

"The Bitter Dream": Internalized Racism in the Passing Narratives of the Harlem Renaissance

For black authors living in New York during the 1920s and 1930s, the Harlem Renaissance served as a forum in which issues of race and identity could be openly discussed. Despite George S. Schuyler's claims that "little of any merit has been written by and about Negroes that could not have been written by whites" or Alain Locke's protests that "genius and talent... must choose art and put aside propaganda", commentary on race in America crept in to the major works of the artistic movement ("Negro Art" 96, Locke 1). Many authors used their writing, either consciously or unconsciously, to discuss aspects of black life that were hitherto largely ignored by the American literary canon. The importance of folk culture was espoused by the poetry of Langston Hughes and Sterling Brown, Jessie Fauset wrote about the problem of assimilation for the growing black middle class, and Jean Toomer examined interracial relationships, lynching, and rural Southern life in the influential *Cane*. Though no two works explored the same set of issues, certain concepts were touched upon more frequently than others. Nearly every author associated with the Harlem Renaissance has some form of the passing narrative in their oeuvre.

Though racial passing is not strictly limited to any particular group of people, in the United States, it nearly always denotes "that particular masquerade" in which someone, "while legally designated as black, lives as white for a significant time" (Harper 381). This phenomenon, while having precedent in the days of slavery, reached its peak "in the years between 1880 and 1925, years which saw the publication of many passing narratives" (Bennett 2-3). Historically, it is easy to see why. This period marked a time of severe prejudice in the south, with the rise of Jim Crow legislation, as well as an increasing clamor for civil rights

amongst black Americans, including many who had tasted freedom while serving overseas in Europe during the First World War. For most, the motivation for passing came from wanting to experience life as a first-class citizen and to exercise the rights denied to them by both the United States government and its rigidly oppressive social structures. Passing ranged from the causal (e.g. posing as white for a day to gain admittance to certain restaurants or stores) to the involved (e.g. a complete change of identity). Regardless of the level of involvement, "tens of thousands crossed the line" and concealed their race (Bennett 2). By acknowledging the prevalence of the practice, it must also be conceded that there is not a single cause for passing. Some were more unconventional than others. For certain characters in the novels of the Harlem Renaissance, the *primary* reason for passing is not an aspiration for equal treatment, but a reflection of their own internalized racism¹ and distaste for black society. For the clever and silver-tongued protagonist of Schuyler's satirical *Black No More*, and the anonymous narrator of James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, passing allows for a rejection of the black identity that each character views with disdain. This reason for passing, while not the principal cause, is also seen in characters from Jessie Fauset's *There is Confusion* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*.

Black No More opens on Max Disher, a young and dapper insurance agent whose "negroid features had a slightly satanic cast", standing outside of the Honky Tonk Club in Harlem (Schuyler 1). Schuyler's initial description of his protagonist equates blackness with badness, and this mentality is consistent with Max's own attitude towards his race. After meeting his jovial friend Bunny Brown on the sidewalk, the pair retreat into the club to discuss their love lives. Max complains to Bunny about the fickleness of his light-skinned girlfriend, and it is

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I have chosen to use W.E.B. Du Bois' concept of double-consciousness to define internalized racism. He writes that double-consciousness is a "sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity" (3). Internalized racism, therefore, occurs when one is unable to separate the outsider's perspective from his or her own self-definition. The person becomes convinced that said feelings of contempt are justified and correct.

revealed that the two men "had in common a weakness rather prevalent among Aframerican bucks: they preferred yellow women. Both swore there were three things essential to the happiness of a colored gentleman: yellow money, yellow women, and yellow taxis" (2). The friends share an opinion consistent with many male characters from the Harlem Renaissance, possessing a belief that darker-complexioned women are undesirable. Disher and Brown have internalized a white standard of beauty and discriminate within their race based on skin tone. When Max angrily declares, "No more yallah girls for me... I'll grab a black girl first," Bunny bemoans "Say not so... you aint thinkin' o' dealin' in coal, are you?" (2). The disparaging epithet carries connotations of dirt and grime, and devalues the sexual desirability of black women².

