Publishing Blackness

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REPRESENTING AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE

Or, Tradition against the Individual Talent

Literary historiography, criticism, and editorial work have done their parts in defining what Darby English has recently termed “black representational space,” an institutional enclosure that has developed out of the history of racist segregation, on the one hand, and strategies of recruiting art by African Americans to the struggle against racism or for racial uplift, on the other. One finds similar dynamics, it seems, wherever a minoritized group occupies a majoritarian literary field. Through myriad processes, the cultural productions of “minority” artists become identified with what distinguishes them from the so-called mainstream, their ability to represent the minority in its distinctiveness, while other features of the texts are subordinated or even transformed in order to bring them into alignment with a presumed tradition. This process, in turn, willy-nilly aids the reproduction of the majority/minority distinction and thus sustains the form and volume of the mainstream, though it is repeatedly troubled by contradictions deriving from the fact that cultural invention derives from liminality (but, I want to stress, not necessarily racial liminality) and from the fact that the very notion of what constitutes a work of “literature” or “art” is always produced in relation to a discourse that traverses social boundaries even as different social groups struggle for position in defining what constitutes “art” or “literature,” with unequal access to the resources through which such terms are defined. Over and over, the most significant cultural developments emerge at the boundary—often to be subsequently acculturated to the system of difference that sustains the prior order of things. In this essay, I will address two different ways in which this occurs in the representation of African American writing that was produced during the era when a modern black literary field initially took shape as such: first, in the processes of anthologizing, with Countee Cullen as a case study; second, in
the design of the paratextual elements and bibliographic codes that help shape a text’s reception, using Cullen again and then focusing on the case of Nella Larsen’s *Passing*.

We are accustomed to thinking that racism in the American publishing industry of the 1920s constrained black literary production by forcing black authors to write in ways that conformed to white audience expectations. Moreover, relationships between white patrons and black authors prevented the latter from expressing themselves freely—a dynamic that, to be sure, affects all patron/author relations but has greater repercussions when poised on the color line. Above all, white publishers’ and patrons’ insistence that black authors represent the race as “primitive and exotic,” according to common understandings, severely contained or distorted New Negro self-expression. Thus present-day republication of black-authored texts rescues those texts from the confining structures in which they necessarily emerged and, by placing them within the frame of a robust African American literary tradition they themselves helped create, allows a more accurate understanding of the cultural work they performed. Undoubtedly, white publishers of the period were racist and invested in the distinctiveness of “Negro literature,” and they identified that distinctiveness with respect to circulating notions of what was “Negro” to majority-white audiences; however, the hope that present-day constructions of African American literary traditions can help rescue texts of the 1920s from distorting conditions can actually reproduce and even magnify the institutional boundaries that developed at that time, submerging or overwriting important features of the texts and of their engagement with history. When biographical evidence conflicts with current theory, one might wonder if current reconstructions of the intertextual relations that produce “black literature” have been overdetermined by unstated, and flawed, biographical and historical hypotheses. When the fallacies of such hypotheses are exposed, we might catch a glimpse of the racialized horizons of expectation in which contemporary representations of black-authored writing and even textual scholarship operate.

Countee Cullen

Between 1924 and 1930, Countee Cullen’s poems appeared regularly in journals that dominated the mainstream of American literary
publishing—magazines like *Harper’s, Poetry, Century, American Mercury*, and the *New York Herald Tribune Books*—as well as more specialized literary magazines and such African American magazines as *Opportunity* and *The Crisis*. Gerald Early has argued that Cullen’s work defined the Harlem Renaissance more than that of any other writer, and that in 1925 he was the most celebrated black poet in the United States. As late as 1951, a Harlem branch of the New York Public Library was named for him, the sort of honor that at the time had been accorded no other black author of his generation.3

It is common knowledge that Cullen’s reputation suffered after the 1920s from the fact that he wrote in late romantic tones and very traditional forms at a time when high modernism was coming to dominate the field of poetry. Perhaps partly for this reason, along with the rising influence of academic criticism and college texts, Cullen’s reputation faded to the point that he came to be known almost exclusively for his “racial” verse—which used the same forms as his other verse but was distinguished by its subject matter. Implicitly, his poetry on nonracial subjects was too much like late romantic “white” poetry to be of interest. Eventually, what were perceived as tensions between his racial subject matter and the forms he used helped to partly resuscitate his reputation. Moreover, his poetry on racial subjects could become part of a theory of the subversive relation of black to white texts, or “mastery of form” in Houston A. Baker Jr.’s influential formulation. His poems have thus been folded back into the realm of black representational space.

Cullen knew all too well the pressures in this direction, and resisted them. He wanted Harper as his publisher precisely because it was associated with what at the time were considered the most canonical British and American authors. In the 1920s, most of those who admired Cullen did so because of his attachment to traditional forms as well as what they took to be the quasipagan passion and “soul” with which he invested those forms. They liked his poems on racial subjects, but they also liked his poems having no racial reference. The traditionalism and range of subject matter, as well as what was considered his pagan-spiritual temperament (partly attributed to his race), were central to his poetic identity.

Comparing the representation of Cullen’s poetry in the 1920s with that since the 1960s, one finds an extreme narrowing of subject matter. Whether looking at the original appearance of clusters of his poems in periodicals, or in anthologies of the 1920s edited by both blacks and whites, or Cullen’s own books, one is struck by the different sense of
where Cullen “fits” in the literary field. We are used to thinking that editors and publishers of the New Negro era had a stifling effect on black talent and narrow views about how and on what black writers should write—and there is plenty of truth to this thinking—but in Cullen’s case they were more catholic than their successors.

