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Gender Trouble and the Tragic Black Woman Hybrids in Clotel, Quicksand and Passing

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ABSTRACT

The African-American female character's description in Clotel, Quicksand and Passing are very impressive, among whom Clotel, Clare and Irene are depicted as one of the most important "passing" figures for the whole story. Though sharing some similarities with the traditional Black women in the past African-American novels, Clotel, Clare and Irene are very different. The strong connection with as well as variations than the usual gender pattern are mixed within these women. It is only by this new approach that the reader can re-think Black woman and build a new African-American female identity. Taking into the consideration an ecofeminist point of view, this paper is going to study the points of similarities with and differences from the traditional Black Women in the novel, unwrap on the developing subject identity of Black women in this novel, in order to prove that in this novel female subject identity is more than a true representation of essentialism and dualism, in a special and unique realistic perspective.

Keywords: African-American, Black woman, Mulatta, Passing.

1. Introduction

In his introduction of *Black Men on race, gender, and sexuality: A Critical Reader*, Devon Carbado points out that questions like "WHAT DOES IT mean to be black? What political ideology holds the greatest emancipatory possibility for Blacks in America?" (Carbado, 1999) have long been on the agenda of black resistance and protest, and starting with the 1960s, black women become aware of the necessity of putting the issues of gender and sexuality on the revolutionary antiracist agenda because it was completely unfair and untrue that racial suffering should be represented only by the black man's experience and seen only through his eyes.

The above myths offer information on antiracist practice and theorizing, proving the "unwillingness on the part of antiracist proponents to investigate and take seriously the gender-specific ways in which

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'racial patriarchy' subordinates black women" and their oppression. (Carbado, 1999) Therefore, not at all surprisingly, black feminists find it imperative to add gender and sexual orientation on the list of oppressions and show that their focus on women comes not from a constant need of bashing men but from the need to offer a complete and correct image of the African American life and feelings which cannot be constructed by leaving aside women or by misrepresenting women or by only briefly mentioning women.

In his essay, "Black Women's Identity: Stereotypes, Respectability, and Passionlessness (1890-1930)", Mahassen Mgadmi develops on white stereotypical thinking concerning African American women and rises the reader's awareness about some of the reasons behind women's fight for civil rights: "Black women are conceived and pictured as primitive, lustful, seductive, physically strong, domineering, unwomanly and dirty. (Mgadmi, 2009)

It is imperative to add here that these beliefs or expectations regarding white women are often considered by them as limiting and oppressive because they make women appear weak and dependent on men, even give them the feeling of incompleteness.

My motivation to conduct this research is that, while the central function of the slave narrative was to expose the brutal existence of a typical slave's life, the narrative frequently effected this by focusing on the experience of a person too white to be black and yet not white, ostensibly to excite the abolitionist sentiments of Northern readers, a large number of whom were women. Given the moral code of the time, the Northern female gentility could empathize (or at least sympathize) with any woman, white or black, whose sexual honor was in constant threat of violation by men. Consequently, the dehumanizing effect of slavery presented through the perilous life of a quadroon or octoroon became a stock device in the slave narrative and was repeated in many fiction works by Whites which were based either on slavery or on the slave narrative – such as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Black fiction writers in turn picked up the convention, which easily evolved into the "tragic mulatto" novels of the 19th century and the "passing" novels of the early 20th century.

Furthermore it was the problem of some black men's oppressive behavior and attitude within the black community and family, men who were mimicking behavior learned from the dominant society – i.e. victimization of women, physical and psychological oppression and abuse, violence – because they knew no other way to affirm their manhood, to cope with their frustrations, and to show their strength. The irony is that by acting in a mimicking way they proved to be not powerful but weak and fearful just as their white examples. So, more and more women began to ask gender-related questions about race such as "how does gender shape Black women's racial experiences?" (Carbado, 1999), and by the 1970s these questions resulted into an overt critique of antiracist discourse which evidently left much to be desired because of its many gaps with respect to women. What is more, the very rare reference to the African American women's life and feelings was done in a superficial and stereotypical manner. Carbado pertinently sheds light on the antiracist myths about black women:

(1) Black women are "already liberated";
(2) Racism is the primary (or only) oppression Black women have to confront (once we get that taken care of, then Black women, men, and children will all flourish);
(3) Feminism is nothing but man-hating (and men have never done anything that would legitimately inspire hatred);
(4) Women's issues are narrow, apolitical concerns. People of color need to deal with the 'larger struggle'; Feminists are nothing but lesbians..., "*nothing but* reducing lesbians to a category of beings deserving of only the most violent attack" (*ibidem*:1-2).