In a larger sense, Max's aversion to darker partners is indicative of his dislike for the black race in general. When he sees Helen, a gorgeous white woman, enter the Honky Tonk Club he instantly forgets his resolution to only pursue black women. "The girl was the prettiest creature he'd ever seen and he felt irresistibly drawn to her" (4). Max's reverent view of Helen cannot be dissuaded by any means. When she rejects his advances, proclaiming, "I never dance with niggers!" Max still doggedly maintains his interest (5). After discovering the girl is visiting from Atlanta, Max muses, "Atlanta! His home town. No wonder she had turned him down" (5). Instead of being insulted or angered by the slur, he justifies it. He overlooks Helen's blatant racist treatment, because he subconsciously agrees with her viewpoint. Max perceives white as beautiful and black as ugly or repulsive. He places the white female on a pedestal, high above the women of his own race. That night, Max is haunted by dreams of "dancing with her, dining with her, motoring with her, sitting beside her on a golden throne while millions of manacled white slaves prostrated themselves before him" (6). His fetishized desire for Helen "serves as the

² Interestingly enough, Bunny reverses his opinion by the end of the novel, happily marrying a "sweet Georgia brown" who may be "the last black gal in the country", demonstrating Schuyler's gleeful irreverence towards consistency (131).

centerpiece of... broader African American aspirations towards whiteness--- white hair, white skins, white jobs, white money, white restaurants" (Leiter 95). Max does not simply want equality, but instead the ability to "be anything he wanted to be, do most anything he wanted to do" (Schuyler 7). As illustrated by the imagery of white slavery, Max subconsciously wishes for a reversal of the status quo. In his dream, Max is held in esteem above the white population. In reality, he is relegated to the status of a second-class citizen. Because Max is unable to change society, he instead craves the entire package of being white, from its privileges to its (perceived) aesthetic superiority.

Max attempts to alleviate his want for white skin by dabbling in "the industry created by racial passing" (Joo 174). *Black No More's* Harlem is rife with African Americans who use "kink-no-more lotions" and "skin whiteners" in order to give themselves a more Caucasian appearance (Schuyler 4). Max's landlady, in fact, is Mme. Sisseretta Blandish³, "the beauty specialist who owned the swellest hair-straightening parlor in Harlem" (23). Mme. Blandish, her name conjuring up images of dull whiteness, represents the widespread nature of the passing phenomenon. The practice is so prevalent that it has become commercialized. Mme. Blandish provides a way for blacks to temporarily achieve the advantages of being white, for a nominal fee. However, straightening hair and whitening skin merely create an illusion of whiteness, not the complete transformation that Max covets. No matter how many products he uses, he will stay fundamentally black. The world still sees him as an African American, and so he retains his sense of double-consciousness. Fortunately for Max, a solution to his ills presents itself the morning after he meets Helen. Dr. Junius Crookman, a physician from Harlem, announces to the *Times* that he is able to transform blacks into whites. Through a medical procedure utilizing

³ Blandish is, of course, Schuyler's caricature of Madam C.J. Walker, a real-life black entrepreneur who made a fortune selling hair-straightening products.

electrical and chemical stimulation, the skin, "hair and features" are altered so that "the Negro becomes to all appearances a Caucasian" (8). Essentially, Dr. Crookman's procedure provides a permanent and irreversible way to pass. With Atlanta on his mind, Max becomes the first to undergo the treatment. The procedure is a success, and upon viewing himself in the mirror, Max becomes "overjoyed" with his new white skin and features (14). "White at last! Gone was the smooth brown complexion. Gone were the slightly full lips and Ethiopian nose. Gone was the nappy hair that he had straightened so meticulously" (ibid). Max's reaction to his appearance again proves the scope of his internalized racism: he experiences no sense of alarm or regret while staring at his unrecognizable countenance. Max sees his white skin as a ticket out of his static place in society. As he leaves Dr. Crookman's sanitarium, he resolves that he is "through with coons... from now on. He glanced in a superior manner at the long line of black and brown folk on one side of the corridor, patiently awaiting treatment... Ah, it was good not to be a Negro any longer!" (14-15). His haughty attitude towards the members of his former race shows that Max "lacks any sense of race pride" and confirms that his primary motive for passing is to escape the black race, which he holds in contempt (Leiter 97).