His first book, *Color*, is by far the most racially focused of all Cullen’s poetry collections. Put together much under the influence of Alain Locke’s encouragement of “paganism” and drawing on the “race endowment,” even this volume, however, is composed mostly of poems with no racial reference. A long section of *Color* entitled “Epitaphs” contains twenty-nine short poems for a wide variety of character types, acquaintances, and literary heroes. When these poems first appeared in magazines, they most often came out in clusters under the “Epitaphs” heading, as they do in *Color*. Today, they are usually presented as freestanding poems, and the only ones reproduced are those few explicitly addressed to African Americans (e.g., Cullen’s grandmother, Paul Laurence Dunbar) or the one epitaph for the upper-class racist white woman “type” memorialized in “For a Lady I Know.” You will not find “For Joseph Conrad,” or “For Hazel Hall, American Poet,” for example—nor “For an Anarchist,” “For an Atheist,” “For a Skeptic,” “For a Magician,” “For an Evolutionist and his Opponent,” “For a Poet,” “For a Cynic,” and so on. The dust jacket of *Color* stressed the fact that much of Cullen’s poetry was not about his race, which was considered, inaccurately, unusual for a black poet.

One of the first anthologists to use Cullen’s poetry was Alain Locke, who chose exclusively “racial” poetry to advance his own interpretation (or projection) of an emergent New Negro identity. Locke conferred with Cullen about what is perhaps his most well-known poem, “Heritage,” as it took shape, and convinced Cullen to reserve it for Locke’s use in the famous special issue of the magazine *Survey Graphic* entitled “Harlem: Mecca of the New Negro” (1924). In that publication he coupled it with photographs of African masks, and the poem itself was drastically different from the version used by Cullen himself in his book *Color* (1925) and his anthology *Caroling Dusk* (1927), as well as his self-selected poetry volume *On These I Stand* (1947). So far we have no direct evidence that Locke altered the poem himself in a major way and that Cullen subsequently published an “earlier” version that he preferred. In fact, it is more likely that Cullen revised the poem after its appearance in *Survey Graphic* but before the republication of that version in *The New Negro*,...
for *Color* came out in the same year as *The New Negro* and had the more “decadent” and “queer” version.

A typescript copy of a never-published early version of “Heritage,” closer to the one used by Locke than by “later” published versions, can be found in the Alain Locke Papers. It provides invaluable perspective on the poem’s development and glosses on ambiguous lines in the later versions. The typescript, probably by Cullen himself, has handwritten revisions (in handwriting resembling Locke’s) that were incorporated into the version published by Locke, and yet differs from that published version as well. I would surmise that it dates to spring 1923, when Cullen and Locke were corresponding about the poem, and that Cullen and Locke together made further changes prior to its first publication. This seems to be a case in which an elder mentor/critic/editor influenced the development of a poem that the poet later independently revised in a major way. A significantly different, typeset version of the poem along with a few of Cullen’s other poems can also be found in the same folder of the Locke papers.

In any case, the version in which Locke collaborated lacks the decadent motifs of the one Cullen consistently chose to publish, and it foregrounds pagan/primitivist qualities in conformity with Locke’s view of African American tradition. This version also lacked Cullen’s dedication of the poem to his intimate gay friend, Harold Jackman. Similarly, in *The New Negro*, Locke positioned “Heritage” to introduce his own essay “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts,” as if to gloss his own position on the connection between African classicism and the Negro Renaissance.

It is well-known that Locke was cavalier in editing other contributions to *Survey Graphic* and the subsequent anthology, *The New Negro: An Interpretation*. More revealingly, he published “his” version of Cullen’s poem yet a third time, in the pamphlet *Four Negro Poets* (1927), a collection prefaced by an argument about the racial “representativeness” of the poems and the emphasis of younger Negro poets on the “racial heritage.” Jean Toomer, one of the poets, must have been infuriated at his inclusion in the pamphlet; he no longer wished to be identified as a Negro and had never regarded his book *Cane* as an example of Negro literature, although he was happy that it had inspired many Negro writers. It may well be that Locke used “his” version of “Heritage” without Cullen’s permission, as well, for by now Cullen’s version from *Color* had been out for two years and remained his choice for publication. In his own review of *Four Ne-
gro Poets, Cullen explicitly rejected Locke’s argument concerning a racial heritage and subsequently distanced himself from Locke both personally and intellectually. Cullen’s additions and alterations may be related to the reasons for which he distanced himself from Locke by 1927. Yet Locke may well have altered the poem on his own, as well; we know for certain that Locke changed the title of McKay’s poem “The White House” without even informing McKay. McKay strongly objected when he found out, but Locke ignored his protests and went on to once again publish, without permission, “The White House” under the title “White Houses” in The New Negro. Locke also published work by Jean Toomer in The New Negro without permission from the author. Toomer had sent him an essay giving his thoughts on the Negro literary awakening from the point of view of someone who did not consider himself a part of it. But instead of using the essay, Locke used portions of Cane that would imply Toomer’s position as a representative “New Negro,” infuriating Toomer. Thus, relations between black authors and black editors are not necessarily less vexed by racial expectations than those between black authors and white editors. (This point does not change the much more important structural influence of white hegemony in the publishing industry, of course.) In none of his own publications did Cullen use Locke’s version of his poem. When Cullen came out with his own anthology of contemporary verse by African Americans (he refused to acknowledge the possibility of “Negro poetry”), he pointedly contested Locke’s positions: “As heretical as it may sound, there is the probability that Negro poets, dependent as they are on the English language, may have more to gain from the rich background of English and American poetry than from any nebulous atavistic yearnings toward an African inheritance.”

In the same year that Color was published, Cullen began pursuing a master’s degree at Harvard (1925–26) and came under the influence of William Stanley Braithwaite, a black man of West Indian background who had once been literary editor of The Crisis and was awarded the NAACP’s coveted Spingarn medal in 1918 for his contributions to the “race” as a poet and anthologist. Braithwaite’s poems rarely featured specifically racial subject matter, and his favorite poets tended to write late romantic verse of an Edwardian cast, rather like the verse that Cullen admired. Cullen dedicated his anthology Caroling Dusk to Braithwaite as the “real begetter of this anthology,” and it remains notable for the extraordinary range of poetic styles and themes it includes, with headnotes written by the poets themselves.

According to Cullen, “This country’s Negro writers may here and
there turn some singular facet toward the literary sun, but in the main, since theirs is also the heritage of the English language, their work will not present any serious aberration from the poetic tendencies of their times.”  