Keeping in mind the theoretical terms of our research, our methodology shall depend on the tools of comparative literature, Canadian scholar Steven Tötösi de Zepetnek defined the ten general principles that govern the comparative study of literature, and which a comparatist should observe. Among them, he mentions the necessity for the comparatist to acquire in-depth grounding in several languages and literatures as well as other disciplines before further in-depth study of theory and methodology. He

made a clear reference to methodology's importance in this type of research work by highlighting some of its important sub-disciplines for the accuracy of our current research such as the research analysis made by a single scholar, or the binary research analysis made by a scholar by comparing the literary work to other disciplines within humanities which are the main approaches of our methodology (Tötösi de Zepetnek, 1998).

2. The black-woman

From the selected novels *Clotel and Passing,* we can find major mutations of the black women's characteristics. And these mutations suggest the reversals of these black women's actions and behaviors, especially Irene, the mother, Clear the Black passer, and young Clotel.

2.1 A failed fighter

Nella Larsen's second novel *Passing* also looks back and gathers up a longer and larger history of passing to construct what we might argue to be the first passing narrative conscious of its generic status. In this next section, I will again begin by reading backwards, arguing the *Passing* represents a genre that has its roots in many of the texts we have already been talking about, in others that we have not yet explored, and many more that we cannot begin to include even in a lengthy bibliography.

Passing depicted not only the struggle between black and white sides of the color-line, many other colors often are celebrated, but the primary focus was on the war between black and white. In *Passing* an introduction of the passing theme is often followed by a blackness of eye or a distinctive whiteness of skin, In the novel, before we know that both Irene and Clare are "mulattoes", we "see" two beautiful young women with black eyes, white skin. It is the notion of passing itself what frightened Irene since she was worried that somebody will discover that she is passing, the thing which will reveal her "blackness." We can trace in both of the title and other descriptions in the novel many suggestions indicating that both Irene and her friend Clare's blackness such as: "a pale small girl," "pasty-white face," "warm olive cheeks," "red in the face," "dark almost black, eyes," "white hand," "her brown eyes" (Larsen 1988).

In a novel that is entitled *Passing*, and written by an African-American woman during the Harlem Renaissance, these are significant clues. But Larson undercuts the lesson of such visual signs by having Irene herself incorrectly read the race of her counterpart, Clare. Through the novel's third-person, interior monologue, which is virtually indistinguishable from Irene, the novel laughs at the inability of white people to read race. Skin and eye color are noticeably absent from this explicit list, while the gaze of the narrator may be said to provocatively highlight little else. Though an astute reader might read the excessive and unusual attention to skin color to suggest the introduction of some passing figure, Irene does not.

Like many novels concerned with passing, Larsen's narrative addresses the problems of reading race, laughing at the myths of white people but also uncovering a certain presumptuousness on the part of black readers. Ironically, Irene cannot read Clare. In the passage, quoted above, Irene assures herself that she has not been discovered. The woman that is boldly staring at her could not possibly suspect her of passing, for white people are "so stupid about such things." But the staring-woman, who we later discover to be Clare, is herself black; Irene does not yet realize that she too can be rather stupid about such things. Race, the narrative seems to say, is unreadable to black and white alike. Yet the narrative continues to traffic in what can only be considered a provocative attention to black and white.

2.2 An optimistic nature woman

In many ways, the above attention to the unstable connection between color and race allows for a more explicit dialogue or polemics. While Brown's *Clotel; or the President's Daughter* allows both the narrator and the characters to argue, Larson's novel relies on dialogue between characters and third-

person interior monologue. *Passing* follows in a long line of novels, such as *The Garies and Their Friends* (1857), where the characters ask the question: "Now which of the two would you rather be – colored or white?" (Webb,1971). Though Frances Harper, Jessie Fauset, and other literary antecedents peopled their novels with characters intensely predisposed to considering the question of race loyalty and color prejudice, Larson seems particularly economic in creating a cast that allows for maximum attention to these issues. The character of Irene Redfield is particularly useful, not simply as an embodiment of the "gory civil war [that takes place] in the mind and body of the mulatto," but because she is situated between two desires: 1) for her husband, who represents blackness and racial pride and 2) for Clare, who represents the denial of blackness and racial betrayal. While the first is an integral part of all passing narratives, the second had never been so passionately explored. Much of the success of Larson's novel comes from her ability to represent these twin desires:

> "A moment passed during which she was the prey of uneasiness. It had suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't asked Clare anything about her own life and that she had a very definite unwillingness to do so." (Larson,1988)
>
> The truth was, she was curious. There were things that she wanted to ask Clare Kendry. She wished to find out about this hazardous business of "passing" … (*ibidem*:157)

Irene contrasts nicely the single-minded passer of Jessie Fausett *Plum Bun* and the guilt-ridden passer of William Dean Howell *Imperative Duty*. Although it is as forthright as *Clotel*, which begins directly by addressing the "fearful increase of half whites" and the fading of "clear black," Larson's novel pursues its questions of amalgamation, color prejudice, and passing with a respect for ambiguities and contradictions.

2.3 An invincible struggler

The most important factor is the similarities between these two passing narratives structures is the fact that they both have the inevitable return. *Clotel* didn't only return to her roots in the south after escaping, but she was rescuing her daughter. In *The House Behind the Cedars*, a similar unavoidable return made by Rena Walden to take care of her ill mother. In other novels, these unavoidable returns were replace by a unclear and even mysterious calling of race. This strong bond is underlined in a very provocative way in Larson's *Passing*. John (Irene's husband) explains in a very racial way the reason behind Clare's return to be united with "her people":

> "They always come back. I've seen it happen time and time again." "But why?" Irene wanted to know. "Why?" "If I knew that, I'd know what race is." (*ibidem*:185)

In an earlier scene, much of the dialogue between Irene, Clare, and Gertrude, who are all light enough to pass, focuses on a similar return, or racial atavism. *Passing*, like nearly all passing novels, highlights the importance of this atavistic return. For some, it is not necessarily a return to a physical home but to a figurative though familiar blackness. The cost of this return, which is usually too late, is dramatic.

3. The tragic mulatta

Clotel let herself to be thrown in the Potomac; A heart disease led to Clarence Gary death caused by his unfortunate discovery of his own blackness which led to an immediate end of all the plans he made for his marriage; Physical and spiritual hardships caused the death of Rena Walden. Only through the mulatto/a or the tragic mulatto/a category the literary discussions of these tormented figures is made possible, The description made by Nancy Tischler's of the tragic mulatto/a is very instructive to our endeavor:

> Supposedly the black blood and the white blood stage a gory civil war in the mind and body of the mulatto, much as the medieval writer would have had the Body and Soul battling it out over possession of Everyman.[…] Through this succinct and perceptive description, we might imagine the passing figure also embodying a struggle of metaphysical proportions. But we must further

> ask why? What is at stake? Sterling Brown has called this stereotype, of his seven stereotypes that white authors traffic in, to be the one most "doomed to unfortunate longevity" (Tischler 1969).

A later study, also mentioned in F. James Davis most celebrated work *Who is Black?*, also "showed that the skin color preferred by rural Southern black children was light brown and that too white or too black or too 'yellow' were all undesirable."[2]

> "A 1932 study of 2,500 mulattoes showed that many quadroons and persons with three-eighths African ancestry could pass as white and that the octoroons in the sample simply appeared white... [although] most of those who could "pass" apparently were not doing so." (Davis 2001: 60)

4. The "passing" black woman

Passing by Larsen shows a unique sense of dualism in the way of treating color. When Clare was punished only because she is completely white, while as few critics acknowledge, the passer Irene remained unpunished. *Passing* points out the fact that Irene, who the anti-passing black woman, rejected her own believes. She enter Drayton the "whites-only" through the act of passing ; to keep Clare's secret, she passes at Clare's house; she passes again when she was meeting John on the street. She was passing for racial loyalty, but she failed during this act of passing. She failed to show herself as white for John, but instead wore another mask: "...her face had become a mask. Now she turned on him a totally uncomprehending look, a bit questioning" (Larsen 1988).

