

# Teaching Texts Materially: The Ends of Nella Larsen's *Passing*

John K. Young

**N**ella Larsen's *Passing* has become one of the most widely read New Negro Renaissance novels in recent years, but no one really knows how it ends. By this I do not mean that critics have not determined how much guilt to assign Irene Redfield in Clare Kendry's fatal fall, or to what extent the narrative is actually a lesbian story "passing" as a racial one. I mean the ending is actually unknowable, because the original last paragraph disappeared from the first edition's third printing, and no extant evidence can explain this change. There is no conclusive answer to the question of presenting this textual crux "correctly"—despite assumptions to the contrary by Larsen's editors—but I argue that this textual problem itself bears an important lesson: the best response to a gap in textual knowledge is to acknowledge the absence and its causes, not to produce editions and teach classes that gloss over such gaps, thereby passing on the social and cultural elements of these textual histories.

More generally, I argue that students and teachers can always benefit from attention to textual scholarship, and that minority texts particularly need such study for what it reveals of the social and cultural interactions between minority writers and predominantly white, male publishers. The unbalanced power dynamics of this relationship produce what Gilles Deleuze terms a "minor literature": "that which a minority constructs within a major language" (152). By focusing on the production history of the texts themselves, we can study the material evidence of this "minor" language.

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Current approaches to pedagogy destabilize static notions of the teacher-student relationship, promoting the merits of “open” classrooms, student-centered learning, and other nontraditional dynamics. These accounts have largely figured the third entity in any literature classroom, the material text, as fixed rather than fluid. But books are contingent products of complex social networks, and there is almost never such a thing as a single, stable text. Scholars working outside of editorial theory have sometimes recognized this fact, especially as it relates to such famous examples as Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Dickinson’s fascicles, Yeats’s poems, or Shakespeare’s quartos, but have generally not made textual scholarship central to their pedagogical strategies. As a result, many students and teachers are not aware of the ambiguities and instabilities that begin at the material level and extend from there into other theoretical paradigms. Beyond correcting a conceptual oversight, incorporating editorial theory into the classroom offers three main advantages: a dramatic demonstration of cultural and historical contexts; an accessible way for students to approach the often difficult processes of literary analysis; and material evidence of the textual contingency emphasized in different ways by contemporary literary theory. Before turning to *Passing* as a concrete example of a materially oriented pedagogy that illuminates the racial politics behind textual production, I explore these costs and benefits on a broader level.

#### TEACHING TEXTS MATERIALLY

Throughout this essay I discuss material history, by which I mean the sequence of versions through which a particular work has passed, from manuscript to revision to publication, and, in many cases, to further revision following its initial publication. (Henry James, for example, substantially revised his novels for their New York Edition, and Virginia Woolf introduced numerous variations into the American editions of her novels following their original British publications. Authors usually lack this level of control, however, as was the case with the various truncated versions of *Black Boy/American Hunger* published during Richard Wright’s lifetime.) Inquiries into a given text’s material history raise a host of questions about the seemingly straightforward process of reading a book. As Jacqueline Foertsch explains, “That students may be required to buy and study and even be tested on not one but two versions of the ‘same’ novel can lead them to questions that their teachers ask as well: Is there only one ‘right’ text? If so, how did the ‘wrong’ one get into print? Can there be two ‘right’ versions of the same story? What else am I reading ‘out there’ for which a radically different version exists?” (698).

Foertsch’s example is *Frankenstein*, which went through several significant changes between its 1818 and 1831 publications. Questions about the “right” and “wrong” version of a work often take on a more highly charged meaning from the

interactions of white, male publishers and writers who have been marginalized along gender or racial lines (or both). In the history of American publishing, almost every mainstream firm has been run by white men, meaning that African American authors must pass through this field in order to gain a wide readership (although, as George Hutchinson notes, Jewish publishers issued many New Negro texts, in an interesting intersection of two groups largely excluded from the dominant firms of the early twentieth century [*Harlem* 344]). Ishmael Reed, who has worked on several occasions as an editor and publisher for small companies seeking expressly to put minority writers into print, publishes his own novels with mainstream New York firms. “They can put out a hardcover book, which I can’t do,” Reed explains (Dick and Singh 123). In contrast, Gwendolyn Brooks abandoned Harper and Row as her publisher late in her career, sacrificing access to their larger audience first for Detroit’s Broadside Press and then for her local Chicago readership. Brooks and her husband founded the David Company, producing books in Chicago and distributing them there, a move that gave Brooks the aesthetic freedom to write explicitly about that audience at the commercial cost of leaving a mainstream publisher. Toni Morrison was the first African American woman to become a senior editor at Random House, but when she resigned in the mid-1980s no other black woman held a similar position at any major firm (Berry 44). Despite this publishing experience and her later commercial influence, Morrison changed the last word of *Beloved* at her editor’s request, and dropped the title *War* in favor of her publisher’s preference, *Paradise* (see Morrison, “Home,” and Mulrine.) Material history is of special importance for minority texts, because it reveals the story behind these publications, reminding readers of the complex social negotiations required to produce them. To read such books without taking the history of their production into account means locating them outside the cultural circumstances that contributed to their creation. No author is an isolated genius, but because that pose has historically been available only to white men, it is especially ahistorical to reinscribe such a cultural image for minority writers.