Caroling Dusk is the most representative sampling I have seen of poetry by black authors from that era. In this respect, it can be seen as an extension of William Stanley Braithwaite’s work as an anthologist who published a vast range of poets (of all backgrounds), and who did not consider race a significant factor in the production of poetry, even though he very much wanted to help poets who were black succeed.  

Also like Cullen, Braithwaite did not want to be considered a “Negro poet,” thinking it would distort the reception of his work.  

After Color, Cullen began feeling that black and white critics both (most notably Alain Locke) were trying to force him into a poetic role he found constricting. His next volume of poetry, Copper Sun of 1927, moved away from the kind of paganism and racialism Locke valued. Copper Sun included illustrations (and dust-jacket art) by the artist Charles Cullen, featuring mostly nude or seminude white female and male and occasionally black male figures in dramatic poses, in a decadent Art Nouveau style apparently inspired by Aubrey Beardsley. The name of the artist is fortuitous; Charles bore no relation to Countee. He was a struggling white artist whose greatest claim to fame was his work on Cullen’s books. The poet enjoyed the collaboration and became Charles’s champion with editors at Harper; they corresponded and continued to work together on Countee’s later books. Indeed, a new version of Color came out in 1928, illustrated by often intensely homoerotic illustrations by Charles. (New printings of this version came out until at least 1931.) As James Kelley has pointed out, “the drawings in Color present nude men, white as well as black, sometimes muscled but more often androgynous, alongside burning candles and dripping lilies that seem to draw their inspiration from art nouveau.”  

These qualities of Cullen’s most racially focused book somewhat destabilized its “representative” work for the race and the traditional correlation drawn between normative heterosexuality, masculine identity, and racial uplift—all aspects of Cullen’s popular persona. Also, very unusually for canonical African American literature, they gesture toward erotic pleasure. Considering the deep taboos surrounding, particularly, black male and gay sexuality, the illustrated version of Color represents an audacious response to New Negro configurations of representative black masculinity, all the more significant because Countee Cullen was considered one of the most “representative” of New Negroes, a credit to his race.
Cullen's identification with the poetic stance of Edna St. Vincent Millay, on whom he wrote his master's thesis at Harvard, emerges only when one reads a wider variety of his work than that usually anthologized today, and particularly when one reads his books in the original. In the 1920s both poets frequently used the ballad stanza, whether for short, epigrammatic poems or for extended ballads as such—notably Cullen's “The Ballad of the Brown Girl” (which was not “about” a black woman, although Cullen intended that it could be so interpreted) or Millay's “The Ballad of the Harp-weaver.” “The Ballad of the Brown Girl,” incidentally, was Cullen's only poem published independently as a lavishly illustrated (by Charles Cullen) deluxe book, dedicated to Witter Bynner. It was a “retelling” of an ancient ballad, according to Cullen's subtitle. Another favorite form of both poets, of course, was the sonnet, to which they introduced unconventional tone and subject matter. *Copper Sun*’s dedication “To the Not Impossible Her” deliberately plays on Millay's poem “To the Not Impossible Him,” which, given her widely known bisexual orientation, would be read by many as an ironic allusion to her sexual attraction to women: “He” is not impossible, but he must accept “her” need to roam. Cullen's title references his brief marriage to Yolande Du Bois after one of the New Negro era's most iconic weddings. The tension between Cullen's “representative” New Negro status and the passions subtending his poetry rarely came so near the surface and are more easily legible when one recognizes his affiliation with Millay or reads his poems alongside the Charles Cullen artwork.17

In his book of selected poems, *On These I Stand*, Cullen would include twenty-one poems from *Copper Sun*, four of them concerning racial issues. Three of these four—“From the Dark Tower,” “Threnody for a Brown Girl,” and “The Litany of the Dark People”—appear frequently in anthologies today; not a single one of the others is ever chosen. Cullen's next collection, *The Medea and Some Poems* (1935), is composed mainly of Cullen's translated “version” of *The Medea*. The last third of the volume comprises twenty-seven poems on various subjects, few of which concern race. The one poem that most directly addresses racial injustice in the United States, “Scottsboro, Too, Is Worth Its Song,” is the only poem from this volume that one finds in American and African American literature anthologies still in print today. For *On These I Stand*, Cullen chose eighteen poems from this volume. Racially themed poems make up about one-third of the selections in that collection; in many current anthologies all of the Cullen poems are overtly “racial,”
although a few do include one nonracial poem, usually “To John Keats, Poet. At Springtime.” The only book of poems that was dominated by racial poems was his first, *Color*, and even in that one they comprised barely half of the total, a ratio roughly equal to what one finds in the selections from that book included in *On These I Stand*.

Knowing that Cullen was black is an inescapable factor in our response to—and therefore the effective meaning of—his poetry. (Theoretically, this may not always be the case.) This knowledge largely accounts for current interest in his verse, if we are to judge by the almost exclusive interest in his verse about blackness and racism in America. If Cullen's racial identity is crucial to the meaning of his “racial” poems, why should this not be the case for his verse on nonracial subjects? One might mount an argument about the subtle ways in which Cullen “blackens” standard themes and forms, but this seems to me to merely exacerbate the problem that he wished to evade, to reflect more of our own need for his race to signify in his poems than about his artistic singularity. I would prefer to draw attention to the ways in which Cullen “queers” or destabilizes racial expectations from his own day to ours, not because of something racial in his poems but because of the frisson caused by his resistance to the institution of “Negro poetry.” His racial identity—or *our* awareness of it—remains, of course, instrumental to this effect.

Cullen had plenty of race pride, but he believed that resisting pressures to write mainly about race or in “racial” forms allowed him to defy the color line and to stand up for artistic integrity. He was far from alone in this. As Gene Jarrett has pointed out, many black intellectuals of the day (and later) felt that poetry and fiction not just on so-called universal subjects but specifically on white people by black authors would be revolutionary in the field of publishing. They questioned, however, whether any publisher would knowingly accept such work from black authors. In Cullen's case, they did—in the 1920s and 1930s, but not thereafter.

