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The Liminality of Irene Redfield: A Reading of Ambiguous Identity in Nella Larsen's *Passing*

Many readings of Nella Larsen's *Passing* have focused on Clare Kendry as a liminal figure who passes back and forth between the White life she chose and the Black life she longs to return to, posing a threat to Irene Redfield's security that she has worked so hard to achieve. Contrarily, I believe that, just as Irene Redfield and *Passing*'s narrator are preoccupied by Clare's distracting beauty and dangerous life choices, so too have the many scholars who have focused on Clare as the singular liminal character in this novel. Irene remains in a liminal space in many aspects of her life, such as in her uncertain loyalties to and performances of her race and her indecipherable sexual orientation. She never truly crosses, or passes, into her own, but wavers back and forth between dual identities. Her fight to maintain her safety and security in a stable identity as a Black wife and mother is complicated by her subconscious understanding of herself as sharing Clare's precarious, in-between position. Given the fact of legal homophobia and racial segregation, it is not surprising that the narrative should present this liminal, in-between position as unsustainable. It is, therefore, fitting that Clare ends up dead on one side of a window, a common figure of liminal space, and Irene, after a fit of madness, alive on the other side and unsure of her guilt in the matter. The ending, ambiguous and liminal in itself, presents a situation where Larsen cannot not imagine an instance, even within this fictional setting, that would allow these women to remain in their liminal spaces within their segregated and homophobic society.

In order to delve deeper into discussions of liminal identities, it is necessary to first establish a definition of liminality. A liminal space is one that is neither here nor there, but rather

in between. Bjørn Thomassen, in “Thinking with Liminality: To the Boundaries of an Anthropological Concept,” writes that “liminality refers to...the experience of finding oneself at the boundaries or in an in-between position, either spatially or temporally” (48). Another way to consider the definition of this word is by examining its origins. ‘Liminal’ comes from the Latin roots ‘limin-’ or ‘limen’ that mean ‘threshold’ (Merriam-Webster). Thus, being in a liminal space can be considered like being in a doorway or window, neither in nor out.

Sociology and anthropology scholars often apply this concept to the notion of belonging to social identity groups, such as racially, socio-economically, or religiously defined categories of personal belonging. While many may identify completely with one party within these groups (i.e., Black or White), others find themselves unable to define their identities in such simple terms. These are liminal identities, and those with these identities tend to “remain at the margins through...frequent reminders from dominant groups that regardless of achievement, qualification or status they are locked in ‘the power dynamic...’ that serve[s] to maintain unequal order in society” (Ladson-Billions & Donnor qtd. in Rollock 66). Thus, occupying a liminal space is often viewed as crippling to an individual’s ability to fully belong within the clearly defined limits of social orderings.

This theory has been applied solely to Clare Kendry in many scholars’ analyses of *Passing*. She is continually “designated by ambiguous double valences” and her death is often accredited to Irene perceiving her as a threat “because she is too *in-between*, too *liminal*, seeking to stand perpetually on the in-betweens. Clare is always *both* black and white, straight and queer, cold and passionate..., and in and out of the closet of racial and sexual belonging” (McIntire 783). This instability, this liminality is interpreted as a threat to Irene’s stability. So, Clare is seen as the unpredictable variable that has the ability to threaten the constancy of Irene’s life. For

example, Jennifer DeVere Brody reads “Clare’s ability to simultaneously imitate and denounce white society” as a threat to Irene’s “puritanical and anti-theatrical” character (1056). In her gothic reading of *Passing*, Johanna M. Wagner also sees Clare’s unrestricted passing between races as a threat to the stability that Irene has established in her life. Wagner believes that “As Irene reacquaints herself with Clare, she realizes that it is not just her attitude, but Clare herself who becomes the danger. The threat of racial fluidity, for Irene, is associated with instability, and instability would obviously jeopardize Irene’s security” (149). While these authors may acknowledge that Irene is a racial passer herself, they argue still that Irene maintains a secure life that Clare’s liminality threatens.