In investigating relationships between white publishers and black authors, I am not suggesting that an “essential” black identity is lost or compromised by this process. Indeed, literature produced by African American writers often destabilizes accepted notions of blackness and whiteness as defined in opposition to each other; certainly one of *Passing*’s main themes is the arbitrariness of strict racial classification in a world that obviously blurs those boundaries. There is no biological reason that Irene and Clare should be categorized as only “black” or only “white,” when those terms are defined as mutually exclusive. But the publishing process often reinforces social constructions of race. For example, Knopf marketed Larsen on its list of “Negro in Unusual Fiction” despite her novels’ efforts to deny such racial division, while Boni and Liveright advertised *Cane* as “a book about Negroes by a Ne-

gro,” prompting Jean Toomer’s rejoinder, “Feature Negro if you wish, but do not expect me to feature it in advertisements for you” (157). The imaginative space of fiction, which both reflects and departs from lived reality, is thus often in conflict with the marketing decisions of publishers, which target particular, in this case racially identified, audiences in order to heighten sales. In this way the business end of the publication process contributes to the illusion of racial categories as natural. The philosopher Charles W. Mills explains that “[b]ecause people come to think of themselves as ‘raced,’ as black and white, for example, these categories, which correspond to no natural kinds, attain a social reality” (48). The study of a literary text’s material history allows us to examine that social reality and the tensions it creates with fictionalized representations of how people “think of themselves as ‘raced.’”

A fairly well-known example of the complex negotiations between a black author and a white publisher is the material history of Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, published by Harper and Brothers in 1940 and the first African American book named a main selection by the Book-of-the-Month Club. For Wright, there was a double racial screen to pass through: his white editor, Edward Aswell, and the panel of five white judges that eventually agreed on *Native Son* for the book club, after several months of deliberation. As Keneth Kinnamon notes, Wright’s composition proceeded with white and black audiences in mind, and against the backdrop of his own transition from a southern rural to a northern urban background. Thus, Wright changes “ofays” to “white folks” at one point in the novel’s drafting, and typically composes dialogue in “standard” English before switching it into dialect (116). We might understand Wright’s composition and revision process here as internalizing the social forces surrounding his new cultural position in Chicago, as, for example, Woolf scholars often debate the extent to which her revisions from manuscript to print represent a self-censorship in response to a presumably hostile male readership. Even more revealing of Wright’s tenuous position as an emerging African American author is the deletion of an early masturbation scene and the rewriting of several passages to dampen Mary Dalton’s sexuality.

From the novel’s initial publication in 1940 until Arnold Rampersad’s edition in the 1991 Library of America volume of Wright’s early works, there was no masturbation scene in print. Bigger Thomas and Jack visit a movie theater, where Bigger is “polishing [his] nightstick” (472) before the men compete to see who can climax first. The ensuing newsreel depicts Mary in Florida with “a well-known radical” (474), leading Bigger to comment that the white woman he is soon to meet is a “hot-looking number, all right” (475). The book club’s judges considered this scene among the novel’s most objectionable, however, and so Wright agreed to cut it in order to secure the greater publicity and sales that were bound to come with the club’s stamp of approval. Similarly, Aswell agreed to the introduction from Dorothy Canfield Fisher without first consulting Wright, which Kinnamon terms a “latter-day ex-

ample of the process of white authentication which Robert Stepto has shown to be so characteristic a feature of slave narratives” (123). The deletion of the masturbation scene renders incomprehensible a later reference to it in Bigger’s trial (Kinnamon 119), but, more important, reflects the charged racial politics surrounding the portrayal of black male sexuality and Wright’s acquiescence to those politics in order to get his novel into print more profitably. As Hazel Rowley notes, Mary Dalton in Wright’s manuscript “desired her black chauffeur every bit as much as he desired her—if not more so,” while in the published version she becomes more stereotypically “passive, limp as a rag doll, scarcely conscious” (183). The revised portraits of Bigger and Mary thus reinforce racial and sexual stereotypes of the day, even while the narrative as a whole remains a daring challenge to these same cultural constraints.

As Rowley notes, Wright’s correspondence on these matters has not survived, so we cannot judge precisely how he reacted to this editorial interference. Nevertheless, the material history in this case documents the cultural boundaries confronted by a revolutionary novel like *Native Son*. Of special interest to me is the fact that this version remained the only one in print for fifty-one years, something that would be almost unimaginable for a major novel by a white American man—*The Great Gatsby*, say. Despite *Native Son*’s historic place in the canon of twentieth-century American literature, its material history remained effectively hidden from most readers until Rampersad’s edition. Rampersad includes a detailed textual note explaining the presence of the “new” masturbation scene in the main text, along with a footnote printing the originally published version of the scene. By privileging the version of the novel from the page proofs sent to the book club judges within the main body of the book, and relegating the edited version to the footnotes, Rampersad reverses this scene’s textual history, allowing readers to encounter the novel as Wright originally wrote it, while juxtaposing the suppressed scene against its distorted reflection.

In addition to yielding such insights into cultural history, a pedagogy grounded in textual scholarship effectively counteracts the common reaction that “anything goes” when interpreting literature in an open classroom. Even while texts are interpretively and materially unstable, they still exist in a finite number of versions: there are three *Preludes*, six versions of Marianne Moore’s “Poetry,” a known and unknown author for *Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (the original 1912 edition was published anonymously, with James Weldon Johnson’s name added for the 1927 reprinting). This instability within limits encourages students to understand a material text no longer as a fixed, iconic object, but also not as a freely floating abstraction, unmoored from any reality. Instead, the material text is more firmly grounded in a particular production history than is the usual classroom sense of a text that can be read in any of its various editions, without much or any impact on interpretation.

