “inferiority.”

Irene views Clare and her transgressions of racial and class boundaries as “exotic,” claiming that Clare and her are “strangers in their ways and means of living. Strangers in their desires and ambitions. Strangers even in their racial consciousness. Between them the barrier was just as high, just as broad, and just as firm as if in Clare did not run that strain of black blood” (44). Irene believes that their differences in ideology creates a barrier between them as “high” as if Clare was white, but Clare’s actions demonstrate that the barrier between white and black – the barrier of the color line – is unstable and permeable. Though Irene fears Brazil for the “danger” its ostensible lack of a color line poses to her privileged social status, Clare exposes the instability of the color line and demonstrates that even in the U.S., Irene’s privileged status, supported by only a precariously unstable foundation, is in “danger” as well. Clare reveals that race in the U.S. and Brazil function more similarly than Irene will allow herself to believe because the only thing that separates them is a conceptual boundary without the power to hold Clare. By passing over the permeable color line, Clare ascended in socio-economic status above Irene, but she still views Clare as “inferior” and belonging to her “class and kind” – the black lower classes that form the foundation of Irene’s privileged position. To Irene, Clare is a “dangerous creature” that has escaped its cage, and now she must either be recaptured or destroyed.

Given how many of Clare's actions parallel the potential effects of Brazil's racial ideology as Irene perceives it, it is no coincidence that after running into her in Chicago, Irene begins to worry again about Brian's "unhappy restlessness" and "craving for some place strange and different" even though he has not voiced his desire to relocate to Brazil since "that long-ago time of storm and strain [between him and Irene]" (35; 40). Unfortunately for Irene, Brian does coincidentally begin voicing his dissatisfaction with life in American again soon after Irene returns from Chicago, which Irene interprets as a manifestation of his "craving" for Brazil. After a breakfast conversation where Brian exclaims, "Lord! how I hate sick people, and their stupid, meddling families," Irene quickly connects the outburst to Brian's "restlessness" and his "fantastic notion of [...] going off to Brazil" (40). In response to this resurfacing of Brian's "craving for some place strange and different," Irene decides that it will "have to be banked, smothered, and something offered in its stead. She would have to make some plan, some decision, at once" (41). In attempt to distract Brian's "craving" away from Brazil, Irene attempts to suggest "some European school for Junior next year, and Brian to take him" (42), but they end up arguing and parting ways before Irene has a chance to make her "first attempt at substitution" (43). Before Irene can make a second attempt at "substitution" she is interrupted again, this time by the arrival of Clare in her home.

As Irene sits in her room one October evening, contemplating how "the chagrin which she had felt at her first failure to subvert this latest manifestation of [Brian's] discontent had receded leaving in its wake an uneasy depression" (45), suddenly Clare arrives at the Redfield's house uninvited and enters Irene's room without knocking. Irene's thoughts move from her fear of Brazil to Clare with little transition, and after Clare convinces Irene to take her to the Negro Welfare League dance, Irene thoughts return to worrying about Brian, not wanting to "ruffle"

him with Clare's presence "while he was possessed of that unreasonable restless feeling" that Irene believed requires a substitution (52). However, Brian seems not to mind Clare accompanying them to the dance and over the next few months Clare's presence becomes a fixture in the Redfield's lives. Simultaneously, Irene begins to feel like Brian's continued restlessness, while similar in some ways to his "other spasmodic restlessnesses" (60), is also different than those previous occurrences. Irene finds Brian's mood so "incomprehensible and elusive" that she begins to doubt Brazil as the cause: "If I could only be sure that at bottom it's just Brazil" (60; 59), and in her doubt she comes to believe that the cause for Brian's "incomprehensible restlessness" is an affair with Clare. Irene believes that Clare has become the "substitution" to fulfill Brian's "craving for some [thing] strange and different," and she expresses bitter hurt over how "Brian's ache to go somewhere else, should have dwindled to a childish triviality" (67)! However, Irene's perception of Brian's desire for Clare represents more than just a childish triviality. Clare represents the embodiment of how Irene perceives Brazil's racial ideology, and thusly, Irene displaces Brian's desire for Brazil onto Clare, and this holds true regardless of whether the affair is real or imagined.