Starting from this point, there was some sort of racial loyalty in Irene's attitudes, She stopped warning Clare that John(her husband) might have discovered her true identity. At this point Irene set in motion the set of steps which will lead to her friend's(Clare) disaster in this narrative, the thing which will restart the usual story of the tragic mulatta/passer started to be much complicated with Irene's strong desire for the death of her friend and follow mulatta/passer(Clare). This passing narrative has a unique way in complicating the death of the tragic mulatta in quite tragic way, making more focus on Irene than her friend (Clare): "Her quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned and sank down, moaned again. Through the great heaviness that submerged and drowned her she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was *dark*." (*ibidem*:242, emphasis added) The "dark" wrap-up changes everything for the reader, Clare as both a passing figure and the tragic mulatta and the most important character in this novel was certain to die, the surprising thing for the reader is that even Irene (who has been passing herself) must die but in a figurative way. Irene's metaphorical fall was to the deep darkness of her forgetfulness and ignorance of herself as a passing figure that she would have easily became. The position that she has taken as the sympathizer with and the one who actually pushes Clare to her tragic death, many evidences encourage us to believe Irene's guilt like her own figurative death – her faint (whether it was a made-up or not). As past writers avoided to focus on the tragic mulatta's future by simply eliminating her, Larsen purposefully avoided focusing on Irene's guilt. *Passing* multiplies the elusion with the tragic mulatta's death, alongside that it makes the clear ending known to us.

5. Conclusion

The ending in *Passing* suggests the author's need for a new sense of incompleteness, but I think it will be better to be looked at as an old literary form that no longer fits the needs of the New Black Negro Woman. *Passing* places the reader behind the Veil to make the readers to feel the dilemma felt by every Black Negro /African-American Woman, the dilemma of whether to pass for the privileges behind on the White side of the color-line or not passing it and to stay loyal to the heritage found on the Black side of the color-line. *Passing* did not focus only on those who cross to the other side of the color-line, it is

[2] Although it would he easy enough to retrieve these studies, the first written by Caroline Day and the other by the eminent Charles Johnson, F. James Davis's offers more than a compilation of information. His study has been particularly useful to my understanding of the passing figure.

about reshaping the big picture of passing and changing stereotypes of death in the previous passing the passing narrative making it not only the story of the racist white man, Bellew, or the tragic mulatta, Clare, *Passing* is a clear manifestation of the problem of color-line. All the passing figures, in the selected novels represent not only the ongoing civil war between Black and White sides of the color-line, but they are the symbols of the ongoing civil war between the two black sides of the color-line.

The Souls of Black Folk, with its pervasive metaphors concerning "twoness" and "dualism," noticeably ignores the figure that most embodies these qualities, especially during the specific literary and cultural juncture which saw its publication. Several years later, James Weldon Johnson will use the passing figure to do much of the same work that Du Bois does: stepping behind the Veil in order to look at the "unvarnished truth," reflecting on the Negro's "double consciousness," and, most telling, exploring a dialectics of music, black and white. That Johnson's ex-colored man, with his movements across the color-line and his concern to integrate black and white music, can be read as a fictional vehicle for Du Bois's idea of double consciousness might be suggested by the sheer number of critics, such as Robert Stepto, Valerie Smith, and Houston Baker, who read the two texts together. My own interest in the relationship between Johnson's fiction and Du Bois's nonfiction highlights the New Negro's concern with representing the passing figure.

What does it mean, then, that the passing figure in literature must die and that the innocent death of a child, the real life passing of Du Bois's firstborn, is evocative of the passing figure? Du Bois, significantly, does not use this chapter so much to depict the child's struggle for life as much as he imagines the child as caught in a bodily civil war where the "brown of his eyes crushed out and killed the blue." Du Bois transforms his son into a symbol, for though his son "knew no color-line," the child is made to represent the struggle between black and white blood. But because the prominent description of the child's "olive-tinted flesh and dark gold ringlets, [and]... eyes of mingled blue and brown" so effectively threatens to evoke the mulatto/passer, Du Bois quickly christens the child "a Negro and a Negro's son" and praises his release from life within the Veil. In this way, Du Bois once again successfully evades, much like the narrators of passing accounts, the problem of resolving the civil war.[3]

We can trace a high impact of the image of the passing mulatta on Du Bois 's concept of the consciousness dualism of the ex-colord woman, the same woman who betrays her black world when she decided to be anonymous, Du Bois 's pictured the ongoing struggle between the consciousnesses of both the American and Negro as a "twoness" as he puts it in a very daring way, instead of picturing it as the civil war between white and black blood, which shows a unique ability to redraw the whole black picture. (Du Bois, 1965).

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[3] In the previous chapter, Du Bois explains why the "Negro, losing the joy of this world, eagerly seized upon the offered conceptions of the next" (344). Although my exploration of the passing figure could easily argue that Christianity, with its promise of the other side, explains the frequent resolution by-way-of-death in these narratives, I am more interested in what it means to silence this figure that provokes certain controversies and typifies racial tensions.

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