

study, in particular, is a strong scholarly complement to Hartman's intimate reflections. It is impossible, finally, to read *Lose Your Mother* without recognizing the layered conversation Hartman sustains with the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah's moving novel *Two Thousand Seasons*. The poetics of dispossession and stubborn faith in the power of compassion so compellingly rendered in Armah's stunning prose also mark Hartman's meditations about her journey along the slave route.

—Suzette A. Spencer

NOTES

1. Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford UP, 1997).
2. Richard Wright, *Black Power: A Record of Reactions in a Land of Pathos* (New York: Harper, 1954) 175.
3. Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Literature, Translation, and the Rise of Black Internationalism* (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003).
4. Wright 140.
5. I am borrowing here from Edwards's work on translation and diaspora. See *The Practice of Diaspora*.
6. See also Lydia Polgreen, "Ghana's Uneasy Embrace of Slavery's Diaspora," *New York Times* 27 Dec. 2005: A1.
7. 133.
8. For more on black travel writing in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, see Farah Jasmine Griffin and Cheryl J. Fish, *A Stranger in the Village: Two Centuries of African-American Travel Writing* (Boston: Beacon, 1998).

Kaplan, Carla, ed. *Nella Larsen's Passing: Authoritative Text Backgrounds and Contexts Criticism*. New York: W.W. Norton, 2007.

Harlem Renaissance writer Nella Larsen could not have imagined the extent of current-day interest in her life or writing. Although she gained prominence in her time for two well-received novels, became the first African-American woman awarded a Guggenheim, and played a central role in Harlem's vibrant social scene, she died in obscurity after close to forty years of literary silence. Dubbed the "Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance" two decades ago, Larsen now figures as one of the period's central and most studied authors. Carla Kaplan's new, deftly edited critical edition of *Passing* confirms Larsen's place in the literary canon and ensures that her work will not be forgotten again.

Kaplan, in her introduction, states the importance of Larsen's second novel: "[. . .] *Passing* questions the very *idea* of race, exposing it as one of our most powerful—and dangerous fictions" (xi). *Passing* is the story of two light-skinned black women whose comfortable lives unravel when they are re-acquainted in a whites-only restaurant. Irene, a prominent physician's wife, enjoys the Harlem Renaissance's new prosperity, but fears that her husband is less serene with their middle-class life. Her estranged childhood friend Clare, who has been passing for white in a restrictive marriage to a wealthy, racially intol-

erant businessman, suddenly finds the magnetic pull of Harlem too strong to resist. The women's renewed friendship has tragic consequences when Clare's African-American past is discovered.

Larsen's swift-moving, modern story needs little explanation, even now, close to eighty years later. Kaplan wisely chooses not to interfere in this critical edition. She presents Larsen's slim novel with limited commentary, appending footnotes mostly to define the out-of-date slang (e.g., "ofay" indicating a white person) or to provide biographies of popular Harlem Renaissance figures perhaps unfamiliar today, such as singer-performer Ethel Waters.

The strength of Kaplan's book is the fascinating historical material she has assembled that contextualizes Larsen's novel. With dozens of tantalizing newspaper stories and contemporary journalistic accounts, Kaplan successfully presents the historical framework of passing and contemporary discussions of race. Today, it is difficult to fathom a headline like this one which appeared in a 1928 *New York World*: "Crossing the Color Line: Social and Economic Ambitions Lead Negroes to 'Pass' at Rate of 5,000 a Year to White Fold" (117). But such was the discussion during the time Larsen wrote her novel. Strict adherence to the one-drop rule and Jim Crow laws made policing the color line important, and African Americans who passed flaunted those rules.

Almost a century later, American ideas of race are shifting and the very notion of passing seems anachronistic. Multiracial celebrities and public figures identify and are identified as biracial or multiracial in the popular press. Future readers of *Passing* may not understand the problem of the color line in the same way, and these historical accounts provide helpful insight into American racial attitudes of the early 1900s.

Most interesting are the newspaper stories related to the Rhinelander case, an interracial marriage scandal that rocked New York's high society, and which is mentioned briefly in *Passing*. After a surprise encounter with John Bellew, Clare's racist white husband, Irene, who was in the company of an obviously black woman friend at the time, wonders whether Clare's secret past has been exposed: "What if Bellew should divorce Clare? Could he? There was the Rhinelander case" (71).

