When Nella Larsen, then a prominent young writer of the Harlem Renaissance, published her second and final novel, Passing, in 1929, the Supreme Court’s “separate but equal” interpretation of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment in Plessy v. Ferguson (1896) had been law for over thirty years. Plessy turned on the issue of the constitutionality of so-called Jim Crow laws, which mandated racially-segregated facilities for whites and “coloreds” throughout the South. Homer Plessy, a resident of Louisiana who described himself as “seven-eighths Caucasian and one-eighth African blood” (1138), was forcibly ejected, after he refused to leave voluntarily, from the first-class, whites-only section of a railroad car in his home state. Declaring that “the mixture of colored blood was not discernible in him, and that he was entitled to every recognition, right, privilege, and immunity secured to the citizens of the United States of the white race,” Plessy argued that the Louisiana law violated his constitutional rights of habeas corpus, equal protection, and due process. The Supreme Court denied the validity of this reasoning on several counts, among them that various state laws forbade interracial marriage on the grounds, as the State of Virginia later argued unsuccessfully before the Court in Loving v. Virginia (1967), that “Almighty God created the races white,
black, yellow, malay and red, and he placed them on separate continents . . . The fact that he separated the races shows that he did not intend for the races to mix."1 Second, in an egregious instance of conceptual blurring of categories of persons that implied, without submitting the proposition to literal scrutiny, that white males were intrinsically more ‘adult’ and ‘able’ than non-whites or women, the Court argued that most states had established “segregated” schools “for children of different ages, sexes and colors, and . . . for poor and neglected children” (Plessy 1141).2 The Court avoided responsibility for promoting institutional racism and established the constitutionality of de jure segregation by stating that “the assumption that the enforced separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority . . . is not by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put the construction upon it” (1143). They made an invidious distinction between the cultural and political rights of whites and ‘coloreds’ on the basis of the intrinsic “reasonableness” of long-established cultural practices.3 Writing for a majority of seven, Justice Henry Brown allowed that while the ‘officers’ empowered to judge racial identity by outward appearances might conceivably err in their judgment, the “object of the [Fourteenth] amendment was undoubtedly to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law, but in the nature of things it could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based upon color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality, or a commingling of the two races upon terms unsatisfactory to either” (1140).4

In the fifty-eight years between Plessy and the Court’s landmark decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas (1954), which declared separate public facilities based on race “inherently unequal,” many African-American authors pursued an actively critical engagement with the convoluted and contradictory terms of racial identity and identification set forth in Plessy. On the one hand, African-American letters faced the onerous burden of proving the cultural worth of black culture to an often doubting, condescending, and largely white audience. On the other hand, the legal decision and the Social Darwinism underlying it provided an unwelcome opportunity to thematize the willful ignorance and blindness informing racial segregation by exploring how racial stigmas were not founded in the “natural” superiority or inferiority of the races but rather constructed through historical prejudices and arbitrary (often illusory) social distinctions. Moreover, since Plessy not only denied the long if publicly unacknowledged history of interracial sexual unions (which had produced, among others, Homer Plessy as subject) but also strengthened existing miscegenation statutes by forbidding the social commingling of the races, narrative treatments of interracial sexual unions featuring characters who “passed” racially became an ideal vehicle through which to explore the inevitable intersection of racism (and, in some cases, sexism) with sexual taboos.

Seen in the light of the legal and cultural assumptions informing its production, Larsen’s Passing, the curious plot of which has thus far eluded sat-
isfactory analysis, becomes a searching exploration and critique of the aesthetic, narrative, and ideological incoherences that confronted Larsen as an urbane African-American woman author who eschewed racial separatism and nineteenth-century ‘racial uplift’ rhetoric—which might in part explain why she abandoned her promising literary career after writing this novel. Indeed, Passing, a relatively late example of this topos of American writing, represents both an original reconfiguration of and commentary on more conventional plots of racial “passing,” which typically center on a psychologically and culturally divided “tragic mulatto” figure, in such novels as James Weldon Johnson’s The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man and Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun, among others. While these novels offer trenchant critiques of institutional racism, they also emphasize the heavy personal costs of crossing over the ‘color line,’ and thus in some measure reinforce the consequences of racial division in an equally separatist “national” literature. Passing, in contrast, stresses the interpretive anxieties and sexual paranoias that make convention-bound people reluctant to allow others the freedom to travel freely throughout the many worlds, identities, and sexualities of American society. Larsen’s novel not only explores a legally fraudulent interracial union in the marriage between Clare Kendry and John Bellew, but also subtly delineates the intraracial sexual attraction of Irene Redfield for Clare, while the former projects her taboo desires for Clare onto her husband Brian. Ironically, Brian Redfield, who the text implies might be homosexual, evinces no sexual interest in women, but Irene nonetheless begins to suspect that Brian and Clare are conducting an illicit, clandestine affair. Since the term “passing” carries the connotation of being accepted for something one is not, the title of the novel serves as a metaphor for a wide range of deceptive appearances and practices that encompass sexual as well as racial “passing.” Focussed principally on the operation of chance and accident as well as the epistemological crises of unknowability that result from self-silencing and self-repression, Larsen’s novel ostensibly “passes” for a conventional narrative of racial “passing.”