Even if scholars are not citing Clare as a liminal character, they remain attached to the interpretation that Irene is secure. Judith Butler states that Irene’s resistance of experiencing true passion in a lesbian relationship with Clare and determination to remain in a loveless marriage is a “sacrifice [that] might be understood...as an effort to...cling to an arid family life and destroy whatever emergence of passion might call that safety into question” (184). Deborah McDowell believes that Irene kills Clare in order to preserve her security within black bourgeois morals in light of her budding lesbian attraction to Clare (80), and Anne Ducille reads Irene as a “protector of the precious domestic realm—defender of middle-class marriage, bourgeois home, family, fidelity, and, above all, security” when she kills Clare out of hatred for her “having way” (441). While it is undeniable that Clare’s liminality and Irene’s desire for Clare are unnerving for Irene, what all of these authors take for granted is Irene’s security. They have been distracted by Clare and her “mesmeric” qualities (Larsen 132), just as Irene and *Passing*’s narrator have. Their thoughts are preoccupied by Clare Kendry, and just as Irene fails to reflect on herself, these authors have also failed to consider Irene’s own liminal qualities.

The first of Irene's liminal qualities can be found in her sexuality. In her groundbreaking reading of *Passing*, Deborah McDowell read Irene's unexplainable attraction to Clare as more than a platonic fascination; she interpreted the connection between *Passing*'s two female protagonists as one of lesbian desire (88). Since then, multiple scholars have come to similar conclusions backed by compelling arguments. Throughout the novel, Irene is drawn to Clare Kendry in a physical way. She describes Clare as "almost too good-looking" (Larsen 127) with "a lovely laugh" (Larsen 122), "a tempting mouth" (Larsen 132), "luminous" eyes "set in long, black lashes" (Larsen 132), and a "voice...so very seductive" (Larsen 135). Irene's mind is continually entrenched with thoughts of this beautiful woman whose physical presence holds a strange power over her. Clare's outward appearance and physical interactions are capable of inciting emotions in Irene more extreme than any other character in the novel can. For instance, after forgetting about her existence since their youth, Irene is afraid of losing Clare after only their brief interaction on the Drayton roof: "At that moment it seemed a dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again. Standing there under the appeal, the caress, of her eyes, Irene had the desire, the hope that this parting wouldn't be the last" (Larsen 132). This fear of never "seeing" Clare again proves that Irene has an undeniable attraction to the other's appearance.

But claiming this attraction to be of a completely lesbian nature implies that lesbian sexuality is comprised of solely physical interactions and desire. In many ways, Irene is dissatisfied with Clare's character, especially when these women are not in each other's presence. Irene continually displays resentment for Clare's "innate lack of consideration for the feelings of others" (Larsen 146). Irene thinks little of Clare besides her physical appeal, seeing her as an offensive and even vapid person. This opinion is noted by Irene in her belief that "Beyond the aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her, she contributed little, sitting for the

most part silent, an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes” (Larsen 172). Besides believing that Clare has little of value to contribute, Irene shows contempt for the notions that Clare does voice, especially those contributed during the tea party with Gertrude, such as Clare’s mockery of Claude Jones’s conversion to Judaism or her opinion that “nobody wants a dark child” (Larsen 138). Although Irene’s own racial loyalties can be questioned due to her own passing, her personal hypocrisy does not cloud the fact that she feels disdain for Clare’s as a person. This contradiction between Irene’s physical attraction to Clare but repulsion to her personality is clearly demonstrated when Irene suddenly transforms her attitude towards Clare upon laying eyes on her after deciding to uninvite her from the tea party at her and Brian’s home:

She meant to tell Clare Kendry at once, and definitely, that it was of no use, her coming, that she couldn’t be responsible, that she’d talked it over with Brian, who had agreed with her that it was wiser, for Clare’s own sake, to refrain— But that was as far as she got in her rehearsal. For Clare had come softly into the room...and...had dropped a kiss on her dark curls. 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 lovely, Clare!” (Larsen 159)

Irene, separated from Clare, firmly decides that she does not want Clare to attend the gathering. But upon a sensual physical interaction, “a kiss,” and “Looking” upon her beauty, Irene cannot resist her. Thus, Irene’s unquestionable physical attraction to Clare is constantly mingled with her distaste for her character.