The sensational trial, in which the wealthy Leonard "Kip" Rhinelander was pressured by his family to sue for divorce from Alice Jones, garnered headlines almost daily, such as the following: "Calls Rhinelander Dupe of Girl He Wed: Husband's Counsel Says He Will Prove Bride Was Negro and Practiced Fraud" (133). Rhinelander claimed that Jones had fooled him into believing she was white. The near-year-long trial ended in a victory for Jones, but not without causing her great humiliation. Not only were her love letters read aloud in court, but she was forced to disrobe to the waist in front of the jury to prove that her lover had in fact seen that she was clearly of Negro blood. The Rhinelander case makes obvious to a present-day reader the stakes of racial passing. The trial, writes Kaplan, "served to remind black women across the nation of the dangers of crossing race lines" (xviii).

What is needed, but missing, from these historical sections is Kaplan's own commentary or clear guidelines for inclusion. Does Kaplan hope that the newspaper stories provide all sides of the period's race debates? Except for the Rhinelander case, were the newspaper stories ones that Larsen read or was influenced by? Kaplan includes a 1931 excerpt from *Outlook and Independent* by Caleb Johnson that posits that "the American Negro will eventu-

ally vanish, completely absorbed into the general body of mixed bloods of all races which will constitute the American people of the future" (123). Though interesting, it is unclear why Kaplan includes a story that was published two years after *Passing*.

Kaplan has also assembled excerpts from fiction by both black and white authors who have written about the subject of passing. (Interestingly, in the short biographical descriptions, Kaplan notes only the race of the African-American writers represented.) Kaplan provides an exhaustive overview of narratives about passing and racially mixed characters that discover or confess the "cross in their blood" or plead with others to keep their secrets. Included, in two sections titled "Selections from Stories and Novels of Passing: 'The Moment of Regret'" and "The Tragic Mulatto," are excerpts, among others, from Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun*, James Weldon Johnson's *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and Mark Twain's *Pudd'n'head Wilson and Those Extraordinary Twins* (one noted absence, however, is the writing of Jean Toomer).

In these literary excerpts, passers—tormented by the truth of their past—faint, plead, and decry the Gods. Melodrama governs these passing narratives as it does in Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy; or, Shadows Uplifted*. When the protagonist, Iola, learns that she is part-black, she is "almost wild with agony" and paces "as the fearful truth broke in crushing anguish upon her mind." She then "burst[s] into paroxysm of tears succeeded by peals of hysterical laughter" (205). In Frank J. Webb's *The Garies and Their Friends*, the protagonist Clarence wrestles with whether to tell his white fiancé of his black heritage: "[...] I must shut this secret in my bosom, where it gnaws, gnaws, gnaws, until it has almost eaten my heart away [...] it is breaking down my health and strength—wearing my very life out of me; no escaped galley-slave ever felt more than I do [...] and yet I must nourish this tormenting secret" (183). When Clarence's secret is revealed, he is shunned by all, becomes inexplicably ill, and dies. The story concludes: "we deem thee better off resting upon thy cold pillow of earth, than battling with that malignant sentiment that persecuted thee, and has crushed energy, hope, and life from many stronger hearts" (192). The narratives follow a formulaic construction: the light-skinned protagonist learns, or discovers, or is exposed as black, and the revelation leads to tragic consequences.

When reading *Passing* alongside these texts, Larsen's great achievement is all the more evident. First, Larsen's spare and elegant prose makes for engaging reading. Irene, unsure of how to respond to Clare's letter, reflects:

Since childhood their lives had never really touched. Actually they were strangers. 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. In truth, it was higher, broader, and firmer; because for her there were perils, not known, or imagined, by those others who had no such secrets to alarm or endanger them. (44)

Larsen's style is decidedly modern and provides a rich interiority lacking in other passing narratives. Second, as Kaplan explains, Larsen re-imagines passing as a "matter of preference, longing and choice" (xxv). Larsen's story is not a morality tale, but rather an

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investigation into the two women's racial consciousness and its impact and relevance to their friendship.

Foremost, this is a book about Larsen. Kaplan has included contemporary reviews of *Passing* as well as several letters Larsen wrote between the mid-1920s and early 1930s. It is clear from a glowing review like that of W. E. B. DuBois that Larsen's tale had the earmarking of a modern classic. "If the American Negro renaissance gives us many more books like this, with its sincerity, its simplicity and charm," wrote DuBois, "we can soon with equanimity drop the word 'Negro'" (98). It is also a pleasure to read Larsen's casual and unedited voice in her correspondence with, among others, author Carl Van Vechten and her friend Dorothy Peterson. Larsen is a witty and humorous letter-writer. "Early this month I took a look at [a novel-in-progress], and I give you my word it was [...] appalling," Larsen wrote to Peterson in an undated letter. "The stuff was good. But the writing! So I've done it all over, except that chapter which made you so ill, and the last" (162). Larsen never published that novel; indeed, she didn't publish again after she was accused of plagiarism. The charge was never proven, but it remains a footnote of her legacy. It is therefore refreshing to see Larsen's own letter of defense published in this critical edition: "Had I had any idea that there was already a story with a similar plot in existence," wrote Larsen to the magazine editor, "I don't think I would have made use of the material at all" (157).