Still in admiration of his "pale blond hair" and "smooth white hands with the blue veins showing through", Max travels to Georgia (Schuyler 22). Under his new guise and the (not-so-subtle) alias of Matthew Fisher, he begins searching for Helen. At the same time, Dr. Crookman's Black-No-More sanitariums have attracted significant public attention. With more and more blacks turning white, the population of the south reaches a state of hysteria. One morning Max catches sight of a newspaper advertisement that loudly proclaims, "The racial integrity of the Caucasian Race is being threatened by the activities of a scientific black Beelzebub in New York" (36). Tracing the advertisement to the offices of The Knights of

Nordica, a Ku Klux Klan substitute, Max meets with Reverend Henry Givens, the organization's self-proclaimed Imperial Grand Wizard. Posing as a white supremacist anthropologist, Max/Matthew joins the Knights and becomes their spokesperson, speaking to crowds of poor southern whites: "For an hour, Matthew told them at the top of his voice what they believed: i.e., that a white skin was a sure indication of the possession of superior intellectual and moral qualities; that all Negroes were inferior to them; that God had intended for the United States to be a white man's country and that with His help they could keep it so" (45). His speech gains him the admiration of many female Knights, including Helen (Givens' daughter, coincidentally). After building a bank account from membership fees to the Knights and other schemes, Max marries Helen. Through matrimony and his acceptance into the Knights of Nordica, Max completes his act of passing. He enters the proverbial lion's den, and cements his place in white society.

Though one of Max/Matthew's predominant motives is the economic exploitation of the Knights--- he and Givens quickly become millionaires by dipping into the organization's coffers-- his involvement also exemplifies his still-present sense of internalized racism. As Matthew, he creates a newsletter for the organization entitled *The Warning*, and "in 14-point, one-syllable word editorials painted terrifying pictures of the menace confronting white supremacy... He wrote with such blunt sincerity that sometimes he almost persuaded himself that it was all true" (65). By taking a position of power in the Knights of Nordica, and spreading their message, Max has betrayed his race. In his eagerness to pass, he "gains effective control of the Knights of Nordica by mimicking and reproducing the forms of racist discourse" (Haslam 23). Finding himself on the other side of double-consciousness, Max/Matthew perpetuates the same race hatred that caused him to want to pass for white in the first place.

Max Disher/Matthew Fisher's passing is paralleled by the unnamed "author" of James Weldon Johnson's confessional *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*⁴. The illegitimate son of a black servant and a southern aristocrat, the narrator is kept unaware of his racial heritage during his childhood. Due to his light skin, he grows up assuming he is white. When he enters school, the narrator finds himself in a classroom that is divided along racial lines. Early on, he aligns himself with the other white students, who show a predilection for "look[ing] down upon" their black classmates (11). After an instance of schoolyard teasing turns into a fight, he joins several white children in chasing a group of black students, "pelting them with stones until they separated in several directions" (Johnson 12). The narrator is "easily indoctrinated into racial prejudice... and he does not possess the delicacy of mind or the humanitarian bent... [to] condemn practical instances of racism" (Fabi 94). His ignorance of his own racial identity contributes to his allegiance to the white students.

By the time the narrator discovers his own mixed-race heritage, he has already internalized the racist attitudes and behavior found in his white classmates. As a result, he attempts to distance himself as much as possible from the black children, readily admitting, "I had no particular like or dislike for these black and brown boys and girls . . . [but] I had a very strong aversion to being classed with them" (Johnson 17). The narrator does not see himself as belonging to the group of black students. This initial separation develops into a general disinterest in black life that follows him as he grows older. Throughout the novel, the narrator views his black identity with a myriad of feelings ranging from apathy to disdain, and this deeply-rooted disassociation with his race eventually culminates in his decision to pass as a white man at the conclusion of the novel.

⁴ Proving that no target is too sacred, Johnson himself is lampooned in *Black No More* as Dr. Napoleon Wellington Jackson, who makes a living speaking to "audiences of sex-starved matrons who yearned to help the Negro stand erect" (Schuyler 56).

Like Max, the "ex-colored" man expresses his internalized racism by maintaining a white standard of beauty. When the narrator first learns of his mixed-race identity, he immediately examines himself in a mirror. He is pleased by what he sees: "I was accustomed to hear remarks about my beauty; but now, for the first time, I became conscious of it and recognized it. I noticed the ivory whiteness of my skin... the softness and glossiness of my dark hair that fell in waves over my temples, making my forehead appear whiter than it really was" (13). The narrator's instinct is to associate whiteness with beauty. Physical attractiveness is found in a light skin tone and hair that would never need Max's bottle of kink-no-more. The narrator's self-assessment in the mirror instantly creates an awareness of his mother's racial appearance. He becomes cognizant of the physical differences between them. "I looked at her critically for the first time," he says. "I had thought of her in a childish way only as the most beautiful woman in the world; now I looked at her searching for defects. I could see that her skin was almost brown, that her hair was not so soft as mine". To the narrator, these traits are somehow wrong, and inhibit his mother's beauty. The typical black physical characteristics are seen as shortcomings and imperfections. Although the narrator eventually decides that his mother is more attractive than her white friends, he arrives at this conclusion in spite of her kinky hair and dark complexion.