Based on these contradictory responses to Clare, disgust and infatuation, Irene’s sexuality remains in a liminal space. She can neither be labeled as hetero- or homosexual. She is part of a loveless marriage with her husband, who believes sex is a joke, sleeping in separate rooms and rarely exchanging loving words. But, she also remains in a loveless relationship with Clare, often despising her beliefs. And while her sexual attraction to Clare is evident, she does describe Brian as “extremely good-looking” and “rather handsome” (Larsen 150). Because she is emotionally

distant yet physically attracted to members of both genders, Irene's sexuality is unidentifiable, without a definite label, liminal.

This liminality carries through to Irene's outward showing, performance of, and loyalty to her race. Most obviously, her outward appearance as a Mulatta serves as a physical sign of her racial ambiguity. Irene's racial passing, a liminal action in itself, is only possible because her Blackness is not openly identifiable to strangers. On the roof of the Drayton, Irene is alarmed, surprised even, that her whiteness might have been discovered, shocked even that the woman she would come to realize is Clare could possibly "know that...before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro" (Larsen 122). She is so confident in her disguise that she finds it hard to fathom that someone could have caught on to what she is doing. What is most interesting about this passing is not that she can pass as either Black or White, but that when people try to place her "They always [take] her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or Gypsy" (Larsen 122). Irene is both Black and White, but outward manifestations of her race are unreadable. In a time when segregation supposed that the physical markings of race were easy to categorize, Irene's are not. Thus, her physical racial identity is liminal, not easily placed, without a singular classification.

This ambivalent physical manifestation of Blackness is reflected in her loyalties to the African race. Throughout the novel, Irene believes that she is a true Black woman while Clare, for the sake of selfish advantage, doesn't have "even the slight artistic or sociological interest in the race" and cares "nothing for the race. She only belong[s] to it" (Larsen 149). In many aspects of Irene's life, she is indeed more devoted member of her race. Unlike Clare, she has not built her life upon a lie of Whiteness. Irene married Brian, "who could exactly 'pass'" and raised a son whose dark skin she is proud of (Larsen 138). Unlike Clare, she did not sever all ties with and deny her race completely for the sake of a better life, although her skin would have allowed her

to do so. Irene is also a proud leading member of Negro Welfare League, working for the advancement of others in her race. And, when Clare permits her husband to deride Black people, Irene feels complete disgust and shock that “even Clare Kendry would permit this ridiculing of her race by an outsider, though he chanced to be her husband” (Larsen 140). She finds the words coming from Bellew’s mouth unforgivable, because she is unable to cast aside the loyalties she feels to her heritage. Because of this, Irene cannot relieve herself of the guilt she feels for failing to “take up the defense of the race to which she belonged” (Larsen 148). This guilt occupies her thoughts, and the racial ties she has with Clare stop Irene from telling Bellew who his wife truly is, even though it would allow Clare to finally be free of the torment that is Clare’s presence. Irene evidently values racial roots to some extent.

