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Library Research Award Reflective Essay

This English 301 essay was the most challenging research assignment I have written. Professor Zita Nunes assigned Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance novel, *Passing*, at the beginning of the semester, and the class continued to examine and explore its many layered themes through a variety of literary lenses. I quickly thought I became an expert on the material and knew all that we could know about what Larsen included in its pages. It is because of this mindset that Professor Nunes' final assignment—to write a 10-page analysis of *Passing* with our own groundbreaking thesis—was so difficult to tackle.

Fortunately, an annotated bibliography was assigned earlier in the semester that prepared me for the research required for this paper. As a class, we visited the English department librarian, Pat Herron, at McKeldin. She detailed the many ways to look up articles and books through the library catalog and various databases. She also showed us that we had our own class page on the library website where we could access more online reference sources, such as the Literature Resource Center and the Oxford African American Studies Center. With this knowledge, I found various different types of sources that related to the topic that I thought I wanted to write my paper on—the hidden homosexual attraction between the novel's two main female characters, Irene and Clare.

As Ms. Herron had suggested, I used many different keywords to open up my search to as many different sources as possible. I used sexuality, lesbian, desire, homosexual, Larsen, *Passing*, gay, sexual, black, woman, etc. in as many combinations as I possibly could think of. Starting my research off in the WorldCat catalog, I then turned my attention to EBSCOhost and Literature Criticism Online. Leaving the UMD Libraries Website, I also searched in Google

Scholar. In choosing my sources from these locations, I ensured that they fit certain criteria. I needed peer-reviewed articles as well as a book article and monograph and was certain that every source I chose came from a reputable site or publication. I ended my research with more sources than was required for this first assignment, so I read the abstracts or skimmed the documents to find those that had the most unique theses, which could add most to the knowledge I already had while remaining pertinent to my research topic. All of the extra articles I saved on my computer for future use in the final paper.

After this annotated bibliography assignment, Professor Nunes required that we submit theses. Now it was time to create an argument, I noticed that many authors had exhausted the topic. Panicking, I sought out Professor Nunes' help in developing a strong thesis. I brainstormed ideas before our meeting, hopefully writing down an idea with potential she could recognize. In our meeting, she agreed that writing about sexuality would be very difficult to do, but latched onto a word I had written down—liminality, or the state of being in a transitional boundary area. I had applied this concept to the novel in a way that she recognized had not been done before, and she encouraged me to change the direction of my research completely.

So, I took the idea of liminality and began looking at the novel through a new lens. After rereading the novel, I decided that this topic would finally work. In all the articles I had read leading up to this moment, I had noticed that the scholars had only applied liminality to Clare. In my reading of the novel, I noted that Irene was also decidedly liminal, which skewed the interpretations that Irene lived a secure life. I then began my research over again, using the same methods and criteria as before, but with different search terms, including all the ways in which Irene was liminal, such as *Mulatta*. It was important, though, to keep my old sources, so that I could place myself in discussion amongst other scholars and compare my interpretation to theirs.

It was a comfort knowing that my previous work hadn't gone to waste. Because this topic included a wider range of research, it was important to not limit myself only to sources that I could find online. I requested books from the library, and read print sources alongside my online articles and books. Once again, I screened these sources to ensure that they were peer-reviewed and came from reputable publishers as well as relevant to my research topic.

After much hard work, I finished my research and eventually, my paper. While I did learn much about the novel and liminality itself, I also learned a lot about research and my writing process. First, I gained the knowledge that the library website isn't just the WorldCat catalog that is prevalent on the home page. There are many other databases that are greatly helpful in expanding and deepening the scope of research, and the class pages with access to specialized librarians are also extremely helpful tools. I also learned that a strong argument cannot be formed without strong research, and even then, research might not be enough; professors and librarians are excellent guides and advisors during the writing process. If I could go back to the time during my research, I would tell myself to go see my professor earlier and recognize in advance that professors are here to help us become the best writers we can be. In terms of making the library better for research, I would suggest trying to combine the databases together so that students can just look in one place; I would not have been able to find all of the amazing sources I was able to find if Ms. Herron hadn't shown my class how to find them on the complicated site. It would be much easier for students to do research if there was only one location for finding sources. Overall, though, my research the resources available made researching a manageable experience.