After graduating high school, the narrator travels to Georgia with the intention of attending college. In Atlanta he gains his first exposure to a sizable population of black Americans. His reaction is less than positive. "I saw a street crowded with *them*... I asked my companion if all the colored people in Atlanta lived in this street" [*italics added for emphasis*] (36). The choice of language is extremely distancing. It creates a detachment between the narrator and his racial group, alienating him from the black population as a whole. In fact, the

"ex-colored" man's regard for the black citizens of Atlanta goes beyond mere separation. He looks on the people on the street with a feeling of disgust. "The unkempt appearance, the shambling, slouching gait and loud talk and laughter of these people aroused in me a feeling of almost repulsion". While it is possible that this reaction could be attributed to a class-based culture shock, the narrator's "interest" in the "Negro dialect" confirms that he sees his race from the perspective of an outsider. Throughout his stay in Atlanta, the narrator keeps apart from most of the blacks in the city, particularly those of the lower classes. He treats a dingy all-black restaurant like the soiled cage of an animal. Eventually, after the theft of his savings denies him tuition to the university, he leaves Georgia, heading first to Jacksonville, then New York, and finally to Europe for a lengthy sojourn with a wealthy, white patron.

When the "ex-colored" man returns to the South later in the novel, he brings an especially distasteful tendency for condescension. After studying music abroad, the narrator boldly decides to travel the rural South and learn traditional black folk songs from the area. He aims to take "not only ragtime, but also the old slave songs" and make them "classic" (86). Even this project, which the narrator believes will elevate black art, is tainted with his ever-present internalized racism. He travels from town to town, and takes pleasure "jotting down in [a] note-book themes and melodies, and trying to catch the spirit of the Negro in his relatively primitive state" (105). The "ex-colored" man is practicing a kind of cultural assimilation, taking black culture and recreating it in a form that can be easily digested by whites. In doing so, he cheapens his source material. He considers it a lesser, undeveloped form of expression, inferior to white art and culture. The narrator's "stereotyped reflections on African America and his never-ending surprise at instances of black artistic skill or social accomplishment glaringly reveal his

continued white supremacist allegiances" (Fabi 95). The narrator's attempts at promoting black folk art are clumsy and further reflect his self-directed racist tendencies.

During his exploration and exploitation of the American South, the "ex-colored" man temporarily passes as white for the first time in his adult life. On a train trip, the narrator enters the smoking car and finds himself in the midst of a discussion of the "race question" between four white men: a Jewish cigar manufacturer, a university professor, a former Union soldier, and a Texan cotton planter. The conversation between the ex-soldier and the planter grows heated, and ends with the Texan declaring: "Down here in the South, we're up against facts, and we're meeting 'em like facts. We don't believe the nigger is or ever will be the equal of the white man, and we ain't going to treat him as an equal; I'll be damned if we will" (Johnson 100). The "ex-colored" man first reacts with bitterness to the white man's racist tirade, but ultimately confesses that, "underneath it all, I felt a certain sort of admiration for the man who could not be swayed from what he held as his principles". Rather than growing angry at the insults to the black race, the narrator offers "expressions of sympathy and apology for the discriminatory behavior" (Fabi 96). The 'ex-colored" man's defense of the Texan can be compared to Max's anti-black bashing at the Knights of Nordica. Both show a denial of self, and a frightening depth to the characters' internalized racism.