But it cannot be denied that Irene is not the perfect example of Black loyalty that she believes herself to be. Although the characters in the book see passing as a permanent state of racial concealment, even temporary instances of passing indicate moments of racial betrayal, and Irene is guilty of this. On the roof the Drayton, Irene enters an all-White space without a consideration of the race she is leaving behind on the streets of Chicago below. Under the scrutiny of Clare’s eyes, it is not her race that she is immediately concerned with, but the possibility that she had “put her hat on backwards,” “there was a streak of powder somewhere on her face,” or that that was “Something wrong with her dress” (Larsen 120). If race truly held such a deep, resounding importance to Irene, her disposal of her Blackness would be expected to weigh more heavily on her conscience. To her, it is not being Black that is shameful, but it is what being Black means to others and how others read Blackness that Irene is ashamed of. She says herself, “It wasn’t that she was ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared. It was the idea of being ejected from any place...that disturbed her” (Larsen). Thus, Irene, who is

so concerned with remaining loyal to her race, is willing to discard it when its burdens become too heavy to bear. Because of this, she sees race as a suffocating force separate from herself, feeling “caught between two allegiances...Herself. Her Race” (Larsen 184). Instead of constituting an inherent part of her identity, race is something outside of her, outside of her control. Nevertheless, her loyalties to her race are still evident. Because of this, both physically and emotionally, Irene remains in a racially liminal space.

This liminality in both sexual and racial expression is inherently unstable and full of contradictions, discordant with Irene’s foremost aspiration: security. “To her, security was the most important and desired thing in life. Not for [anything or anyone else] would she exchange it. She wanted only to be tranquil. Only, unmolested” (Larsen 192). Until the arrival of Clare, though, Irene has been able to deceive herself into believing her upper-middle class family of four gives her security. Clare’s openly liminal status, passing back and forth between her current White life and former Black one, forces Irene to question the stability of her identity. Johanna Wagner explains Clare’s role in causing Irene’s insecurity:

Irene’s need for ontological certainty...begets security in every aspect of her life. Irene’s security is based on, among other things, stasis. When we meet her, Irene has already meticulously defined and secured her concepts of race and sex and relegated them to their respective compartments in her psyche, never to be revisited...Revisiting either of these ideas...breach[es] the serene outlook she entertains about her life. It is her resolve to maintain security that drives the action of the novel and...illuminate[s] what it ‘was’ in Clare that incites such anxiety.” (143)

Clare’s presence, her passing, makes Irene reconsider what it means to be loyal to one’s race, realizing that her loyalty can indeed be questioned. And although Irene never consciously acknowledges her attraction for Clare, her sexually charged descriptions of Clare indicate that there were stirrings of homosexuality, which are direct threats to Irene’s steady family life and

pride in her knowledge of self. This fear of being a complete stranger to oneself and one's life is what precipitates Irene's madness that drives the ending of the novel.

In her madness, Irene is unsure of her role in Clare's death, and thus, the reader is unsure of her guilt in the matter as well. The novel offers various culprits and potential answers as to how Clare's body ended up on the snowy ground below the apartment window, but never commits to one singular explanation. Besides the fact that Irene rushed at Clare in her final moments, certain instances within the novel hint to Irene's guilt, such as her shattering of the white cup with dark tea inside (Clare had a white shell, but was intrinsically Black.), dropping her glowing cigarette into the same snow Clare would fall into (Clare is often referred to as a "glowing thing" (Larsen 196)), and her continual wishes that "Clare should die" (Larsen 187) in order to simplify her life. But, those left speculating the incident at the end of the novel offer up alternative and plausible solutions as well. Clare could have fainted or jumped, realizing that her world had just crumbled, and the lie she had so carefully crafted and thrived upon was shattered. Or, more likely, her angry and fiercely racist husband, who now sees her as no more than a "damned dirty nigger" (Larsen 195) could have pushed her. To amplify his guilt, he disappears from the scene where his wife lays lifeless. By providing us with multiple potential endings, Larsen structures her novel in a way that is just as liminal as its protagonist, Irene; multiple solutions are presented, but a definite answer lies nowhere. Readers are not granted the usual closure that a novel offers in its closing pages, and instead, "By killing off Clare in an ambiguous fashion, Larsen thwarts any final knowledge about the two female characters of her text, which leaves the reader...like Irene, desiring" (Landry 46) for steadiness and security that they are prone to expect. Thus, readers are forced to endure a hint of the doubt and insecurity of liminality, wanting an answer and wanting out of the liminal space.