The story is narrated from the point of view of Irene Redfield, a light-skinned, middle-class African-American woman who disdains “passing” and is married to a successful doctor, too dark to “pass,” by whom she has had two sons. Irene, although self-consciously proud of her African racial heritage, has internalized the “separate but equal” dictum of Plessy as well as the ideology of bourgeois morality, both of which lead to a notable prudishness on her part and an obsessive attention to seemingly miniscule distinctions of caste and class. The well-regulated surface of her existence is shattered, however, by the unexpected arrival of Clare Kendry, a light-skinned African-American woman from Irene’s long-forgotten childhood past who has, through a combination of personal adventurousness and familial mishaps, ended up marrying John Bellew, a prosperous white businessman who knows nothing of her racial identity and by whom she has had a daughter. Hence, these once intimate childhood friends are simultaneously separated.
and tethered together, so to speak, by the divergent stratagies they have adopted as adults to cope with their racial identities and their options to “pass” racially. The fact that they are, like Homer Plessy but unlike the vast majority of their fellow African-Americans, sufficiently light-skinned to “pass” marks them out as relatively privileged and distinctive individuals, ideally situated to both embody and expose the Janus-like duplicity of social arrangements that divide the races according to “discernible” outward appearances and, hence, “inner nature.”

Larsen connects the arbitrarily segregated lives of these two married women by having them meet accidentally in the rooftop restaurant of a Chicago hotel, where they are not in company with their husbands, and where Irene, in this instance, has resorted to “passing” to escape a sweltering heat wave. Clare’s chance meeting with her long-lost childhood friend instigates a potent desire in her, described in an effusive letter intertwining romantic and racial longings for Irene, to escape the isolated life of deception and secretiveness forced upon her by “passing”:

“...For I am lonely, so lonely...cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life...You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of...It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases...” (174)

These profound if, significantly, somewhat inarticulate yearnings to return to the conditions of her childhood, before she and Irene “fell” into the self-divided condition of adult women, culminate in her decision, near the end of the narrative, to abandon her husband and child and return home to Harlem. As Clare’s plans to reassume her earlier identity as an unmarried African-American crystallize, Irene convinces herself, with inconclusive evidence at best, that Clare actually intends to steal her husband Brian, a discontented if wittily urbane man who expresses periodic disgust with United States racism and who cherishes a dream, actively suppressed by Irene, of emigrating with his family to Brazil. In the denouement, which again takes place on a rooftop, Clare, Irene, and Brian assemble for a party hosted by a couple ironically named the Freelanders. John Bellew, who, unbeknownst to everyone save Irene, has accidentally discovered the racial identity of his wife by running into Irene with a woman too dark to “pass,” bursts into the apartment. Before the scene can develop beyond Bellew’s initial reaction of pained horror and outrage, Irene “accidentally” pushes Clare from the window, and she falls to her death. In the end, Clare—whose death, the text indicates, is interpreted and dismissed by the authorities as an “accident” or “suicide”—becomes a poignant symbol of the victory of de jure segregation and narrow social conformity over integration and self-creation, and thus a symbol of the eclipse of the potential of both Irene as an independent woman and the Harlem Renaissance as an artistic movement:

Corinne E. Blackmer

53
Gone! The soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene’s placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter. (272)

Given the unconventional nature of this plot, which conjoins Larsen’s interest in the operation of contingency and accident with her use of an unreliable narrator, earlier critics have judged *Passing* an artistic failure that represents an uneasy admixture of “public” issues of race and racial “passing” with the more “private” ones of sexual jealousy. The gender bias of this critique is not difficult to detect, and subsequently several African-American feminist critics focused on Larsen’s use of irony to critique, through the character of Irene Redfield, conventional bourgeois notions of feminine propriety and racial identity and identification (see Fuller, Youman, Ramsey, Tate, and Christian). In her 1986 introduction to the reissue of Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*, moreover, African-American feminist Deborah E. McDowell broke from (and, in some senses, extended) these critical interpretations in an atmosphere that, influenced most prominently by Alice Walker’s *The Color Purple* and Audre Lorde’s essays and poems, gave new importance to issues of lesbian sexuality in African-American literature. Treating *Passing*’s ostensible concern with racial passing as a rhetorical cover, McDowell contended that the novel’s apparent inconsistencies resulted from Larsen’s actual concern with exploring the taboos against lesbian desire. According to this analysis, the novel “superficially” concerns “passing for white” and related issues of racial loyalty, but “underneath the safety of that surface is the more dangerous story—though not named explicitly—of Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Clare” (xxvi).

This interpretation elucidates many of the otherwise quixotic motives that impel the narrative and serves in part to explain Irene’s highly contradictory and volatile reactions to Clare as instances of what Patricia Juliana Smith has termed “lesbian panic,” which finally impels Irene to destroy her friend in order to prevent disclosure, perhaps even to herself, of her taboo sexual desires. Nevertheless, McDowell’s analysis, which in effect substitutes sexual for racial passing, both dehistoricizes and somewhat mischaracterizes the text, in which lesbian desire becomes an aftereffect, or, perhaps more accurately, an inevitable corollary of racial panic and the sexualization of socially taboo racial contacts in an environment governed by the legal and cultural presumptions of *Plessy*. In a narrative centered on the emotionally charged relations between two light-skinned African-American women, both of whom hold the secret of Clare’s racial identity as an intimate and potentially explosive bond between them, their friendship also becomes fraught with secret sexual fantasies as the mysterious and alluring Clare becomes for Irene both an exotic object and a projection of her profound dread of and taboo desires for sexual pleasure, worldly experience, independence from men, and escape from the narrow conventions of the marriage plot. Clare’s
legally proscribed liberation from the constraints of racial identity configured through marriage implies, for Irene, the equally terrifying possibility of liberation from those of "feminine" and heterosexual propriety as well. Irene may be intensely curious about—and, indeed, both desirous and envious of—the capacity of an "exotic" person like Clare to resist or evade the forces of domination, but her fear of freedom eventually impels her to act much like a Social Darwinist, and thus to force this representative of sexual and racial "exoticism" to lose the battle for survival.