*Passing*

I will now turn to the presentation of what many scholars would call the best novel of the Harlem Renaissance, Nella Larsen's *Passing*—a novel that takes as its subject, in part, the fear and fascination inspired by a woman who is both black and white. Told from a third-person limited point of view, with a middle-class black woman, Irene Redfield, as the
center of consciousness, the novel focuses on this woman’s relationship with a childhood friend, Clare Kendry, who has been passing for white and is married to a rich white businessman. Clare is described as pale white in complexion, with blonde hair and large, languorous black eyes. Originally of a lower status than the narrator and therefore treated as a kind of charity case by their circle of childhood friends, she was taken in by white aunts after her father, a mulatto, died during her youth. Removed from the neighborhood, she lost contact with her black friends, who on first seeing her years later with a white man assumed that she had begun supporting herself as a sort of high-class prostitute. Now thrown back in contact with Irene Redfield, she reveals that she has been married for twelve years to a white man and has a child by him who is, to all intents and purposes, white; but she wishes to reenter the black world and is not afraid of being “found out.” What is curious about the novel, however, is that Irene Redfield, the center of consciousness, who is very much a “race woman,” finds herself both attracted to and frightened by Clare Kendry. Above all, for a variety of reasons, she emphatically does not want Clare to become “black” again. At the end of the novel, just as her husband confronts Clare, at a black party, about her racial identity, Irene panics and apparently pushes Clare out of a sixth-story window to her death. There are many ways of interpreting the story, of course, but at its center is the luminous figure of a dark-eyed, pale blonde woman who is socially both black and white—a white woman who is “really” black; a black woman who is “really” white—and the tremendous danger associated with this self-positioning because of the fear it arouses in others. If she cannot be stabilized on one side or the other of the color line, she simply must be done away with.

The novel’s subversion of the color line, its critique of the ways in which American racial identities depend upon the sacrifice of racial ambiguity or transracial identity, has important connections with Larsen’s first, largely autobiographical, novel Quicksand, which focused on a biracial woman—a “black” woman with a Danish mother, raised in a white family after her mother remarried a white man, who was never able to find a home in the world. Among African Americans she had to hide the fact of her white parentage. Among white Americans she could not, of course, find a place because of her dark skin. In Denmark, her “mother country,” she was treated as an exotic pet and recruited to advance the family’s status through marriage. A final attempt to find her true home in the black Southern Christian community proves her most disastrous
move of all. Larsen’s interest in how the color line is reproduced at the expense of the interracial subject derived from her personal history, for she, like the heroine of her first novel, had a white Danish mother—a fact that was important to her self-understanding and closely linked to her literary inspiration.

The original dust jacket of Passing bore a geometrically patterned art deco design, with no reference on the front surface to the work’s status as a “Negro” novel (although the inside flap and back of the jacket, respectively, would feature Larsen’s racial identity and summarize the plot). The inside front flap, printing almost verbatim a short biography that Larsen herself wrote for Knopf’s publicity department, reads as follows:

NELLA LARSEN’S

mother was Danish, her father a Negro from the Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies. When she was two years old her father died and shortly afterwards her mother married a man of her own race and nationality. At eight she and her half-sister attended a small private school whose pupils were mostly the children of German or Scandinavian parents. When she was sixteen she went to Denmark to visit relatives of her mother and remained there for three years.

On her return to America she entered a training school for nurses in New York and after graduating, accepted a position as Head Nurse of the hospital at Tuskegee Institute, but left after a year and went back to New York. She was admitted to the Library School of the New York Public Library and after graduating, worked as an Assistant and later as Children’s Librarian in the New York Public Library until 1926. In April, 1928, she published her first novel, Quicksand, which has since been awarded the Second Prize in Literature and a bronze medal by the Harmon Foundation in its annual award for “distinguished achievement among Negroes.”

This was the most accurate rendition of Larsen’s life story in all of the editions of her novel until the very recent Norton Critical Edition edited by Carla Kaplan. In fact, it is the only one that is probably completely accurate. You will no doubt notice how much emphasis this biography gives to the unusual ethnoracial position Larsen occupied. The biography is a faithful representation of her upbringing and professional life. The
biographical synopses in introductions to later editions of *Passing* both drastically reduce the attention paid to Larsen’s interracial position and present false information that would assimilate her to a more normative model of black female identity, perhaps in part because biographical work through the 1990s had come to the inaccurate conclusion that her autobiographical statement was fraudulent, a symptom of Larsen’s need to cater to a white audience and/or “play up” her white connections.19 Yet such notions may themselves be overdetermined by scholarly desires to fit Larsen into the “family” of black women’s literature.

The back flap of the dust jacket points out that *Quicksand*, Larsen’s first novel, won the Harmon Foundation’s second prize and excerpts reviews of that book from the *New York World* and the *New York Times*. Finally, the back of the dust jacket gives a partial plot summary of *Passing*: “The heroine of this novel is a beautiful colored girl who crosses the color-line into the white world. Her life as a white woman brings her superior advantages of almost every kind, and yet after a time there comes an inexplicable longing to go back to her own people. A chance meeting with a Negro school-mate—and she renewes her old racial contacts, although she is aware of the accompanying danger and senses the tragedy that will undoubtedly overtake the double life she attempts to lead.” This summary stresses the motif of the “double life” and the danger of being both black and white.

I might add that the physical presentation of the book, except for the dust jacket, ties it closely to *Quicksand*. That novel was published in brick-orange cloth with black scoring creating a kind of frame along the edges of the front cover. The typeface was Caslon Linotype. The book was dedicated to Larsen’s husband and bore an epigraph from Langston Hughes’s poem “Cross”: “My old man died in a fine big house. / My ma died in a shack. / I wonder where I’m gonna die / Being neither white nor black.” *Passing*’s cloth cover is like an inversion of *Quicksand*’s—black cloth, with brick-orange scoring on the edges of the front cover in exactly the same design as the black scoring for *Quicksand*. The dimensions of the books are identical. The typeface chosen for *Passing* is once again Caslon Linotype. It is intriguing to consider that if *Quicksand* centers on a woman neither white nor black, *Passing* centers on a woman both white and black.