The narrator shows his affinity for passing again in another rural town, this time attending the lynching of a black man accused of rape and murder. The narrator casually leaves his cabin to witness the spectacle, confident in his ability to go undetected as a black man. Joining the white mob, the narrator watches a black man being dragged by horses into town. He displays a distinct lack of empathy for the victim. The narrator silently observes as "a railroad tie was sunk into to the ground, the rope was removed and a chain brought and securely coiled

around the victim and the stake. There he stood, a man only in form and stature, every sign of degeneracy stamped upon his countenance. His eyes were dull and vacant, indicating not a single ray of thought... He was too stunned and stupefied even to tremble" (113). Rather than showing concern for the man's fate, the narrator again detaches himself from the other members of his race. He makes no attempt to save the man from the mob, and his commentary is judgmental and dehumanizing. The narrator seems to perceive the lynched man as an object, or some kind of animal, "reveal[s] . . . contempt for the victim" (Fabi 97). Though the sight and smell of burning flesh eventually arouse feelings of disgust and fright in the narrator, he does not direct his bitterness and ill-will towards the white mob. Instead, he places the blame for the violence on his race, and says "A great wave of humiliation and shame swept over me. Shame that I belonged to a race that could be so dealt with" (Johnson 113). The lynching proves to be the final deciding point for Johnson's protagonist and yet, fear of becoming the recipient of such brutality is not what causes him to pass as white for good. "I understood that it was not discouragement, or fear, or search for a larger field of action and opportunity, that was driving me out of the Negro race. I knew that it was shame, unbearable shame. Shame at being identified with a people that could with impunity be treated worse than animals" (115). The narrator finally admits to his own latent internalized racism in this scene. For the first time in the narrative, he is truly honest. He actually believes the black race to be inferior, and decisively renounces his biracial identity. "I cursed the drops of African blood in my veins," he declares, "and wished that I were really white" (123). For the "ex-colored" man, the desire for whiteness springs from nothing more than a hatred of being black.

Ironically, despite bringing success (Max/Matthew is a family man at the forefront of a national organization, and the "ex-colored" man marries and makes a comfortable living in the

banking business), both characters come to regret their passing. At the end of his story, Johnson's narrator has grown discontent and expresses a crisis of identity, fueled by his inability to connect to his black heritage. "Sometimes it seems to me that I have never really been a Negro, that I have been only a privileged spectator of their inner life; at other times I feel that I have been a coward, a deserter, and I am possessed by a strange longing for my mother's people" (126). The narrator finally shows a tenuous affinity for his race, which had been mostly absent during his early life. He changes his opinion on passing. It is no longer his escape from his race, but the admittance of defeat. Though the struggle of the African American is difficult, success and fame as a black man is preferable to obscurity as a simple white banker. The narrator reminisces on his musical research in the south, mourning his "fast yellowing manuscripts, the only tangible remnants of a vanished dream, a dead ambition, a sacrificed talent... I have sold my birthright for a mess of pottage" (127). The narrator realizes that, although white life is less challenging, he has lost some indescribable part of his being by denying his ancestry.

Max, too, is forced to admit that "life as a white man [was not] the rosy existence he had anticipated... As a boy he had been taught to look up to white folks as just a little less than gods; now he found them little different from the Negroes, except that they were uniformly less courteous and less interesting" (Schuyler 34). He experiences disillusionment when he comprehends the lack of real racial difference between blacks and whites. His pale skin is not the key to instant happiness. While being white has created new opportunities, it has also brought new problems unknown to Max when he lived his relatively carefree life in Harlem. The disappointment of both characters subverts the internalized racism that caused them to pass in the first place, and the efforts they made to escape black society are rendered more or less

meaningless. Neither character is completely satisfied or content as white, and they are forced to concede that their initial negative assessments of the black race were largely incorrect.

While *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* ends on this somewhat pessimistic note, *Black No More* takes the conceit further. Schuyler is unable to resist bringing the subversion of Max's internalized racism to its absurd limit. At the climax of the novel, Max is in grave danger of being discovered as one of Dr. Crookman's patients and seeing his white life crumble before his eyes. He is with the Givens family in the hospital, awaiting the birth of his and Helen's child. Max is well aware that his baby will come out black. At the same time, he is nervously waiting for the results of the upcoming presidential election. Using the country's racial panic as a political rallying point, he manages to nominate Givens as the nation's Democratic candidate.

Just as Max and Helen's child is born, a report is leaked to the newspapers by the Republican Party, reading "DEMOCRATIC LEADERS PROVED OF NEGRO DESCENT. Givens, Snobbcraft, Buggerie, Kretin, and Others of Negro Ancestry, According to Old Records Unearthed by Them" (127). Helen blames the black child on herself. In the light of the Givens family's mixed-raced background, Max's black identity becomes practically insignificant. He tells them about his true identity, and feels a "great load lifting from his soul" (129). Similarly, Helen feels "a wave of relief go over her. There was no feeling of revulsion at the thought that her husband was a Negro. There once would have been but that was seemingly centuries ago when she was unaware of her remoter Negro ancestry... all talk of race and color was damned foolishness". Schuyler pokes fun at the institution of racism. In one quick moment, the prejudices possessed by both Max and the Givens family disappear. The white integrity of Rev. Givens becomes pointless. He has no choice but to let go of his racist beliefs. If such prejudices can be eliminated so easily, the novel asks, then why do they exist in the first place? The

internalized racism that has driven Max for the whole novel is simply a social construct. If whites no longer view blacks with contempt, double-consciousness is eliminated. In one moment, the core values that have motivated the characters throughout the entire novel are upended, showing the frivolity of the racist mode of thought.