This dissolution of textual iconicity yields for students a newfound accessibility

for once complex and forbidding texts. Seeing textual instability in this direct way, I have found, substantially heightens students' broader analytical insights: after disrupting preconceived notions of the text as an iconic object, this pedagogical strategy leads quickly to theoretical approaches seeking to orient the text within its relation to Marxist, feminist, psychoanalytic, New Historicist, or other conceptions of the text-world relationship. The inclusion of editorial theory within broader classroom discussions of literary and cultural theory also demonstrates to students (and teachers) that, no matter the theoretical paradigm for interpretation, textual scholarship offers important evidentiary support. Textual scholarship serves as a touchstone for all theoretical frameworks, grounding every textual analysis in the level of material, historical detail that first establishes the nature of the text itself, before proceeding to its examination according to a particular critical viewpoint.

Broad discussions of textual history also usefully come into classroom conversations about other historical contexts, including authors' biographies and the particular cultural and other circumstances within which they worked. I often distribute passages from a work's early drafts and/or alternate published versions as material evidence of authors' (and editors' and publishers') responses to these conditions. I also emphasize the original circumstances of publication as a useful index for a work's changing audiences, as we read the same text in different ways when it appears in markedly different venues. My general goal is to demonstrate the contingency of the version contained in the seemingly official edition ordered from the bookstore, and to encourage views of the text as a fluid object that is therefore open to multiple readings.

While I am generally concerned in this essay with introductory literature courses—those assuming little or no background literary knowledge among undergraduates—these examples and the ideas behind them are equally applicable to higher levels of instruction, including advanced undergraduate and graduate seminars.<sup>1</sup> In some ways the introduction of editorial theory can be even more powerful at more advanced levels, among students who have already internalized an expectation of interpretive uncertainty, but who have (usually) not considered the material status of a work in question. For these more advanced students, making their own edition of a text or group of texts can be a particularly rewarding exercise, as they have developed sufficient audience awareness to appreciate the nuanced decisions required. My own introduction-to-graduate-studies course included the assignment of an “edition” of Dickinson's poems, growing out of the simple yet vexing issue of how best to represent her fascicles. Most students ended up somewhere between an absolutist insistence that fascicle facsimiles be published and nothing else, and a consumerist acceptance of the most “readable” version. With the question of precisely where and how to draw a middle line, a deeper understanding of material forms and their interpretive consequences begins.

*Passing* serves as a particularly effective classroom application of textual scholarship on two practical levels. Because the textual discrepancy in question is confined to a small section of the novel, this crux is easily accessible. Reading one edition of the novel or the other, as I outline below, does not require complex distinctions between genetic and synoptic editions, as employed most famously in Hans Walter Gabler's edition of *Ulysses*; of sequential printings of variants, as used for the three major versions of Wordsworth's *Prelude*; or of extensive apparati appearing at the end of a volume, or even in a separate volume sometimes published years later, as has been the case for several medieval works. Admittedly, students reading *Passing* lose much of the complexity produced by such examples, but the same basic theoretical point holds for Larsen's novel, and can thus be extended clearly to its more far-reaching cousins. Second, examining a work like *Passing* in this context helps to broaden the canonical scope of editorial theory itself, which has focused the bulk of its scholarly efforts on such important, but culturally narrow, examples as Shakespeare, Joyce, Yeats, and Dickinson. This critical tendency runs the risk of implicitly reinscribing a conventional canon, by justifying the expense of new editions only for those authors and works deemed most marketable, or historically significant, or both (see Andrews).

#### TEXTUAL AND NARRATIVE INSTABILITIES IN *PASSING*

Since the appearance of Deborah McDowell's 1986 Rutgers University Press edition of Larsen's two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing*, Larsen, and her second novel in particular, have been widely taught and analyzed. Claudia Tate, McDowell, Cheryl Wall, Pamela Caughie, Peter Rabinowitz, and Judith Butler, among many other scholars, have traced the novel's elusive interpretive status, paying particular attention to the subtextual lesbian narrative (more or less as articulated by McDowell) that works alongside (or against, depending on one's critical perspective) the more apparent story of racial passing. As I will argue in this section, an important pedagogical parallel operates between these kinds of narrative instability and the textual instability produced by the insoluble problem of the last paragraph. (For an interesting discussion of this edition's typography and its effect on interpretation, see McCoy.)

Knopf's first two 1929 printings of *Passing* ended with the following two paragraphs, after Clare Kendry has fallen to her death from an open window and Irene Redfield has descended from the party to the street:

Her [Irene's] 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.



Centuries after, she heard the strange man [a police officer, presumably] saying: “Death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look at that window.”

The second paragraph disappeared in the novel’s third 1929 printing, so that “Then everything was dark” ends this version, not the police officer’s remark. (McDowell’s footnoted reference to the “Centuries after” paragraph states that this paragraph “was not included in the original 1929 Knopf edition” [246n9]. McDowell is in error here, presumably because she mistook a later 1929 printing for the original one.) There is no extant evidence to explain whether Larsen requested that the “Centuries after” paragraph be omitted, or if she approved of this change as a revision initiated by Knopf, or even whether the omission was intended by either party. The extensive Alfred A. Knopf archive in the University of Texas’s Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center contains no files on Larsen that resolve or even address this matter (for further information, see Madigan). Not surprisingly, Larsen scholars have reached various conclusions about how to explain this situation. Thadious M. Davis observes that “Larsen herself was not satisfied with the ending of her novel,” and so speculates that “she may well have been responsible for dropping the final paragraph” (322). Charles R. Larson offers the alternative, and for him “more likely,” explanation that the omission was “a matter of a dropped plate” (218n129). Where Davis assumes intention, Larson assumes accident. To reach either Davis’s or Larson’s conclusion—or any other, for that matter—is ultimately a guess, with no letter, diary entry, memo, or other record to answer this question decisively. Mark J. Madigan, the first scholar to address this discrepancy, opts for the third printing as the “definitive edition” because “there is no evidence that Larsen opposed the substantive change of dropping the final paragraph” (523). Of course, there is also no evidence that Larsen supported the change, and, as I have argued above, one cannot assume the same level of authorial control for New Negro writers and their white publishers that is present for an author like Joyce or Woolf, say. Partly acknowledging this problem, Madigan concludes: “In light of the uncertainty concerning the reason for the change in ending, and the confusion caused by the reprintings, though, I would also recommend that editors of the novel discuss the final paragraph in a textual note recounting its enigmatic history, a history which underscores the difficulty of establishing final authorial intentions” (523). Madigan thus opts for a compromise version of Davis’s argument, allowing the omission to stand while still directing readers toward its ambiguous textual status.