But there is another book to which the presentation of *Passing* bears comparison, as Beth McCoy has argued—Carl Van Vechten’s controversial novel of 1926, *Nigger Heaven*, the first edition of which had the same
dimensions as Larsen’s novels and was also set in Caslon Linotype.\textsuperscript{20} (I should add that these dimensions and typeface were not unusual for Knopf novels at the time.) Larsen dedicated *Passing* to Carl Van Vechten and his wife Fania Marinoff (to whom *Nigger Heaven* was dedicated). *Nigger Heaven* used as an epigraph several lines from the last part of Countee Cullen’s “Heritage”; Larsen draws her epigraph from several lines near the beginning of the same poem: “One three centuries re-
moved / From the scenes his fathers loved, / Spicy grove, cinnamon tree / What is Africa to me?”

The dedication in the first edition is spread out to four lines, in large type—not only larger than the face used in the body of the book, but larger even than the novel’s three major section-headings. Centered in the top half of the page, it makes a bold statement, for dedicating a novel to Van Vechten at this time was far from a neutral act. Future editions of *Passing* would in various ways both marginalize the dedication and reduce its visibility—by severely reducing the size of the type, confining the dedication to one or two lines, and/or setting it against a margin.

It has been argued that the dedication in the original edition registers not only the friendship between the author and the dedicatees, but the unequal power relations that made black writers dependent on white patrons, who in turn attempted to control their artistic production.\textsuperscript{21} Indeed, it has been suggested that the dedication is a kind of disguise in readings that interpret *Passing* chiefly as a deliberate subversion of *Nig-
ger Heaven*. However, at the time of publication, while Larsen certainly felt tremendous gratitude to Van Vechten and Marinoff—they were two of her best friends—she was not dependent on him for publication. In fact, she almost sent her novel, dedication and all, to Viking, a new house at the time that was trying to woo her away from Knopf and, more generally, attempting to build a distinguished list of titles by African Amer-
icans. Van Vechten ultimately persuaded her to stay with Knopf. Far from being the one mediator every black author needed to sell his or her books to New York publishers, as he is often represented in histories of the pe-
period, Van Vechten worried that his black friends—particularly Larsen and Langston Hughes—would drift away from Knopf to other presses, as both Walter White and James Weldon Johnson had done.

In a recent article on Larsen’s *Passing* that focuses on the changes in typography between the original Knopf text and the Rutgers text of 1986, Beth McCoy observes that *Passing* was originally set in the same type—Caslon—as Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, suggesting an important in-
tertextual relationship between them that was erased when Rutgers put out its edition in the more modern Perpetua. But rather than reading this connection between the novels as a sign of cultural-political kinship—or, more probably, reflective of Knopf book designers’ standard practices for novels of the time—McCoy uses it to mount an argument about Larsen’s text as signifying on and undermining Van Vechten’s. (Of course, her argument also implies that new editions of *Nigger Heaven* should also retain its “original” physical form.) We should recognize, she argues, the intertextual relationship between these works as a sign of the “difficulties of maintaining interracial friendships across lines of institutionalized inequity.”

To make matters worse, Larsen “enters the complexly disturbing realm of the exceptional black woman in the context of the largely ‘white’ American Women Writers Series”—in other words, a priori, Larsen really belongs with other black women writers such as Jessie Fauset, and her being singled out plays into the white establishment’s methods of promoting some minority authors as individuals at the expense of others—notably Jessie Fauset—and the collective project of black women writers as a group.

“Typographical changes that bring volumes such as the Rutgers *Passing* . . . into the visual mainstream can also functionally mute structural critique. When typography, along with other tools, is used to normalize the physical presence of African American literature, the sense of the works themselves as artifacts with both individual and cumulative force and aesthetic and political context can be lost, or at least diluted.”

That is to say, if a text is by an African American, it belongs a priori to a separate family of text and ought to bear the visual imprint of that filiation, that overdetermining difference. Just as one can argue that Larsen is the sister author to Jessie Fauset without any attempt to find out what she thought of Fauset and her work, so should one insist that the para- textual elements of black-authored texts signify their racialized alterity. The failure to so differentiate, we are warned, comports with the neoconservative and neoliberal dogma of “color-blindness” that argues blacks are the same as whites and justifies rolling back the gains of the Civil Rights movement. “And typography can shift *Passing* from its status as a very public response to Carl Van Vechten and the institutional power he wielded through Knopf to a series text that, in a sort of cosmetic sisterhood, is putatively ‘the same as’ other recovered texts by white women writers, such as ‘Behind a Mask,’ by Louisa May Alcott.”

The possibil-
ity that *Passing* may actually share as much aesthetically and politically with *Nigger Heaven*—or various works by white women in the Rutgers series—as with Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun* is simply inconceivable. The signs of intertextuality between Larsen’s text and Van Vechten’s can only be interpreted in terms of resistance, while Larsen’s novel is presented as a kind of twin to *Plum Bun*. Of course, regardless of how Larsen herself thought of the relationship between her work and Van Vechten’s, it is perfectly legitimate to locate points of conflict and subversion (intentional or not) between *Nigger Heaven* and *Passing*. But doing so may tell us as much about the desire of the present-day critic or editor and the prevailing structures of literary scholarship that shape that desire as about something “in” the text or historical context. An inherent, yet scarcely stated, biographical hypothesis about Larsen, Van Vechten, and Fauset turns on the racial identifications of the authors that divide them into their presumed spheres of affiliation, helping undergird the institution of “black representational space.”

We can read the intertextual relationship between *Nigger Heaven*, *Plum Bun*, and *Passing* quite differently, however (which is not to say we must do so). In direct repudiation of Van Vechten, who had subtitled his infamous book “A Novel with a Moral,” Fauset subtitled *Plum Bun* “A Novel without a Moral.” (Perhaps coincidentally, Claude McKay gave his novel of the same year, *Banjo*, the subtitle “A Novel without a Plot.”) The publishers of *Plum Bun* sent a prepublication copy to Larsen in hopes of getting a statement from her for publicity purposes. She failed to respond.25 Aesthetically and temperamentally, Larsen and Fauset had little in common, and they had strongly opposed views about Carl Van Vechten.