Although Larsen, in 1929, uses the term "passing" to connote both racial and sexuality masquerading, the recent shift in criticism from issues of racial to sexual "passing" can itself be historicized, for "passing" now refers almost exclusively to the self-protective disguise of identity practiced by lesbians and gays in a society presumed and enjoined to be universally heterosexual. Moreover, homosexuals continue to occupy both in law and culture an analogous if not parallel position to that held by the minority of African Americans under Plessy who were sufficiently light-skinned to "pass" for white and thus to hide their "innate" inferiority. The differences are significant inasmuch as the vast majority of African-Americans under Plessy could not (or chose not to) "pass" for white, whereas the vast majority of lesbians and gays do pass for, and are assumed to be (unless declared otherwise), heterosexual. The similarities between the groups are equally compelling, however, inasmuch as when Larsen wrote Passing, blackness and homosexuality were both held to be stigmas that disqualified the bearers of these labels from freedom from undue social burdens and equal protection under the Constitution. For Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, the social deployment of the hidden knowledge of racial identities (and homosexual desires) in contexts presumed to be universally white (and heterosexual) takes a form uncannily similar to what Richard D. Mohr calls "The Secret," or that informal community contract of complicity and deception which characterizes the epistemological regime of the majority of lesbian and gay lives (30). That Larsen inextricably intertwines both forms of "secrets," like both forms of "passing," indicates her interest in stressing the interrelationship of racial identification and homoerotic desire. That tragedy ensues in Passing once Irene Redfield misinterprets her own attraction for Clare Kendry, however, also clarifies the complex cultural and historical precedents of recent Supreme Court decisions that, deploying the hatred of homosexuals as an "invisible" fulcrum, have developed a mode of historically-based legal reasoning that threatens to erode relatively recent extensions of Constitutional protections to both women and racial minorities.

Since the late 1930s, the Supreme Court has identified several considerations for determining which governmental classifications require "heightened scrutiny" under its three-tier equal protection analysis of the Fourteenth Amendment: (1) whether the discrimination is unjustifiable or invidious; that is, based on an obvious, immutable, or distinguishing trait that frequently bears no relation to the ability to contribute to society; (2) whether the class
historically has suffered from purposeful discrimination; and (3) whether the class lacks the political power necessary to obtain protection from the political branches of government. But most courts have ignored purposeful historical discrimination and lack of political power and have simply concluded, without supporting authority, that heightened scrutiny is inapplicable in cases involving lesbians and gays, because homosexuality is not an "immutable characteristic."8 The very mode of framing this debate as one of a voluntary decision between heterosexual (i. e., "moral") behavior on the one hand and homosexual (i. e., "immoral") behavior on the other is itself deeply homophobic, as it assigns arbitrary values to the intrinsically neutral category of sexual orientation. This debate has, moreover, encouraged some scientific researchers to ascertain a biological basis for homosexual identity to meet the legal criterion for equal protection.9 By framing the issue in biological terms that implicitly regard homosexuality as a "crime against nature" and reducing the cultural dimensions of homosexual identity to criminal "acts," the courts have thus far evaded a broader ethical debate concerning the right to privacy, which "embodies the moral fact that a person belongs to himself and not others nor to society as a whole."10 Therefore, the present laws of the United States give force to societal homophobia by defining lesbians and gays, as they once defined African-Americans and women, as objects of contempt and lesser mortals who have a fundamentally different (and inferior) "nature" from other human beings, and thus do not deserve equal protection under the law.

The fact that the law offers no protection for sexual orientation has forced most homosexuals to adopt costly and self-damaging stratagies of secrecy and self-disguise, just as, before the Court's adoption of "heightened scrutiny" of racial classifications, Clare Kendry "passes" racially and adopts similarly destructive deceptions to elude "recognition" by American society. The peculiarly exposed condition of homosexuals has also obscured the fact that whereas race, gender, alienage, and illegitimacy can, like sexual orientation, be changed or concealed, these former conditions have, in recent times, been defined as "immutable characteristics" and thus compel heightened scrutiny by the courts. For these reasons, Kurt D. Hermansen has recently argued that "immutable characteristic" not be treated as a presumably biological category defined through history, culture, and politics, but rather in reference to a particularly reprehensible form of discrimination inflicted upon minorities qua minorities:

While one might be able to alter or conceal traits such as race, gender or sexual orientation, that change can only occur at a prohibitive cost to the average individual. The court only looks to the immutable traits, which are central, defining traits of personhood, which one may alter only at the expense of significant damage to one's identity. In this context, sexual orientation fulfills the requirement that the identifying trait be immutable. (174)
Nevertheless, even if the courts refuse to grant sexual orientation the status of an "immutable characteristic," they must make the more important decision as to whether the perpetuation of social stigmas against homosexuals constitutes a legitimate state interest. In Palmore v. Sidoti (1984), for example, the Supreme Court held that a white father could not sue for custody of the child he had had with his divorced wife, a white woman who had remarried an African-American man, on grounds that social recrimination against a mixed-race marriage would inevitably damage the child. In this case, the Supreme Court ignored the high-tier equal protection analytic it had set out for itself, because that analytic, which holds that promoting the welfare of children constitutes a compelling state interest, would have resulted in giving custody of the child to the father. Making no explicit reference to race, the Court held that while social prejudices may be outside the reach of the law, "the law cannot, directly or indirectly, give them effect." The principle in Palmore, if neutrally considered, holds that the perpetuation of stigmas does not constitute an acceptable means by which the state can carry out its interests. Hence, in City of Cleburne v. Cleburne Living Center (1985), the Court, quoting Palmore, struck down zoning laws that gave effect to fears and biases over having a group home for the mentally challenged nearby, even though the Court refused to broaden its equal protection analytic by holding that discriminations against the mentally challenged were "suspect" or "quasi-suspect." 11

One year later, however, in Bowers v. Hardwick (1986), the Supreme Court not only refused to see but also pointedly denied the relevance of Palmore or Cleburne for gays and lesbians and upheld the constitutionality of a Georgia sodomy law on the grounds that "Sodomy was a criminal offense at common law and was forbidden by the laws of the original thirteen States when they ratified the Bill of Rights," and that the law expressed a legitimate state purpose in that it promoted "morality," which the Court defined simply as "majority sentiments about . . . morality." The second dissenting opinion, written by Justice John Paul Stevens and joined by Justices William J. Brennan and Thurgood Marshall, not only pointed out that the original sodomy statutes had applied neutrally both to heterosexuals and homosexuals, and married and unmarried persons, but also that "at one point in the 20th century, Georgia's law was construed to permit certain sexual conduct between homosexual women even though such conduct was prohibited between heterosexuals" (2857). 12 Since the Court had previously established that a State may not prohibit sodomy (here defined as anal intercourse or cunnilingus) between married couples in Griswold or between unmarried heterosexual couples in Eisenstadt, the Court had to establish why the selective enforcement of the statute against the class of homosexual persons constituted a compelling state interest. By disdaining to advance an adequate rational basis for this selective enforcement, the dissent strongly implied that the Bowers majority had, ironically, transformed homosexuals into a "suspect class." Moreover, Justice Harry Blackmun, as if to underscore the majority's unprincipled depa-

Corinne E. Blackmer
ture from presumably settled legal precedents, noted in his dissenting opinion the “almost uncanny” parallels between Bowers and Loving v. Virginia (1967), in which the petitioners employed biblical doctrine (as well as majority opinions regarding morality) to show that “traditional Judeo-Christian values” proscribed interracial marriage.\(^\text{13}\)

By employing arguments from biblical morality and social custom to deprive lesbians and gays of equal protection, the Bowers decision also places women and African Americans in greater jeopardy as the rights of both these groups are guaranteed, as Passing amply illustrates, by relatively recent extensions of constitutional law rather than long-standing tradition. Indeed, Richard D. Mohr has argued persuasively that Bowers stood behind the Court’s subsequent decision in City of Richmond v. Croson (1989), which crippled municipal and state affirmative action programs by establishing the fundamental rights of white people, much as Bowers upheld the fundamental rights of “heterosexuals” (or, more accurately, the ill-defined class of “non-sodomites”). In City of Richmond, Mohr notes, the Court held that state and municipal minority set-aside programs are unconstitutional under the equal protection clause because racial classifications made with respect to whites are as “suspect” as those made with respect to blacks:

If, as per Bowers, it is those actions that are by tradition socially averred that are the actions that are performed by right, then it is the people whose privileges are by tradition socially averred who have those privileges as a matter of right. It is the history and tradition of white privilege that converts the privileges into white rights. Thus, the style of reasoning specifically developed to deny rights to lesbians and gay men is now used to restrict legal protections afforded to other minorities and to enhance majority privilege. (72-73)

The peculiarly insidious manner in which social prejudice against lesbians and gays is employed to undermine the basis of civil rights protections, perhaps most notably for African-American women, is exhaustively illustrated in Passing, where Irene Redfield’s sexual and racial panic transforms her into the unwitting instrument and reinforcer of social prejudices and legal prohibitions designed to keep women and African Americans in place. Charles R. Larson has recently used biographical evidence to suggest that Larsen’s marital difficulties with her husband, Elmer Imes, a professor of physics at Fisk University who subsequently became romantically involved with a white woman, are reflected in the plot of Passing, where Irene suspects her husband of infidelities with Clare and, like the latter, becomes a woman with unspeakable “secrets” after she destroys her rival. While Larson describes with great insight the mind of an intensely suspicious, rather cloistered woman who does not fully understand the story in which she becomes implicated as the central narrative consciousness, this critic’s “heterosexualization” of the narrative not only ignores the fact that Larsen’s marital difficulties and divorce occurred after the publication of Passing, but also reprises the humiliating public scandal that Larsen subsequently endured in 1932,
when the *Baltimore Afro-American* conflated Larsen with her fictional character Clare Kendry and suggested that the former ‘jumped’ from the window in the wake of her discovery of her husband’s affair with a white woman.14