Kaplan concludes the collection with a wide range of literary interpretations of *Passing* which have shaped and reshaped understandings of Larsen's modern text. The critical essays appear in chronological order, the earliest from 1974. Reading each in turn, one can discern a kind of evolution of thought regarding Larsen's work. Is *Passing* a story of race, or sex, or class, or some mixture thereof? Ultimately, Kaplan writes, "Larsen's work is now prized for its portrayal of black, female subjectivity and for its depiction of the social and psychological vertigo caused when identity categories break down" (ix).

The rescue of Larsen's writing and life story—begun in the late seventies and early eighties—seemed to be a result of the need for a "counterpoint" to Zora Neale Hurston's work. The easy shorthand was that Larsen, the biracial daughter of a black West Indian and immigrant Dane, wrote somber, modern stories about the black middle class; whereas Hurston, a Southern-born black woman, wrote engaging stories about the "real" folk. So ingrained was that notion that, for years, I, a half-black and half-Danish woman, refused to read or identify with Larsen because she didn't represent what "real" black writers wrote.

I wish I had not been so headstrong because I denied myself for years the pleasure of reading Larsen's engaging work. The kind of quarrel that I had found with Larsen (that she was not black enough) was the central notion that Larsen interrogated in *Quicksand*, but then, more specifically, in her most-accomplished novel, *Passing*.

In that regard, it is unfortunate that this critical edition appears now—so soon after the publication of George Hutchinson's 2006 Larsen biography, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*. In his Larsen biography, Hutchinson debunks many of the myths perpetuated by previous biographers. He proves that Larsen spent considerable time in Denmark as she claimed (earlier biographies claimed she had fabricated such tales) and that she was not disowned by her white mother at an early age because of her "dark skin." More importantly, Hutchinson suggests that to understand Larsen's work

fully, it is necessary to take into account her Danish and interracial background without pathologizing her mixed-race identity.

Kaplan notes that Hutchinson shared the biography with her while still in manuscript and includes his essay "Nella Larsen and the Veil of Race," which sparked his well-researched, book-length biography. However, for what I assume was an issue of timing, she was unable to include a response to the full-length biography. Ultimately, like the ambiguous conclusion of *Passing* itself, Kaplan leaves open the direction of future interpretations of Larsen's work.

—Heidi W. Durrow

Holcomb, Gary Edward. *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha: Queer Black Marxism and the Harlem Renaissance*. Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007.

Its title evocative of a Cold War era spy film, *Claude McKay, Code Name Sasha* argues that the Jamaican poet and novelist fashioned himself in the interwar years as the "deepest mole, a diaspora undercover agent of queer black Marxism" (15). *Sasha* was the secret name McKay adopted upon his tour of the Soviet Union in 1922 in order to duck FBI investigators, who suspected him of proselytizing Bolshevik propaganda in the United States. Contrary to popular scholarly belief, McKay's life as Sasha—as a subversive queer black Marxist—extended well into the late 1930s when he wrote his allegedly anti-communist memoir, *A Long Way from Home* (1937). *Code Name* links McKay's hitherto critically unexamined sexuality to his Marxist politics, contending that the "quest for Comrade Claude is the pursuit of queer Sasha" (53).

Suppressed in the 1940s and 50s, McKay's now highly anthologized sonnets were first recovered by the Black Arts movement for their Black Nationalist sentiments. Recent critical recovery work on McKay, however, has emphasized his status as an international writer, venturing beyond the militant sonnets and into the rich totality of his oeuvre. Holcomb's book takes the work of Heather Hathaway, Brent Hayes Edwards, William J. Maxwell, and McKay biographer Wayne F. Cooper¹ in new directions. *Code Name* paints the Caribbean vagabond—most often considered a progenitor of the Harlem Renaissance and destabilizer of the traditional sonnet form—as perhaps *the* prototype of twentieth-century queer black diasporic writers, a figure as much politically as geographically mobile.

Central to Holcomb's book is the question of where to locate McKay as a political figure. How does one reconcile the militant black nationalism of the early 1920s sonnets with what Edwards calls the "vagabond internationalism" (187) of such later novels as *Banjo* (1929)? To answer this complex question nonreductively, Holcomb imports queer theory's concern with identity as a process of becoming rather than a fixed category of being in order to articulate the *ménage à trois* of queerness, blackness, and Marxism as it develops across McKay's work. For those who know McKay as the progenitor of the Black Arts Movement and the militant, manly sonneteer of "If We Must Die" (1919) and "The Mu-