Larsen and her husband, Elmer S. Imes, were fans of Van Vechten’s fiction before, during, and after the publication of *Nigger Heaven* in 1926. One of Elmer’s favorite novels was Van Vechten’s *Peter Whiffle*. Among Larsen’s particular circle of black friends, *Nigger Heaven* was enthusiastically received. Lillian Alexander, an old Harlem friend of Nella and Elmer’s, had objected to the novel based on reviews she read when it came out, but after reading it, she wrote Elmer specifically to apologize, citing how “dumb” the criticism of it was in the black press: “Really the book is an epic—to me—(and I rarely rave over anything or anybody) and is revealing in every line of Negro wants, needs, failures and why, aspirations and the vicious circle that prevents their realization.”26 Rudolph Fisher’s sister Pearl spoofed the criticism of the novel and of its title in her col-
umn “This Harlem” for the Baltimore *Afro-American*. Rudolph himself had read the book in manuscript (as had Walter White and James Weldon Johnson), had encouraged Van Vechten, and had helped him with the “glossary.”27 These were exactly the people with whom Larsen spent most of her intimate social life in the late 1920s. James Weldon Johnson wrote a review defending the novel for *Opportunity*. As I have shown elsewhere, Larsen was directly implicated in the black newspaper criticism of *Nigger Heaven*, which was as often an attack on Van Vechten’s black friends as on Van Vechten himself, and specifically targeted his “dusky hosts—and hostesses” in Harlem, Nella Larsen being one of the chief of these.28 *Plum Bun*’s ideological trajectory and plot structure, in any case, are virtually the opposite of *Passing*’s.29

Instead of reading the dedication as an obsequious expression of Larsen’s dependent status or a fetishistic expression of her ambivalence toward her “patron,” we can read it as an assertion of artistic autonomy, indeed of independence from the demands of racial representativeness and uplift. The dedication made a deliberate cultural-political statement that could not have been missed by contemporary readers of “Negro” literature and literary criticism. Larsen was thumbing her nose at those—including many black reviewers and Harlem neighbors—who had pilloried *Nigger Heaven*, much as Langston Hughes had done in 1927 by dedicating *Fine Clothes to the Jew* to Van Vechten. The dedication of *Fine Clothes*, along with the form and content of its poetry, much of which took the form of blues lyrics, prompted black critics to charge that the book was “designed for white readers” and that it showed how Hughes had been led astray by Carl Van Vechten.30 After taking the second draft of her first novel (*Quicksand*) in to Knopf, while *Fine Clothes* was being ripped to shreds in some quarters, Larsen wrote Carl, “Heaven forbid that I should ever be bitten by the desire to write another novel! Except, perhaps, one to dedicate to you. For, why should Langston Hughes be the only one to enjoy notoriety for the sake of his convictions?” From the moment she began writing *Passing*, Larsen planned to dedicate the book to Van Vechten, and she referred to it in correspondence as “his” novel. Could Larsen have been kissing up to Van Vechten? Of course. But more dramatic in the context of the moment was the fact that any fond acknowledgment of his friendship at the time virtually ensured notoriety and identified Larsen’s fiction with Van Vechten’s in the critical landscape of the late 1920s. Larsen was most emphatically not allying herself with, for example, Jessie Fauset.
With both her first and second novels, Larsen thought she was risking ostracism by the same people who had attacked Van Vechten and Hughes. Ironically—and to Larsen’s amazement—the same critics who railed against Van Vechten hailed *Passing* as an antidote to novels like *Nigger Heaven*, proving that black America had an intelligent and striving professional class—which, actually, was much more the propagandistic point of Van Vechten’s own novel than of *Passing*.

Van Vechten himself was a huge fan of *Passing*. Larsen did not share it with him while writing it; she apparently wanted it to be a surprise. When he received his pre-publication copy, with its affectionate inscription by the author, he immediately started reading it—“absorbingly” he wrote in his diary—until he had to go out to dinner. When he got home from dinner at 1:00 a.m. he picked it up again and finished it at one sitting, calling it in his diary “an extraordinary story, extraordinarily told. I go to bed and sleep badly. I am so excited.” The next morning he woke up, dressed, and immediately headed to the Knopf offices where, his diary records, “I stir Blanche and Alfred up about Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, making quite a scene.” He then went next door to the *American Mercury* office and raved to George Jean Nathan about the book. Next he went to a florist’s and ordered a bouquet of flowers for Larsen, and continued to the home of Dorothy Peterson—a black friend who was also Nella’s best friend at the time—for lunch, where he found Nella herself. A few days later he went to the Knopf offices again to join in a conference with the Knopfs, an editor, two salesmen, and Nella Larsen to brainstorm about ways to market the book. This level of interest has no parallel in Van Vechten’s response to other writing—by blacks or whites—of the period. (Of course, vanity may have been one reason for his enthusiasm.) One result of the meeting, apparently, was a unique marketing gimmick. Knopf quickly printed up some green paper “belly bands” to wrap around the middle of the jacket of the book with a bold blurb by Van Vechten. Blanche Knopf subsequently hosted a well-attended tea in honor of Larsen and her book at the elegant Sherry-Netherland Hotel and invited many of the literary lights of the city, along with Larsen’s friends, both black and white.