*Passing* is not fictionalized autobiography so much as it is acute social observation of her artistic peer community, for Larsen fashioned herself as a writer in the context of the Harlem Renaissance, most of whose major figures were both racial and sexual minorities.15 In addition, Larsen dedicated *Passing* to her literary sponsors, Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff, the white patrons and promoters of the Harlem Renaissance. Since Van Vechten actively sponsored lesbian and gay modernist writers such as Gertrude Stein and Ronald Firbank in addition to African-American authors like Larsen (whose novels he assisted in having published by Alfred Knopf), her imbrication of the issues of racial and sexual “passing” can be seen as both an appeal to her potential audience and literary colleagues and an informed critique of socially conservative African Americans like Irene Redfield, whose understandable desire to gain marginal acceptance and security in American society under *Plessy* compels her to imitate the prejudices of the dominant society. Unfortunately and tragically, Irene reinforces her identity as an ‘American’ by destroying an African-American woman much like herself in outward appearance and thus diminishes, through ignorance, perceived necessity, and limited moral agency, the value and meaning of her own selfhood.

Given the secrecy and duplicity enjoined upon Clare and the self-deception unwittingly practiced by Irene, neither woman can, in any sense, be considered a morally exemplary or self-consistent character. Within these intractable limitations, however, Larsen explores the crucial distinctions between Clare’s highly self-conscious rhetorical deployments of the fictions of race and Irene’s unself-conscious internalization of the dictum of *Plessy*. While Clare becomes adept at subverting expectations and eluding capture through selective shape-shifting and camouflage, Irene has a self-divided consciousness both as an African American and a woman, for she believes she can gain security and meaning solely through marriage and ignore the larger implications of living in a racially divided and segregated society. While Irene finds Clare’s refusal of her own “feminine” ideal of self-effacement, self-denial, and service to men proof of her selfish, immoral, and “cat-like” disposition (173), the example of Clare’s nonconformity not only invokes her reluctant admiration but also eventually shatters her illusions of the inviolability and ‘sanctity’ of masculine propriety and power. Moreover, Larsen makes the point about Irene’s sexual attraction to (and fear of) Clare and the defiant bid for freedom she represents, in two crucial scenes that represent an extremely detailed and, I would argue, intentional representation of the epistemological uncertainties attending both racial and sexual “passing.” In the first, both forms of “passing” are inextricably imbricated through projections of “exoticism,” while the second illustrates that the social predicaments faced by African Americans who “pass” are structurally analogous to those faced by homosexuals who “pass.”

*Corinne E. Blackmer*
The first occurs in the initial encounter between Irene and Clare, which sets the stage for the action that follows, which takes place in a rooftop tea-room of the Drayton Hotel in Chicago. Significantly, Irene is away from her home in New York City, not in company with her husband, and therefore “free” to exercise the option of “passing” for white to escape a heat wave. Once settled in this unfamiliar environment, Irene’s attention becomes riveted on a “sweetly smelling” woman wearing a “fluttering dress of green chiffon [with] mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths” (176) that associate her with familiar topoi of feminine artifice and French exoticism. Her aura of illicit sexuality is heightened, moreover, by her brief appearance with a white man, neither her husband nor a mere platonic friend, whom the woman swiftly if gracefully dismisses from her company. Since this scene takes place in a hotel, an acute reader might surmise that this woman is an expensive mistress or prostitute, although the text, narrated from Irene’s characteristically discreet and unobservant point of view, does not comment further. Instead, Irene openly admires the woman’s dress, “her dark, almost black, eyes,” her “wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin,” and her “odd sort of smile” (177), which Irene interprets as hovering between sexual provocation and self-assurance. Conscious, at last, that she has been staring at this woman, she is even more disconcerted when the stranger, in turn, stares back at her, like “one who with the utmost singleness of mind and purpose was determined to impress firmly and accurately each detail of Irene’s features upon her memory for all time” (178).

Ironically, although Irene cannot determine what she sees when she gazes at this alluring woman, or what the woman sees when she gazes at Irene, in reality she looks at someone who very much resembles herself in outward appearance, indicating that Irene, at least when alone, does not “see” herself as an African American (or an “exotic” woman). Racial identification (and self-identification) is, Larsen hints, a matter of context and social convention. As if to underscore Irene’s limited self-knowledge and fear of self-disclosure when confronted with her mirror “image” in another woman, she begins to question her own outer appearance and suspects this woman might “unmask” her racial identity, an anxiety uncannily similar to that an unconscious lesbian would experience in company with another “suspected” lesbian to whom she found herself unaccountably attracted. Although Irene experiences “a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar” (178), she promptly dismisses her fears of racial disclosure, as “white people were so stupid about such things” and “always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a Gypsy” (178). In this context, Irene’s fear of racial exposure both parallels and masks her fear of sexual exposure, particularly to herself. Irene, however, automatically assumes that the woman staring at her must be white, suggesting that Irene regards this stranger as possessing an ineffable power over her which, on the one hand, distances them, but on the other, draws them together in an ineluctable bond of mutual attraction and fascination. In this instance, then, racial invisibility camouflages all other
modes of recognition, enabling Irene to deny what she sees and finds compelling about this mysterious woman.