I am ultimately less interested in the question of which is the correct or definitive edition; as various editorial theorists have argued, the idea of a “definitive” edition, in the sense of an absolutely stable text, is illusory in the first place, thanks to the inevitable textual questions arising from the series of social interactions leading



to any textual production. In this particular case, we might either privilege the third printing as the last revision published during Larsen's lifetime, or the first two printings as representative of Larsen's original intentions. The problem lies, of course, in not being able to know whether the omitted paragraph represented any intention at all, authorial or otherwise.<sup>2</sup> The lack of either a relevant author's or publisher's archive makes it impossible to prefer one printing versus the other on the basis of intentionality. What is theoretically and pedagogically useful for me about this problem is instead the larger cultural lesson borne out by the bottom-line textual instability.

Two of the novel's current paperback editions—conveniently, for my teaching purposes—take opposite stances on the text's ending. McDowell's edition ends "Then everything was dark," and refers readers to the "Centuries after" paragraph in the footnote mentioned above, along with her odd claim that "This closing paragraph does not seem to alter the spirit of the original in any way" (246n9). Davis, despite her earlier hypothesis that dropping the "Centuries after" paragraph was Larsen's decision, includes it in her 1997 Penguin edition. "Although it is possible that the revised ending conformed to the author's sense of her novel," Davis writes in a textual note, "there is no indication that Nella Larsen herself recommended, sought, or approved the excision of the final paragraph" (xxxv).<sup>3</sup> I ask the campus bookstore to order both editions, so that half the class will read the Rutgers and half the Penguin, only advising students on the first day of the semester that we will discuss later the difference it makes to read a particular copy. On the second or third day of our *Passing* discussion, we reach the novel's end, and I ask someone to read the last paragraph aloud. Puzzled expressions soon appear on half the students' faces, along with questions and comments about either the missing or the extra paragraph. I also assign a brief response for this day on "what happens at the end of the book," a question that deals on its surface with Irene's role in Clare's death, but also leads usefully into the text's other closing ambiguity.

Following a quick determination of the textual facts at hand, I ask students to evaluate McDowell's claim, with a specific explanation of why the last paragraph would or would not affect interpretation. The ensuing class discussion focuses on the two main effects of the final paragraph's omission: the now more ambiguous question of how Irene's role in Clare's death will be perceived, and the removal of the police officer as a closing voice of white male authority, in contrast to the now final line, "Everything was dark." A careful review of the novel's previous pages, following the arrival of Clare's white, racist husband, Jack Bellew, and thus the discovery of her secret, establishes the consensus that Irene has pushed Clare out the window, or has at the very least wished for her death in this manner. This evidence includes, for example, such passages as, "It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew.

She couldn't have her free"; "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never clearly"; and "Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost. What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not—" (all 111, in the Penguin edition). The critical consensus largely supports the reading that Irene is responsible for Clare's death, at least to a large extent (but see Tate).

So the penultimate (or closing) paragraph thus ends with a clear sense of Irene's guilt, but without a definite resolution of the plot, at least as far as the legal consequences of her guilt are concerned. (*Black's Law Dictionary* defines "misadventure" as "an accident by which an injury occurs to another." By terming the incident "death by misadventure" the officer may be holding no one directly responsible, or may be suggesting that someone, presumably Clare's husband Jack Bellew, has accidentally caused her death.) The (perhaps) final line, "Then everything was dark," also echoes the novel's return to an overtly black community (Bellew is absent in the final scene), and so "dark" bears the additional connotations of Irene's wish for Clare's death: the restoration of a racially "pure" identity, along with the return, Irene hopes, of a stable marriage, enabled by Clare's absence as an object of attraction for both Brian Redfield and his wife. (The original book jacket for Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* plays on a structurally similar distinction between "black" and "dark," with the lines, "It's not only a black story / It's a very very dark one." Note that only a material history of Morrison's first novel would include these lines.)

These classroom conversations about the end of *Passing* help to clear up obscure readings—one student took the line "Everything was dark" to mean that Irene has died—but more importantly to encourage student-centered awareness of the novel's textual contingency. Another student remarked that she had begun discussion already aware of the closing discrepancy, after comparing notes with a classmate the night before, and now felt that she could no longer "take for granted that what you read in a book is what the author meant to be there." This displaced faith in authorial intention at the material level shifted quickly to a broader discussion of authorship as an inherently social process, which both makes authorial intention (as a final and stable entity) unrecoverable, and converts traditional conceptions of authorship into more nuanced appreciations of the social and cultural forces at work in any textual production.