In marketing the novel, Knopf used different strategies. One played up the “sensational” aspects of the novel without specifying them, making no reference to race or blackness. Van Vechten’s blurb read: “A strangely provocative story, superbly told. The sensational implications of *PASSING* should make this book one of the most widely discussed
on the Spring list.” Probably the most important advertisement for the novel was that in Publishers Weekly, a full-page advertisement aimed at booksellers immediately before publication. Such ads are intended to get a book into bookstores nationwide—a difficult task for black-authored fiction in those days. “An ASTONISHING and SENSATIONAL Novel that will be widely advertised,” it began. Knopf had written a special advertising letter (not uncommon for him), presented in an hourglass design over his signature. The letter never says a word about the race of the author or the racial content of the book, although the title might have given away the subject matter to most readers. Knopf, I suspect, was trying to persuade booksellers outside New York to adopt the title who normally would be skeptical of the sales potential of a “Negro” novel. “Passing is a novel on a theme so explosive that for a long time the advisability of its publication was seriously debated,” Knopf disingenuously puffed. “But the complete artistry of its telling and the poignant interest of the story itself imperatively demanded that the book see the light of day.” A different advertisement developed for literary reviews subsequent to publication explicitly identified the novel racially. Thus the New York Herald Tribune carried, along with a profile of Larsen based on an interview, an advertisement beginning “I like my ladies darker,” quoting Irene Redfield’s husband Brian. “Brian Redfield didn’t like ‘jigs’ who passed for white,” the text continues, “and he claimed that the pale beauty of Clare Kendry didn’t compare with that of an ‘A-number-one Sheba.’ But he succumbed to the charms of this girl who was ‘passing’ . . . who had married a white man . . . who was accepted in white society. Then Clare’s husband discovered the truth.” The firm tried its best to create a sensation around the drama of passing: “There are thousands of Clare Kendrys, and every woman who ‘passes’ is a possible storm center. Nella Larsen knows her subject and around this sensational question she has written a fast-moving, action-filled story that will startle both Negroes and whites.”

The novel, unfortunately, did not do well commercially. Van Vechten continued pressing Knopf to market the book aggressively. Knopf wrote to assure him that the firm was doing all it could, but to little effect. Even in Chicago, the book’s opening setting, where Knopf’s sales force was pressing the bookstores to feature it, people weren’t buying. The sales were limited almost exclusively to New York. Knopf brought out a third printing (the one in which the final paragraph of the original was unac-
countably dropped) in hopes that interest would pick up—the novel was getting positive reviews—but obviously expected to lose money on that printing. It seems unlikely that the Knopfs made back their investment in the novel, and it soon went out of print.

Forty-two years later a new edition of *Passing* appeared in the form of a 1971 Collier Books paperback introduced by Hoyt Fuller, editor of the journal *Black World* and an important proponent of “the Black Aesthetic” in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This book appears in a series called the African/American Library: “A continuing series of works of literary excellence by black writers in the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean.” The cover illustration shows African Americans in an urban setting suggesting the Great Depression. The front cover, under the title, has this marketing blurb: “The tragic story of a beautiful light-skinned mulatto passing for white in high society, who sought dangerously—and too late—to claim her black heritage. A searing novel of racial conflict in the 1930s.” Fuller’s introduction recalls the initial reception of the book and then rejects interpretations from “without” the black community. It also states that Larsen, like the two main characters of the novel, “had gone off to Europe for a try at rejecting her Blackness, only to return in the end to wrap it closely about her again.” A footnote adds, “At one point, Miss Larsen left her husband, Dr. Elmer Imes, and went off to live in Europe. Reportedly, she considered ending her marriage and becoming the wife of an Englishman. However, she finally returned to America and to Dr. Imes.” That is all we get of Larsen’s biography, and it is essentially inaccurate. (The truth is actually the opposite: Larsen learned that her husband was having an affair with a white woman just about the time she was awarded a Guggenheim to go to Europe and work on a novel. About a year after her return she divorced her husband because of his infidelity; the white lover would remain his partner for life.) The biographical inaccuracies concern me less than the attempt Fuller makes to direct the reader toward an understanding of the novel as affirmation of an undiluted black heritage. Yet the novel is hardly black enough for Fuller, who finds its subject matter trivial, justifying the fact that black readers have ignored it and its author: “Current interests lie in other, less white-oriented directions.” Even in the 1920s, Fuller adds, “not all that many Black people were worked up over passing”: “apart from the malicious delight Black people derived from having one of their own get away with such a masquerade, passing no doubt ranked very low in the
essential scheme of things.” In other words, white audiences are primarily responsible for the appearance of Larsen’s novels.

It is very clear from the black-authored reviews of *Passing* (and *Quicksand*) in the 1920s that many black readers of the time considered these the sorts of novels that blacks would enjoy more than whites. Of *Quicksand*, W. E. B. Du Bois stated simply, “White people will not like this book.” The truth is that some white people and some black people liked Larsen’s books, but most potential readers—white and black—ignored them.

Larsen’s attention to upper-class light-skinned characters Fuller attributes to her desire to present a favorable impression to the white public, to advertise the existence of a black bourgeoisie. “It is all rather banal . . . In the tradition of mulatto writers since William Wells Brown . . . Miss Larsen dwells on the ‘white’ traits of her ‘society Negro’ characters.” “Without the element of intrigue and suspense injected by race,” Fuller’s introduction concludes, “Miss Larsen’s novel might have been relegated to the lost ranks of that massive body of fiction designed to titillate middle-class housewives on a long and lonely afternoon.” Between the cover illustration, the blurb material, and the argument of the introduction, a particular racial/ethical orientation envelops the text. The cover attracts an audience looking for “black” fiction of the urban underclass, the front matter listing titles in the series places the book within a black diasporic canon, and the introduction relegates the text to the dustbin of history for not being about what the cover illustration seems to suggest.

The next significant edition of the novel is Deborah E. McDowell’s, for the American Women Writers Series of Rutgers University Press (1987). This book set off a new phase in Larsen’s reception, publishing Larsen’s two novels together at the very moment black feminist criticism and black women’s fiction were gaining new footholds in the academy and the publishing industry. In her influential introduction, Deborah E. McDowell argued that the novels were not really about biracial identity or passing but rather about black female psychology and sexuality. As if to signal this new understanding, the cover of this book features a well-known photograph by the Harlem photographer James Van der Zee of three well-dressed, unmistakably African American women of the 1920s strolling joyously, arm in arm, down a broad Harlem sidewalk. Celebrating three evidently middle-class black women’s friendship, the photograph has little in common with either of Larsen’s novels.