At this point, however, the stranger approaches and, with grace and warmth, 'unmasked' herself as Irene's long forgotten childhood friend, Clare Kendry. Having experienced life on both sides of the 'color line,' and thus expert at distinguishing reality from conventional appearances, Clare immediately recognizes Irene on a personal and historical rather than an abstract or "exotic" level. She launches into a picaresque account of the accidents and misadventures that have befallen her since the death of her white father (which, ironically, removed her from the black community) and that have resulted in her perpetrating a legal fraud by marrying a white man who knows nothing of her racial identity. By the end of this story, Irene, whose experience has been far more limited and uniform than Clare's, and who already projects a certain taboo "exoticism" on her friend, longs to ask Clare how she sustains her racial masquerade, but, with her customary propriety, finds herself "unable to think of a single question that in its context or its phrasing was not too frankly curious, if not actually impertinent" (187). In other words, the intimate details of how Clare "passes" for white are inappropriate questions for a "proper lady" to ask, and Irene therefore retains an essential ignorance regarding Clare that becomes increasingly fraught with danger as the narrative progresses. On the other hand, Clare's knowledge of the profundity of others' capacities for self-deception and the complexity of her own experience has obviated temptations on her part to exoticize or primitivize others. Nevertheless, the manner in which the accidents of her personal history have made her unacceptable in both the white and African-American worlds becomes illustrated in the next major scene of the novel, after Clare convinces a highly reluctant Irene to attend an afternoon tea party in her apartment.

Clare and Irene are joined by Gertrude, a childhood friend of both women who has pursued yet another social configuration of racial identification inasmuch as, like Irene, she does not "pass" for white, although she too, like Clare, has married a white man. In this context, Irene, unaccustomed to being "out of place," feels both outnumbered and defensive, while Clare, with her almost ludicrous attention to environmental disguise, has decorated her sitting room in dark browns and blues in order to obscure the sharp visual distinctions between white and black. This masquerade of interior decor serves to further ironize the problematics of racial identity and identification when Clare's husband arrives to "rescue" them from a stilted conversation that has devolved into embarrassing banalities and heavy silence. John, with no hint of self-consciousness, refers to his wife, whom he affectionately complains has become "darker" since their marriage, by the nickname "Nig," but then complains viciously about the "niggers" he reads about in the newspapers. Larsen reveals the limits of knowledge conveyed through language when compared with the ambiguities of perception inherent in experience, since the difference between marital love and racial ani-
mus comes down to the syllable “-ger.” In launching into an ignorant and bigoted attack on blacks in the company of three African-American women “passing” for white, this scene replicates with remarkable accuracy the social dynamics experienced by closeted lesbians and gays when in company with people who, presuming everyone to be heterosexual (or, perhaps more insidiously, shame those suspected of being “queer” into silence), openly attack or ridicule homosexuals.

Clare, however, seemingly determined to make her friends admire her recklessness and share the intense contradictions of her day-to-day life, almost goads her husband into displaying his dangerous blindness, as if this humiliating ‘spectacle’ will finally expose the speciousness of her own rationales for “passing.” In reality, her friends can hardly “enjoy” the presumed superiority of their insight into the real state of affairs, since their knowledge leaves them powerless in the face of Bellew’s privileged and voluble ignorance. Therefore, this strategy places Clare and her friends in an ironic double bind, since they must modulate between secret knowledge and the social presumption of whiteness. As in the analogous case of lesbians and gays, if they defend blacks against his racist slander, they might expose themselves as the very people Bellew attacks, and thus jeopardize Clare’s marriage and social masquerade. In effect, this scene reveals to the women their limited moral agency in providing them the untenable choices between silent complicity and exposure. Thus, the question of what ‘loyalty’ to race, to sex, or to Clare might mean in this context is impossible to determine, since any valid description of reality depends upon the articulated language of personal history and experience rather than obscure appearances offered visually. Yet this carefully crafted visual illusion eloquently demonstrates the limits of “passing” and thus dramatizes the inescapable moral conundrums that finally impel Clare to leave her husband and return to Harlem.

Unfortunately, this scene does not have the ‘intended’ effect on Irene, who feels justifiably enraged over her powerlessness in the face of Bellew’s bigotry and thus adamantly resists acknowledging the full dimensions of Clare’s predicament. Since Irene, like society at large, is unwilling to assume responsibility for her knowledge, in any sense, of Clare Kendry, she becomes for Irene a ‘sign’ for the intractable social and moral dilemmas attendant on Plessy. Significantly, however, although Irene vows never to see Clare again and dismisses her lingering “sense of panic” (212) by projecting onto Clare the abstract offense of racial disloyalty, she cannot for long repress the profound attraction she feels for Clare as an “exotic” woman sufficiently daring to violate the conventions of American society, particularly since her successful defiance represents a potential model for Irene herself. Thus, although Irene on one level shuns and condemns Clare, on another level her attraction redoubles when Clare, exercising her formidable will against the force of circumstance, arrives uninvited and unwanted at Irene’s home. Once Clare breaks into the “sanctum” of Irene’s private bedroom and “drol[ls] a kiss on [Irene’s] dark curls” (224), Irene’s distance and aversion transform
almost magically into admiration and desire for intimacy: “Looking at the woman before her, Irene Redfield had a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling. Reaching out, she grasped Clare’s two hands in her own and cried with something like awe in her voice: ‘Dear God! But aren’t you love-ly, Clare!’” (225).