Aside from their specific effects on these narrative questions, the final paragraph(s) bear special weight by virtue of their position. Rabinowitz observes, "The ending of a text is not only to be noticed; there is also a widely applicable interpretive convention that permits us to read it in a special way, as a *conclusion*, as a summing up of the work's meaning [. . . R]eaders *assume* that authors put their best thoughts last, and thus assign a special value to the final pages of a text" (*Before Reading* 160). To be fair to McDowell, the novel's close would have this same general

effect with either last paragraph; Rabinowitz points to the final pages of a novel, after all, and certainly Rutgers and Penguin readers would both respond to the ending in the same overall ways. All the same, for McDowell to conclude blithely that “[t]his closing paragraph does not seem to alter the spirit of the original in any way” risks short-circuiting the careful narrative dynamics that do change significantly, depending on which paragraph holds the privileged final position.

Indeed, two recent, insightful readings of *Passing* depend on the absence of the “Centuries after” paragraph to support their conclusions. Samira Kawash observes, “The novel opens and closes with Clare, beginning with Clare’s letter to Irene and ending with Clare’s death. When Clare dies, Irene loses consciousness, and the novel ends with her blackout: ‘[. . .] Then everything was dark’ [. . .] I would suggest that Irene’s loss of consciousness is not simply tidy narrative closure: it is the necessary result of the foreclosure of desire marked by Clare’s death” (165). Kawash’s analysis of Irene’s consciousness as the novel’s closing focus depends on the last paragraph ending “Then everything was dark,” without the “official and authoritative” presence of the police officer. Not only would this last paragraph prevent the symmetry that Kawash reads as more than “tidy narrative closure,” but the male voice would shift the novel’s closing focus away from Irene’s consciousness and desire (what Kawash terms “not only the consciousness of desire,” but “consciousness as desire” [165]). Kawash uses the Rutgers edition of *Passing*, but does not cite McDowell’s erroneous footnote on the “Centuries after” paragraph.

Turning to a critic who does note the novel’s textual history, albeit misleadingly, Neil Sullivan provides a Lacanian reading of the novel, in which “Clare becomes an image of Irene’s self” (375). When Clare dies, Sullivan writes, “Irene replicates Clare’s death in a fainting spell mirroring the one that eventually led to her reunion with Clare two years earlier” (382). (In the novel’s opening scene, Irene is faint from heat and passes in a white hotel bar, where she meets Clare.) Sullivan concludes that Irene’s aphanisis, “the disappearance of the subject behind the signifier” (375), is manifested in the final, “everything was dark” paragraph: “The narrative ends here, since Irene’s consciousness—the one that drives the narrative—dims and then fades completely” (382). Interestingly, Sullivan then cites Madigan’s discussion of the novel’s textual history, claiming that the “Centuries after” paragraph “was omitted from the third printing in accordance with Larsen’s instructions, apparently to add ambiguity and suspense to the ending [Madigan, ‘Two Endings’ 522]. Larsen’s *crucial revision* allows Irene’s fainting to be aligned more closely with Clare’s death” (383; emphasis added). Sullivan strikingly misreads Madigan here. Madigan writes simply, “In the third printing of *Passing*, however, the final paragraph is dropped,” a sentence that, through its passive construction, ascribes no agency to Larsen or anyone else (522). In a closing passage I have cited previously,

Madigan observes that “there is no evidence that Larsen opposed the substantive change of dropping the final paragraph” (523), but this is as close as he comes to suggesting that Larsen instructed Knopf to make this change. Whether consciously or unconsciously—though for Lacan the two are more or less indistinguishable—Sullivan posits two “subjects presumed to know,” in Lacanian terms: Madigan and Larsen herself. While Madigan, as a scholar, does occupy the structural position of the knowing subject, he carefully avoids any absolute claims of knowledge. Sullivan’s misreading of Madigan in order to impute intentionality to Larsen is a particularly interesting slip, as it suggests Sullivan’s knowledge of *Passing*’s textual instability and also his desire to erase that instability by imagining it to be the product of Larsen’s intention “to add ambiguity.” In fact, the ambiguity is there at the material level, but this kind of ambiguity may be more unsettling than one which can be explained as a conscious decision rather than as a result with an unknowable cause. The material instability challenges many readers’ fundamental, and often unexpressed, assumptions about textuality itself. By addressing the insolubility of the novel’s ending, that is, we see material documents themselves as “texts presumed to know” their own stability, when in fact the Lacanian recognition of this structural assumption reveals the true, productive lack of definite textual “knowledge.”

In tracing the different evidentiary uses of either “last” paragraph, I am not arguing that a particular material ending necessarily yields a particular reading. The connection between a material text and its interpretation is not that direct. Certainly, each version of the novel bears distinct interpretive implications; as I maintain above, the white police officer’s declaration as the novel’s last words puts a different spin on the ending than the closing line “Then everything was dark.” But rather than seeing one last paragraph as a queer ending and the other as straight, or one as “black” and the other as “New Negro,” we see that various, and sometimes opposing, interpretations of *Passing* can ultimately be derived from either last paragraph. My larger claim is that the novel has no “definite” ending, and so any reading should account for this level of textual instability within its broader response.

The ironically “dark” clarity advanced and then undermined in the novel’s closing paragraphs is itself founded on the larger illusion of racial identity in 1920s America, which rigidly insisted on the “one drop of blood” rule to preserve strict racial boundaries. “It is not precisely Clare’s race that is ‘exposed,’” Butler writes, “but blackness itself is produced as marked and marred, a public sign of particularity in the service of the dissimulated universality of whiteness” (183). That is, the racial ideology that leads to passing as a cultural practice depends on whiteness as an artificial norm, and Clare’s “discovery” as black locates her outside this norm. But to teach *Passing* without drawing attention to its textual history, I would argue, presents a similarly false norm: teaching either edition without editorial comment com-

pels the text to pass as stable, belying its authentic instability. Thus the text's most powerful ambiguity—which inheres at both the interpretive and the material levels—disappears as the payoff of this combined reading.