The structure of Larsen's ending is not its sole liminal feature. In a novel whose two central figures continually pass back and forth between their various identities, it is no wonder that the novel concludes in a liminal space: a window. The window is the threshold over which Clare tumbles to her death while Irene remains safely on the other side. The significance of the spaces on either side of the window is a telling piece of evidence as to what Larsen is expressing about liminality in this novel. Clare ends in the white snow, and Irene is left within the Freeland's apartment amongst the other Black partygoers. Thus, through the ending of *Passing*, Larsen is suggesting that liminality is unsustainable, especially the racial and sexual liminality that both Clare and Irene preoccupy. During the time in which Larsen was writing *Passing*, society was built upon ideas of strictly defined cultural identity categories. For Black people in the 1920s, their life was defined by the color line. The notion "separate but equal" was law under *Plessy v. Ferguson*, and the courts as well as the general public functioned under the ideology 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'" (Blackmer 50-1). The need to separate the races speaks to the fact that Whites found themselves as individual and superior, and thus unequal. Defining their differences and their racial superiority was dependent on viewing race as a categorical certainty. Various peoples were not to mix, and the law declared that they were independent of each other. Both Irene and Clare's physical appearances as mulattas and ability to dupe others with their racial passing was a blatant threat to this belief and even to the laws that America was built upon, to the belief that White was a separate, "superior race" (Larsen 169). Clare and Irene's liminality is not cohesive with society's racial classes, and thus is threatening to the social order.

The women's racial liminality was just as dangerous as the liminality of Irene's sexual orientation. While "passing" may refer to racial identity passing, it may also refer to the need of homosexuals' need in the 1920s to pass as heterosexual due to the societal belief of their "'innate' inferiority" (Blackmer 55). Homosexuals were seen as a separate and class of sexual deviants:

When Larsen wrote *Passing*, blackness and homosexuality were both held to be stigmas that "gave way to "societal homophobia...defining lesbians and gays, as they...defined African-Americans...as objects of contempt and lesser mortals who have a fundamentally different (and inferior) 'nature' from other human beings. (Blackmer 55-6)

So, just as it is dangerous for Irene and Clare's racial ambiguities to point out the fragility of society's social structures, Irene's wavering and indefinable sexuality threaten the line that had been drawn between homosexuals and everyone else. Thus, she is physical evidence that the categories of identity that had been defined by law were not mutually exclusive of each other. Irene is proof that one could be heterosexual and homosexual, just as one could be Black and White concurrently.

These threats that the women posed determine their fates within *Passing*. Because of her threat to the color line, Clare lays dead at the end of the novel. She had firmly built her life upon her racial passing as a White woman while truly being of African origin, and thus her liminality was locked into place. She could never choose a side and exit that dangerous space of ambivalence. Irene, on the other hand, has not completely denied her Blackness; while she may pass as White for convenience and feel internal contempt for her racial burden, the foundations of her wellbeing do not rely on passing for White. Thus, Irene can choose to stay in the world of Blackness, in which societal order requires her to belong. Further, Clare's death destroys the women at the heart of Irene's liminal sexuality. Irene can continue her life as an outwardly recognized Black and straight woman in a safe and unambiguous space.

Passing is a novel of uncertainty and doubt. The fact that for years, scholars have been writing about their own personal interpretations of its ambiguities, attests to this fact. Not only is Clare a liminal character, but the so-called “security” of Irene’s being must be questioned. She is both Black and White, gay and straight—a threat to the strict categorizations of societal identity groupings and to the belief that White is fundamentally better than Black and homosexuality is an aberration from heterosexuality. In a time of intense segregation, Larsen presents to us a novel that proves the danger of challenging society’s divisions, throwing one woman from a window, a liminal space, and thrusting the other back away from it.