The quasi-sexual gallantry of this encounter is reinforced when Clare comments suggestively that, in asking the post office for letters from Irene that never arrived, she had felt sure that “they were all beginning to think that I’d been carrying on an illicit love affair and that the man had thrown me over” (225, italics mine). Since virtually all of Clare’s ‘affairs’ are, in some measure, “illicit,” and Irene feels constrained by her sense of “decorum” not to probe into the truth, the remainder of the text details the intense ambivalences Irene experiences through her realization that Clare, “in spite of her determined selfishness . . . was yet capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Indeed, never cared to know” (226).

Indeed, once Clare threatens to return to Harlem and thus to transform from an “exotic” dream into a “familiar” reality, Irene seems impelled to associate Clare’s bid for freedom and self-creation to her husband Brian’s long deferred dream of escaping to Brazil. At last, in a kind of interpretive desperation, Irene conflates Clare and Brian in her imagination as potential “run-aways” and imagines that she is really involved in a rather mundane plot of marital infidelity. While it is perfectly true that Clare, as the scene in the Drayton Hotel implies, is far from a conventionally moral woman, there is no tangible evidence to suggest that she plans to secure her position in Harlem society by stealing Brian from Irene. In fact, Irene’s determination to make Brian’s dream of Brazil “die” constitutes the first in a series of destructive longings for stability and order that culminate in her determination to destroy Clare as the embodiment of her own socially, racially, and sexually transgressive desires. The remaining narrative is played out against a backdrop of Irene’s increasingly pronounced extremes of physical attraction and moral aversion for her ‘exotic’ friend. Aware of the racial and sexual masquerades enjoined upon the characters by Plessy, Irene decides that she must maintain her social respectability and economic security at any cost, even if “only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known” (234). As she fears that “If Clare were freed,” anything might happen” (268), she acts in the guise of a Social Darwinist compelled, as it were, to vanquish Clare as an instance of an “exotic” culture that, however seductive and admirable, must fall before the “superior” forces of American civilization. In removing Clare, however, Irene also eliminates the possibility of her own freedom from the shackles of the racial and sexual conventions that imprison her.

While the strategies of self-disguise and masquerade Clare employs are far from ideal, they represent viable means of survival and self-transformation under conditions that temporarily limit her moral agency as she fashions
an identity that allows her greater autonomy and self-determination. Tragically, Clare is not permitted to complete this journey or force the other characters in the novel to confront their ignorance or drop their self-protective disguises. Thus, a novel by an ostensibly heterosexual author forcefully critiques censorship and self-repression as well as the conventional narrative paradigms that compel her, through the agencies of Irene Redfield and John Bellew, to destroy anyone who resists these stifling social and artistic conventions. Hence, through the destruction of Clare Kendry, Larsen also suggests the intractable artistic limits that confronted her in this, her second and final novel. Accordingly, the social and legal dimensions of racial segregation and sexual "panic" are neither separable nor tangential issues in Passing. Rather, they are central in an innovative narrative that posits a choice between a racially divided and moralistic model of social and artistic decorum ultimately enforced by John Bellew and his like, and an integrated and worldly model that challenges not only the lingering separatist traditions of Plessy v. Ferguson but also the willful ignorance and sexual paranoia embodied in its contemporary legal analogue, Bowers v. Hardwick.

NOTES

1The Court not only held that the invidious racism of Virginia's law violated the Equal Protection Clause, but also that "the law deprived the Lovings of due process by denying them the freedom of choice to marry that had long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men" (2854).

2Specifically, the Court treats age (as well as poverty and neglect) as if they are parallel to the categories of race and sex. States can thus establish different schools on the basis of race and sex using the same "principle" used to establish separate elementary, junior, and high school facilities.

3In this instance, the Court applied the standard of "reasonableness" to the Fourteenth Amendment, and found that "in determining the question of reasonableness, [the Court] is at liberty to act with reference to the established usages, customs, and traditions of the people, and with a view to the promotion of their comfort, and the preservation of the public peace and good order" (1143).

4In his lone dissenting opinion, Judge Harlan noted prophetically that "the judgment this day rendered will, in time, prove to be quite as pernicious as the decision made by this tribunal in the Dred Scott Case" (1146).

5After the publication of Passing, Larsen received a Guggenheim Fellowship (the first awarded to an African-American woman) to write her third novel, Mirage, which was to focus on the intersections of Latin, Anglo, and African-American cultures, but she never finished the project. She subsequently returned to her earlier career as a nurse, and some critics, notably Charles R. Larson, have speculated that the breakup of her marriage with Elmer Imes, in addition to the furor over Larsen's supposed plagiarism of a short story, "Sanctuary," caused her to retreat from writing. Nevertheless, the ending of Passing, which presents a classic instance of what Rachel Blau DuPlessis has termed "no ending to write beyond" seems an equally compelling reason for Larsen's decision to abandon literature.
6Smith defines "lesbian panic" as "the disruptive action or reaction that occurs when a character . . . is incapable of confronting her own lesbianism or homoerotic desire." I thank her for access to her unpublished work ("And I Wondered If She Might Kiss Me" and "Nothing Happened").