Literary analyses that do not take account of a work's production history create a nonhistorical sense of the work's place within the complex cultural networks which most classrooms examine in detail. In this case, *Passing's* unresolvable textual questions are an important index of the social power held by publishers marketing New Negro works for implicitly separate white and black audiences. As Zora Neale Hurston once explained to an interviewer, "Rather than get across all of the things which you want to say you must compromise and work within the limitations [of those people] who have the final authority in deciding whether or not a book shall be printed" (qtd. in Hemenway 286–87). This necessary compromise leads Houston A. Baker to conclude, "There is, perhaps, something obscenely—though profitably—gut-wrenching about Afro-Americans delivering up carefully modified versions of their essential expressive selves for the entertainment of their Anglo-American oppressors" (194). Similarly, Beverly Haviland observes that "[a]ll of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance faced difficulties about how they would become authors in, and yet not in, the white world that controlled the traditions and the material means of publication. There were many issues to resolve: about the subject matter one chose, [. . .] about the publisher one chose—or was chosen by" (305). Alfred A. Knopf, a relative newcomer among the large New York firms, was one of the leading publishers of African American writers, including Langston Hughes, James Weldon Johnson, and Walter White. While Larsen had mixed feelings about submitting her work to Knopf after the firm had rejected Jessie Redmon Fauset's 1924 novel *There Is Confusion* (eventually published by Boni and Liveright), Larsen "understood well the power of white males in the New York literary establishment, and she knew that as a female and a woman of color in search of a major publisher, she needed support from within their ranks" (Davis 186). Larsen came to Knopf's attention with a recommendation from her friend and patron Carl Van Vechten, whose controversial *Nigger Heaven* had appeared from Knopf in 1926. The Knopf first edition of *Quicksand* includes a list of "Negro in Unusual Fiction," implicitly including Larsen herself. So while in her two novels Larsen critiques the ideological dependence on a strict racial separation, her publisher reinscribes this constructed divide, even while stepping outside mainstream publishing trends by marketing minority texts in the first place. Like her protagonists, Helga Crane and Clare Kendry, Larsen bore a mixed racial heritage, as she explained in her author's statement for *Quicksand*. (On Larsen's autobiographical claims, see Larson; Haviland; Davis; Hutchinson, "Nella Larsen.") The implicit risk for Larsen of publishing with Knopf was that she would be marked as only, or at least as predominantly, a "Negro" author for Knopf's white readers, even if "New" and "Unusual," and would therefore lose control over the

authorial image being manufactured for her work. If, as Barbara Johnson suggests, “[r]epresenting the Negro race for whites’ was [. . .] in many ways the program of the Harlem Renaissance” (280), then we can see Larsen being represented by her publisher as a black literary commodity for white consumption.

#### TEACHING *PASSING* AND TEXTUAL AUTHENTICITY

A similar kind of consumption continues today in the literature classroom, often transferring the structure of *Passing*'s original production and reception onto issues of interpretive authority between white teachers and students of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. As Pamela Caughie observes, this pedagogical dynamic creates “questions about how to teach for diversity without treating texts only in terms of their racial, ethnic, or gender identity while acknowledging that their identity as such is precisely why we are teaching them—that is, in response to our recognition of the racial, ethnic, and gender bias of our traditional curriculum” (125). Caughie’s thoughtful response to this dilemma is to emphasize first that while “[w]e are always ‘passing’ in the classroom [. . .] we must realize that ‘passing’ functions differently for differently positioned subjects” (137).<sup>4</sup> Caughie’s “passing” teaching aims to demonstrate the limits of heretofore stable bodies of knowledge, because of the positionality inherent in any classroom discussion of multicultural literature. Seeking to disrupt classroom structures in which the teacher alone functions as the subject-presumed-to-know, in Lacanian terms, Caughie instead opens textual analysis to the process of different readers’ assuming different subject positions. Toward this end, she cautions against uncritical assumptions that Larsen’s novel contains specific, systemic meanings, finding *Passing*'s lesson instead to be “that we cannot always rely on tangible evidence and that desiring certainty and coherence in our interpretations may lead us to project the absence of such traits onto the craft or craftiness of the other—the text, the passer, or the teacher or student who has had a different racial, ethnic, or gender experience” (139).

As Caughie points out, the desire for certainty negates a recognition of its absence, as readers attribute a craftily hidden coherence even to those entities which seem to lack it. As a textual scholar, I am particularly struck by Caughie’s equation of texts with people, whether teacher, student, or “passer.” By not attending to *Passing*'s particular textual history—Caughie’s chapter in *Passing and Pedagogy* makes no mention of the final paragraph’s omission—Caughie ultimately assumes a textual certainty that is in fact absent. Rather than attributing this discrepancy to the text’s presumed craftiness, Caughie simply ignores the matter. Thus Caughie implicitly locates the material text in the “structural position of authority” too easily credited to “white teachers of nonwhite literature” (137). The interpretive and pedagogical effects of this oversight are structurally similar to those Caughie diagnoses for the

complex interplay between *Passing* and the multicultural classroom. Caughie argues that Larsen's novel "enacts the tensions involved in reading and teaching narratives that focus on multiple differences, and to this extent it can reveal the difficulties and resistances that ensue whenever we attempt to read, interpret, or teach in terms of one privileged reference point, whether sexual politics or racial politics, the authority of experience or the authority of theory" (134). I agree with Caughie's point as far as it goes; despite *Passing*'s status as what Rabinowitz terms a "fragile text," its demonstration of the limitations Caughie describes can only develop through active discussions of the novel. Yet by leaving an unstated faith in textual stability in operation as the single "privileged reference point" still left unchallenged, Caughie indirectly invites students to pursue the text's "politics of (dis)placement" (135) without displacing the material text itself.