Of course, no good satirist could resist ending here, and Schuyler continues to mock the concept of internalized racism by having the novel come full circle in its final pages. After the nationwide racial confusion caused by the newspaper announcement dies down, Dr. Crookman quietly reveals to the American public that the whites created through his process are actually whiter than the original Caucasian population of the United States. The nation plunges back into hysteria. The national mentality becomes: "If it were true that extreme whiteness was evidence of possession of Negro blood... then surely it were well not to be so white!" (citation?) Numerous articles and scientific studies pop up like weeds in an attempt to explain the new race problem. "A Dr. Cutten Prodd wrote a book proving that all enduring gifts to society came from those races whose skin color was not exceedingly pale" (149). The nation restructures itself to see white as inferior. Those with exceptionally light skin face discrimination in schools, at work, and on the street. A bizarre form of reverse racial passing develops in order to easily discern the whiter-than-whites from the ordinary whites. For the upper class, it "became the fashion for them to spend hours at the seashore basking naked in the sunshine and then to dash back, heavily bronzed... [and] lord it over their paler, and thus less fortunate, associates" (149-150). Mme. Blandish, rebranded as Mrs. Blandine, seizes the opportunity and creates a skin staining solution. "Everybody that was anybody had a stained skin. A girl without one was avoided by the young men... America was definitely, enthusiastically mulatto-minded" (150). The white standard of beauty held by Max and others at the beginning of the novel has completely polarized. A new

kind of internalized racism emerges, this time against white skin. This new trend reflects Schuyler's belief in the "malleability of race" (Joo 182). Clearly race means nothing. Americans are only eager to label and discriminate in order to subjugate and feel superior to a group of people. The actual characteristics of this group are of little importance. However, a curious thing happens in the country. Soon, almost everyone is passing as dark, and an odd racial harmony begins to grow. The book ends with Dr. Crookman looking at a photograph of Max, Helen, Bunny, his wife, and Rev. and Mrs. Givens standing on a French beach, "All of them... as dusky as little Matthew Crookman Fisher who played in a sandpile at their feet" (Schuyler 151). With this image, Schuyler provides a pithy final comment on race and passing, and leaves the reader with a hope for eventual peace between blacks and whites.

In Schuyler and Johnson's novels, internalized racism is the main cause for the protagonists' passing. This idea is also explored (to a lesser extent) in other works of the Harlem Renaissance. Jessie Fauset's *There Is Confusion* is a bildungsroman that traces the life of Joanna, an outspoken member of an upper-middle class black family in Harlem. The concept of passing is addressed in the novel through Vera Manning, an old friend of Joanna's. Halfway through the novel, Vera disappears, and rumors abound that she "was passing for white and had no desire to be recognized by her colored acquaintances" (Fauset 196). In a later chapter, Joanna meets Vera by chance on the street and discovers that the rumors are true. Although Vera has renounced her race, the two meet amicably. The friends discuss Vera's new life as a white woman. Vera finds passing fulfilling and explains, "You can't imagine--- I couldn't--- the almost unlimited opportunities that these people have for work, for pleasure, for anything... Jan, you can't imagine... the sudden removal of thousands of pin-pricks, not only that, of inconveniences" (200). At first, the motivations for Vera's passing seem to be the sole desire for rights and freedoms

offered to white society. However, the same internalized racism that influenced passing in *Black No More* and *Autobiography* is present. Vera tells Joanna about her tragic romance with Harley Alexander, a dentist. Because of Harley's complexion, Vera's "color-struck" mother⁵ objected to their relationship. "None of her children should marry a dark man," she protested, "It only meant unhappiness" (198). When her mother's intrusiveness ends the relationship, Vera decides to pose as white. "Without Harley, I'm bound to be unhappy anyway," she says, "even if I do go back to my own. Since I can't have happiness I might just as well take up my abode where I can have the most fun and comfort" (200). Though Vera does not directly possess the internalized racism of Max and the "ex-colored" man, it is such a powerful force in her life that it influences her choice to pass. Because she is not allowed to associate with darker-skinned blacks, she feels that may as well take advantage of her complexion and gain access to the white lifestyle.⁶