7In arguing in favor of outing, Mohr argues that "The Secret [that] currently binds the [gay and lesbian] community together is a commitment to a belief in the community's worthlessness. The very structuring principle of the community functions as a denial that the community exists—indeed, a denial that it should exist" (30).

8In Woodward v. United States the Federal Circuit cited no authority in asserting that "Members of recognized suspect or quasi-suspect classes, e. g., blacks or women, exhibit immutable characteristics, whereas homosexuality is primarily behavioral in nature" (1076). In High Tech Gays v. Defense Industry Security Clearance Office, the Ninth Circuit repeated this language almost verbatim, asserting that "Homosexuality is not an immutable characteristic; it is behavioral and hence is fundamentally different from traits such as race, gender, or alienage, which define already existing suspect and quasi-suspect classes" (573).

9In "Homosexuality and Biology," gay scientist Chandler Burr marshals the growing if highly contested evidence for the biological basis of homosexual orientation, and concludes by noting that while opponents "discern in the biological quest the seeds of genocide . . . the spectre of the surgical or chemical 'rewiring' of gay people, or of abortions of fetal homosexuals who have been hunted down in the womb . . . Five decades of psychiatric evidence demonstrates that homosexuality is immutable, and nonpathological, and a growing body of more recent evidence implicates biology in the development of sexual orientation" (65). Burr realizes, however, that scientific research can provide no antidote to the misuse of science in a homophobic society. For this reason, the struggle for gay rights must ultimately rest on "fundamental questions involving human rights, human freedom, and human tolerance." See also Halley, who contends, arguing against legal strategies that seek to secure rights for sexual minorities by tethering homosexuality to the legal discourse of "immutable characteristics," that the supposed homogeneity of the category "heterosexual" needs to be exposed as an intrinsically incoherent, self-contradictory legal fiction.

10Quoted from Justice Blackmun in his dissenting opinion in Bowers v. Hardwick (1986), who quoted Justice Stevens quoting Fried, Correspondence, 6 Phil. & Public Affairs (1977): 288-289, in his concurring opinion in Thornburgh v. American College of Obstetricians & Gynecologists, 476 U. S., at 777, n. 5, 106 S. Ct. at 2187, n. 5. While the right to privacy has come under attack recently as an appropriate legal strategy for securing rights for sexual minorities, it is important to remember that, while privacy and secrecy can overlap, they are nonetheless distinct entities. A disclosure of sexual orientation does not violate privacy since such a disclosure reveals nothing about private sexual acts or activities between consenting adults.

11The decision of the Court in Cleburne not to decide the case on heightened equal protection scrutiny indicates that the Court (perhaps with lesbians and gays in mind) wants to delimit the class who can claim suspect or quasi-suspect status. The Court refused to deem the mentally retarded a quasi-suspect class because doing so would make it "difficult to find a principled way to distinguish a variety of other groups who have perhaps immutable disabilities setting them off from others, who cannot themselves mandate the desired legislative responses, and who can claim some degree of prejudice from at least part of the public at large . . . We are reluctant to set out on that course, and we decline to do so."

Corinne E. Blackmer
Justice Stevens cites *Thompson v. Alredge*, in which the Georgia Supreme Court held that the sodomy statute referred to anal intercourse and did not prohibit lesbian activity. In *Riley v. Garrett*, moreover, the Georgia Supreme Court held that the same statute did not prohibit heterosexual cunnilingus. The current Georgia statute under consideration in *Bowers* provides that “[a] person commits the offense of sodomy when he performs or submits to any sexual act involving the sex organs of one person and the mouth or anus of another,” (*Bowers* 2849). Stevens also refers to the definition of sodomy given in May: “Sodomy, otherwise called buggery, bestiality, and the crime against nature, is the unnatural copulation of two persons with each other, or of a human being with a beast . . . It may be committed by a man with a man, by a man with a beast, or by a woman with a beast, or by a man with a woman—his wife, in which case, if she consent, she is an accomplice.” While Justice Stevens points out the wide historical variability of sodomy statutes, neither of the two dissenting opinions mentions that English Common Law had never specifically applied to lesbian sexuality. The decision in *Bowers* to group lesbians under “homosexual sodomy” is thus a very new social construction of sexual taboo with very little history or tradition to support it.

See *Loving v. Virginia*. Justice Blackmun notes that in *Loving* as in *Bowers*, the petitioners “relied heavily on the fact that when the Fourteenth Amendment was ratified, most of the States had similar prohibitions [against sodomy and miscegenation, respectively].”

In some senses, Larson’s introduction can be seen as a direct response to McDowell’s earlier introduction to *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Larson never refers to McDowell’s introduction, underplays Larsen’s feminist concerns, and makes no mention of the possibility that *Passing* might depict female (or male) homoerotic desire. Larson quotes the headlines from three articles in the *Baltimore Afro-American*: “Fisk Professor Is Divorced by N. Y. Novelist”; “Friends Think Love Cooled While Wife Wintered in Europe”; and “Recall ‘Jump’ from Window” (xvi-xvii).

Eric Garber notes that many of the leading figures of the Harlem Renaissance—for example, Bruce Nugent, Langston Hughes, Wallace Thurman, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Alain Locke, Bessie Smith, Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Ethel Waters, Josephine Baker, Alberta Hunter, and Gladys Bentley—were gay, lesbian, or bisexual.

**WORKS CITED**


Corinne E. Blackmer 67