Were Caughie to incorporate the kind of textual history I have outlined above, the result would be a more firmly rooted sense of its uncertainty and incoherence. That we cannot know which version of *Passing* is "correct" demonstrates much about the politics of (dis)placement when it comes to the historical preservation of New Negro Renaissance textual records. That is, by dislodging students' and teachers' unquestioning reliance on falsely stable texts, we might both amplify our understanding of *Passing*'s historical condition and expand our "open" sense of interpretation. Because reactions to the novel's conclusions vary according to which is the last paragraph, and because this unresolvable crux mirrors the text's more abstract ambiguities, teaching this text materially takes the book itself out of the structural position of authority, instead placing different versions of the novel into different "subject" positions in relation to its readers.

This move away from the text's presumed stability also has an impact on discussions of its submerged lesbian narrative. Rabinowitz and Caughie, in the two most sustained pedagogical treatments of *Passing*, disagree over the centrality of this theme. Rabinowitz begins by explaining that "I treated *Passing* as an exemplification of its subject: a novel about lesbians passing as heterosexuals that passes as a novel about racial passing" ("Betraying" 201). His subsequent discussion of the novel in terms of its "gullible" and "knowledgeable" audiences depends on this double-edged reading: the second group of readers may not wish to disclose the novel's hidden story, because to do so would require "shattering" the "fragile" text. "[R]hetorical passing," Rabinowitz explains, "requires two audiences: one audience that's ignorant and another that knows the truth and remains silent about it" (205).

Caughie challenges the premise that the lesbian and racial lines of the narrative can supersede each other, contending that "the issues brought together, those of race and sex, are not substitutable. Another way of putting this is to say that things brought into close proximity may be mistaken as similar, so that we are tempted to resolve the dilemma by conflating the two issues or by substituting one for the other



as the real point of the story. That is, we may mistake a metonymy for a metaphor” (136). Seeking not to reduce *Passing* to one kind of narrative or another, Caughie concludes instead that the fragility Rabinowitz finds is the product of the changing classroom itself, not an inherent textual feature. “I would say these ethical issues arise from our teaching of multicultural literatures,” Caughie writes; “what the teaching of multicultural literatures and cultural criticism has brought to literary studies is a new ethical dynamic that could never have been conceptualized in terms of canonical literatures and the formalist and expressivist pedagogies” that supported the traditional canon (143).

Before turning to the effects of the novel’s material history on this debate, I would like to add a brief account of my own teaching experience, because my student population differs from both Rabinowitz’s and Caughie’s. I have taught *Passing* most recently in an upper-level course on the twentieth-century novel to a group of mostly white, Appalachian students, many of whom are first-generation college students. This particular pedagogical context interestingly complicates the ethical issues Rabinowitz and Caughie outline, as my students have been almost uniformly resistant to the idea of a submerged lesbian narrative (even after I have provided them with Rabinowitz’s article or McDowell’s introduction to the Rutgers edition, and my own list of passages especially amenable to this interpretation). The desire that Rabinowitz postulates among homosexual students to keep this fragile narrative unexposed would be felt even more strongly, I suppose, among my student population, where open acknowledgment of a gay or lesbian lifestyle is rare, and the risks attendant on agreeing with a lesbian interpretation might well be too great to risk engaging in such a discussion. On the other hand, not to present such a reading would carry its own risks of perpetuating the heterosexist bias that might be keeping some students silent in the first place. So in this particular pedagogical environment, I believe, the costs of keeping the lesbian narrative publicly unread outweigh the potential costs to individual students. Furthermore, a classroom discussion of *Passing* as a text that lacks in conventional authority—there is no “right” or “wrong” ending—might help challenge broader attempts to require stable sexual identities, suggesting that there is also no “right” or “wrong” answer there.

A material reading of *Passing* is also important to this discussion because neither Rabinowitz nor Caughie (nor any other Larsen critic, for that matter) confronts the problem of which version of the work to consider within this ethical framework. The most authentic representation of Larsen’s novel would not presume to know which version is correct—or indeed, that any version is correct—and would instead represent the absence of historical knowledge. Imagining a hypothetical future, even if a long-lost note from Larsen or Knopf were to surface in a misplaced library folder or in a distant relative’s attic, clarifying exactly what happened to the novel’s third printing, the history of editorial uncertainty would con-

tinue as a vital part of the work's representation for future readers. Along with the new questions such a discovery would raise about why Larsen or Knopf had made a particular editorial decision, there would remain difficult issues concerning how best to convey this decision within its historical context. If Larsen opted to drop the final paragraph, was she responding to pressures from Knopf, effectively censoring herself? Or was she altering the novel's first published version for other reasons, perhaps seeking to represent differently a fictional world in which "everything was dark" (as Sullivan imagines)? Or, if the decision to drop the paragraph was Knopf's, was Larsen further removed from her publisher's power over her work than has been previously realized? The particular nature of textual instability might vary according to the terms of the hypothetical possibilities, but the work's basic character as materially unstable would remain a significant issue for editors to represent.