Clare and Brazil become so interrelated to Irene that she begins to think about the two interchangeably without realizing it. When Irene admits to herself that the affair had occurred (though she still has no proof) she begins to think of how to handle the situation:

Now that [Irene] had relieved herself of what was almost like a guilty knowledge, admitted that which by some six sense she had long known, she could again reach out for plans. Could again think of ways to keep Brian by her side, and in New York. For she would not go to Brazil. She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an

American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted. Not even because of Clare Kendry, or a hundred Clare Kendrys. (76)

Brazil and Clare coalesce into a singular menace to Irene, both threatening to take Brian and her “security” away from her. In wanting to keep Brian “by her side,” Irene aims to keep him away from both Clare and Brazil. Irene’s rationale implies that if Brian chooses to be with Clare he simultaneously chooses to relocate to Brazil, but in reality no tangible evidence exists supporting the interrelation of these two outcomes. Clare is not trying to take Brian away to Brazil, but in Irene’s mind Clare comes to stand in for Brazil and her presence serves as a constant reminder to Irene that though Brazil is distant, the “dangerous” influence of its racial ideology is still present and close.

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## **VI. Conclusion: The Killer Instinct**

Irene’s one hope for keeping Clare constrained within the boundaries of race and class comes with the help of her husband, John Bellew. Come March, Clare will travel with Bellew to Switzerland where their daughter, Margery, has been left for school, an occurrence Irene eagerly awaits. If Irene views Clare as a “dangerous animal” that has escaped from her cage of racial and class status, returning to Europe with Bellew traps Clare in her upper-class, white life where she can no longer actively expose the instabilities of the American color line. When Clare reveals to Irene that if Bellew ever found out her “true” race she would come to live in Harlem – “what [she] want[s]...more than anything else right now” (75) – the need for March to arrive becomes even more urgent to Irene. Without Bellew anchoring Clare down into a singular race and class, she would have the freedom to transgress these boundaries as she chooses, permanently exposing the instability of the color line and thusly, Irene’s “security” – much like a

relocation to Brazil would create instability in Irene's "security" as well. For a woman to whom "security" is "the most important and desired thing in life" (76), she responds to any threat to her "security" with the viciousness expected of someone defending the "most important [...] thing in [her] life." So when John Bellew barges into the party at the Freeland's apartment and his "white gaze [of Clare] in clear association with African Americans" exposes her "true" race, (Butler 171), Irene responds to the "threat" a "free" Clare poses to her "security" with "ferocity:"

Clare stood at the window [...] there was a faint smile on her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes. It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free.

(Larsen 79)

Clare's smile "madden[s]" Irene, who runs across the room with "ferocity" to keep her from becoming "free." Without hope of containing the "dangerous creature" of Clare, Irene chooses to destroy her. Irene's highly structured view of the world cannot have Clare free from the defining boundaries of race and, thus, class because Irene cannot fathom a world without these boundaries – a world ostensibly like Brazil. While the text provides no definitive explanation of Clare's death, the focalized narration that frequently reveals Irene's true thoughts and intentions – sometimes without her own conscious awareness – provides ample evidence that Irene murders her:

Irene wasn't sorry...What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backwards? Certainly one or the other. Not – But she mustn't, she warned herself, think of that. (80)



Irene stumbles over her own guilt and too quickly begins to worry what the others will think. She cannot even name the possibility that she killed Clare, “she mustn’t, she warned herself, think of that,” as if not thinking about it means it did not happen. If Irene knew she did not kill Clare, she would not struggle to remember the fact. In the immediate aftermath of Clare’s fall, the apparent explanation is that Irene pushed her.

If Clare Kendry serves as a symbol for Brazil, used to stage “certain moves...arguments and epiphanies” (Edwards 4), her character becomes a type of martyr in doing so. Irene kills Clare in attempt to silence the questions about the American color line both Clare and Brazil raise, and when Irene sees Clare lying dead in the snow she struggles to suppress a “sob of thankfulness” (Larsen 81). Irene believes she has prevailed over the “threat” Clare presented to her “security;” that without Clare Kendry, Brian will stay “by her side” and the boundaries of race and class can re-stabilize, returning structural soundness to Irene’s life. However, Clare does not create the instability in the American color line, she only exposes it, and ironically, killing Clare has done nothing to change Brian’s desire for Brazil; its specter will continue to haunt Irene. At the end of the novel, Irene essentially ends back where she started. Her marriage remains unstable due to the unresolved conflict of racial ideology her and Brian’s differing opinions on Brazil represents. The idea of Brazil – a world without a color line – will re-emerge to threaten the structure of Irene’s “security.” Whether the idea confronts Irene again through Brian or another “Clare Kendry,” people will continue to challenge the American color line and expose its instabilities, ensuring that Irene’s privileged middle-class status as a model for black racial uplift can never truly be “secure.”

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