The connection between passing and internalized racism is also found in Nella Larsen's (appropriately-titled) *Passing*. The novel tells the story of two light-skinned women, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. At the beginning of the novel, Clare, the "racial transgressor" reunites with Irene after a long time apart (Bennett 24). Clare's absence is explained by her lifestyle: she has been passing and is married to a white man. The orphaned daughter of a black mother and an alcoholic Caucasian father, Clare leaves behind her childhood friends in order to start anew as white. Her husband is entirely unaware of her true racial background. She describes her marriage as such: "When Jack... returned from South America with untold gold, there was no one to tell him that I was coloured... So on the day that I was eighteen, we went off and were married" (Larsen 27). Clare's main reason for passing is to obtain comfort and

⁵ Mrs. Manning begs a comparison to Mrs. Turner, the grumpy matron in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, who notably complains, "It's too many black folks already. We oughta lighten up de race" (140).

⁶ Furthering the comparison to *Black No More*, in the later chapters of *There Is Confusion*, Vera Manning also infiltrates a group of white supremacists while passing.

economic security. She hopes that her wealth and light skin will afford her the happiness she was unable to know as a child. Her motivations seem relatively sound. Out of all of the characters examined, Clare is the poorest example of internalized racism as a cause for passing. However, there is still textual evidence of it influencing her decision to cross the color line. After her father's death, she lived with her two paternal aunts. Clare tells Irene, "They didn't want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced--- ruined, as they called it--- a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn't forgive the tar-brush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors" (26-27). In raising Clare, her aunts created a taboo around the subject of race. They associated blackness with something shameful, and tried to hide Clare's racial identity. On a young, impressionistic child, such behavior would foster a sense of self-loathing for one's black ancestry. Perhaps Clare's racial confusion growing up contributed to the ease of her passing.

If the opinions of her aunts were not enough to create a denial of her black self, Clare's husband Jack finishes the job. A staunch believer in the superiority of the white race, Jack gives Clare the derogatory nickname of "Nig." He explains the origin of the nickname at a party with Irene: "When we were first married, she was... as white as a lily. But I declare she's gettin' darker and darker. I tell her if she don't look out, she'll wake up one of these days and find she's turned into a nigger" (39). Clare's quiet acceptance of her husband's nickname is indicative of an iron will and at least a partially unconscious agreement with his racist attitude. In the novel, Irene asserts that Clare's passing is a betrayal of her black identity. She complains, "Clare Kendry cared nothing for the race. She only belonged to it" (52). While Clare sometimes expresses longing to return to the black community throughout the novel, it is clear that the length of her passing was helped along by a subtle sense of dislike for the black race. She simply

would be unable to withstand her husband's behavior without it. As with Vera Manning, Clare demonstrates the influence of internal racism on passing, though to a lesser degree than Max and the "ex-colored" man.

While the passing narrative was common in the Harlem Renaissance, the reasons for passing within the texts were as varied as the reasons why African Americans passed in real life. However, Max Disher from *Black No More* and the unnamed narrator of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* both share a feeling of internalized racism as the primary cause for their passing. The two characters reflect this through differing means: Max shows a preference for light-skinned women, holds a deep aspiration to appear white, and frequently displays a sense of superiority over the other members of the black race. The "ex-colored" man is blind to anything but a white standard of beauty, views his race with a disgusted detachment, and possesses a condescending attitude towards black art and culture. Both Schuyler and Johnson end their novels, however, by commenting on the futility of their characters' internalized racism. While serving as a driving force for their actions in the novel, both characters come to regret their passing and wish for a stronger relationship with their blackness. Schuyler and Johnson's assessment of internalized racism as a contributing factor to the phenomenon of passing is legitimized by the inclusion of it in other novels such as *There Is Confusion* and *Passing*. The authors of these novels criticize the unbalanced double-consciousness of their protagonists. All four books ultimately deliver a message of pride in the black racial identity. While the authors are not against passing, they challenge their readers to question the motives for crossing over and criticize the social structures and constructs that make such a thing necessary in the first place.

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