Absent such new information, any future edition will still have to make a practical choice about whether and where to print the original final paragraph, along with some explanation of the text's historical uncertainties. Ironically, the most effective editorial strategy might be to print some editions with the final paragraph, and some without, as the most faithful representation of the historical record (however unlikely actual publishers might be to agree to such a scheme). Of course, each edition would have to include a full textual history, explaining the problem of the two endings. Whatever practical decisions might be made, the most accurate edition of the novel would gesture only to the insolubility of its closing crux, because the most ethical editorial strategy would be the preservation of our lack of knowledge. That we cannot recover an accurate material record of Larsen's or Knopf's intention(s) (or of a printer's error) speaks ultimately to the construction of literary history, and to editors' and teachers' roles in either perpetuating or revising the historical conception of minority literature, in particular.

*Passing* is in this way a different kind of fragile text from that which Rabinowitz describes; here the gullible audience becomes those readers who do not question its textual status, and the knowledgeable audience those who recognize its material uncertainties. *Passing* is fragile in this second sense when encountered by gullible readers, because an inauthentic sense of textual stability betrays a historical attitude that has not privileged the archival records of writers like Larsen as worth preserving, a situation that is not uncommon for members of the New Negro movement.<sup>5</sup> Not to acknowledge this lack risks displacing, in Caughie's terms, a genuine understanding of the novel's instability with an unquestioning assumption, or unthinking neglect, of its material history. Teaching *Passing* in terms of that material history does not finally locate it as more of a lesbian or racial novel, but it does bring students and teachers face to face with questions we cannot answer, and with a history we cannot write, thus directing them to confront such gaps in the literary past and to address them openly in the future. The question of how best to represent *Passing* in

a contemporary edition demonstrates the broader need to teach texts materially, as a means of remaking the classroom into a site for more historically accurate encounters with the uncertainties of textual production. Rather than perpetuating a view of literary history in which every material thing is “dark,” this pedagogical approach would illuminate the social networks of authorship that often mirror the cultural and political biases and lacunae of the surrounding society.

## NOTES

1. I have found that students at all levels enter literature classrooms more attuned to issues of textual versions in film, where they have learned to expect “director’s cuts” and other alternative editions. Even if not fully aware of the theoretical issues created by such versions, many students can easily translate from film to literary examples.

2. I would argue, however, that we can dismiss Charles Larson’s speculation as materially unsubstantiated. The last page in the novel’s first two printings begins before the original last paragraph, with nineteen lines of text, and the colophon reads in part: “Set up, electrotyped, printed, and bound by the Vail-Ballou Press.” The reference to electrotype would indicate that the dropped paragraph could not be a “matter of a dropped plate,” as Larson suggests, because the last page would have been printed from a plate carrying more type than just the final paragraph; the omission would therefore have to represent a deliberate decision by someone, whether author, publisher, printer, or some combination thereof. Thanks to Russell Maylone of the Northwestern University Special Collections department for clarifying this point.

3. Davis does not explain the shift in her thinking from the 1994 biography to the 1997 edition of *Passing*. The Modern Library hardcover edition includes the last paragraph, without editorial comment, but the Modern Library paperback edition, published in 2002, does include a footnote by Mae Henderson, specifying how particular editions have handled this issue, and quoting McDowell’s “interesting” comments. Henderson concludes that she is “inclined to believe that the ending does make a difference, in that the amended conclusion enhances its status as a ‘writerly’ text” (204). I certainly agree with Henderson that the last paragraph “requires the reader to collaborate in producing [the] ending” (204), but this is even more powerfully true with a full knowledge of that paragraph’s history: it is not just the linguistic text itself that makes *Passing* a writerly text, but also the work’s open-ended material status.

Greenberg Publishers reprinted *Passing* in 1935, but Larsen did not renew the novel’s copyright when it expired in the 1950s (Larson 88), and the novel remained out of print until 1969, when the Arno Press and the Negro Universities Press both published editions without the last paragraph. Collier’s 1971 edition did include the last paragraph (Henderson 204).

4. Caughie’s use of “we” here risks eliding the specific historical connotations of passing, if late-twentieth-century white professors can “pass” in ways structurally similar to the ways light-skinned African Americans did earlier in the century. Caughie is very much aware of this issue; she goes on to write, “If as teachers we are always ‘passing’ in the classroom because our authority is positional, and if we are multiply positioned in the multicultural classroom, still, race may intervene in some of our classrooms to expose not simply the illusion of authority but the illusion of whiteness as well” (137). This is one of the points at which Caughie’s larger discussion of “passing” as an analogue to “performativity” intersects with a specifically racial context. Caughie seeks to employ “passing” generally as part of an “ethical practice” (25) which is “both the problem and the solution” to the “binary logic of identity” (22), and she explicitly distinguishes between “passing” in her sense and “passing as” another subject position, or assuming another cultural heritage. I would argue, though, that by transferring “passing” out of its historical context, Caughie is still implicitly engaged in the practice of “passing as”; for her to distinguish between the earlier use of “passing” and her own reinscription of the term implies her ability to under-

stand “passing” from both points of view, to inhabit both subject positions, in order to be able to tell the difference. For Caughie’s response to a separate but related criticism, see 144n1.

5. There is no surviving manuscript, for example, of Zora Neale Hurston’s classic work of folk anthropology, *Mules and Men* (Hemenway 355). Similarly, the original works and papers of African American artist Nancy Elizabeth Prophet have been lost, as have most of the original sculptures produced by Augusta Savage (see Leininger-Miller 17, 162).

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