On the back cover, one finds two blurbs, one by Alice Walker and one
from the Women's Studies International Forum, the latter reading, “A tantalizing mix of moral fable and sensuous colorful narrative, exploring female sexuality and racial solidarity.” A brief description of the contents reads, “Nella Larsen’s novels Quicksand (1928) and Passing (1929) document the historical realities of Harlem in the 1920s and shed a bright light on the social world of the black bourgeoisie. The novels’ greatest appeal and achievement, however, is not sociological, but psychological. As noted in the editor’s comprehensive introduction, Larsen takes the theme of psychic dualism, so popular in Harlem Renaissance fiction, to a higher and more complex level, displaying a sophisticated understanding and penetrating analysis of black female psychology.”

Deborah E. McDowell’s introduction steers readers away from concentrating on interracial identity or passing to argue that the novels are fundamentally about black female sexuality. The biographical information provided matches this emphasis. We find less detail than in the dust jacket of the first edition about Larsen’s family and are told she never felt connected to that family anyway. Roaming from place to place, Larsen finally studied science for a year at Fisk, we are told, during a rocky marriage to professor Elmer Imes, then traveled to Denmark where she audited classes at the University of Copenhagen; then she returned to the States and studied nursing, and so on. Not only are the facts wrong—understandably, given the state of Larsen biography at the time—but they give a very different notion of what is significant in the author’s life than what Larsen presented, deliberately, to her publisher for publicity purposes.

Similarly, McDowell strives hard to discount the notion that Passing is about passing or racial ambiguity and ambivalence; its chief concern is with black female sexuality, and its chief weakness is that it does not address this issue as forthrightly as it should. Larsen’s failure in this respect, McDowell argues, can be attributed to the oppressive atmosphere of the time, when black women authors had to take care not to nourish stereotypical notions of black women’s hypersexuality. In particular, Carl Van Vechten’s novel Nigger Heaven had made it “difficult to publish novels that did not fit the profile of the commercial success formula adopted by most publishers for black writers.” In essence, McDowell makes a point closely related to Fuller’s: If it hadn’t been for the hegemony of white notions about race (specifically, for McDowell, black women), perhaps Larsen would have had the courage to develop her talent in more fruitful directions.

Knowing that Van Vechten was Larsen’s friend, McDowell speculates
that Larsen found herself between a rock and a hard place, unable to come out directly against Van Vechten. That *Passing* is actually dedicated to Van Vechten and his wife is put in perspective by the speculation that, since Van Vechten had helped her get her first novel published, “perhaps Larsen showed her gratitude by dedicating her novel to him and his wife Fania Marinoff.”

But let me return to the packaging of *Passing*. As we’ve seen, Larsen had given her novel an epigraph from Countee Cullen’s poem “Heritage” that focused on the ambiguities of racial identity and the question “What is Africa to me?” This epigraph, boldly featured in the first edition, is reproduced in the Rutgers edition on the verso of the dedication page in minuscule type. Moreover, in the introduction, McDowell brushes off the epigraph as “misleading.” “Focusing on racial identity or racial ambiguity and cultural history, the book invites the reader to place race at the center of any critical interpretation,” but this is merely a piece of camouflage, forced on Larsen by the racism and heterosexism of the 1920s. Larsen’s unfortunate compromise with reigning prejudices, we learn, is compounded by the matching inappropriateness of the novel’s ending, in which Clare Bellew, the “passing” heroine, is pushed to her death by the novel’s center of consciousness, Irene Redfield. The story of lesbian attraction between these women, according to McDowell, was too dangerous to expose, and so Larsen wrapped her real concerns in the misleading guise of the “safe and familiar plot of racial passing.”

Such a hypothesis is inherently biographical, and yet it sidelines the possibility that Larsen was, for example, investing Irene Redfield with her own fears about losing her husband to another woman (who was white) at the time she was writing *Passing*. McDowell ends with a devastating critique of the novel for honoring “the very value system the text implicitly satirizes.” Larsen does “the opposite of what she has promised.” But McDowell goes on to suggest that the novel did, after all, anticipate later, more explicit and satisfying treatments of black female sexuality by African American women authors such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Gloria Naylor, Gayl Jones, and Ntozake Shange. This sisterhood, we understand, is where Nella Larsen really belongs.

As if following upon McDowell’s point, the Modern Library commissioned Ntozake Shange to do the introduction for its new edition of *Passing*, the back cover of which has a blurb by Alice Walker and an excerpt from Shange’s introduction. The front cover is graced by a photograph of Larsen by Carl Van Vechten. Shange’s brief and ambivalent introduc-
tion, in some ways like Hoyt Fuller’s, focuses on the question of racial betrayal. Shange judges Clare Kendry a negative force who “tortures” Irene Redfield by asking to be taken to Harlem events, “as if Irene were there for her amusement, to see Negroes, not unlike the hordes of whites who invaded Harlem at the time to look at us, to dance our dances, to guess who among us was more white than the others.”

Clare, in Shange’s presentation, is like a white woman touring black Harlem and making invidious color distinctions among its populace. (In the context of the present discussion, this statement is ironic, in that Van Vechten and his wife occasionally escorted Larsen to the NAACP dances, since her husband did not like to go.) The entire novel, by Shange’s account, is an indictment of the central characters; Larsen “bluntly exposes the classism and racism of this small clique of our population.”

Given this critique of the main characters, who all seem to suffer intense ambivalence about the enclosure of race, one can’t but take as a warning to self-described “multiracial” persons at the turn of the twenty-first century Shange’s concluding moral that “Larsen has peeled away the historical questions we might have about society during the Harlem Renaissance, while remaining relevant in an America whose biracial population is growing. She offers characters so honest and desperate to be whole that we cannot help but champion their humanity.”

Shange’s introduction brims with anxiety about the destabilization of racial identities in the late 1990s, when questions about racial categorizations for the 2000 census grew acute.

On this note, it is worth pointing out a similarity between the cover of the 1997 Penguin edition of Passing, introduced by Thadious Davis, and that of the 1990 Beacon Press edition of Plum Bun, the classroom standard edited by Deborah McDowell. They use an identical portrait by Archibald Motley, drawn from his series on African American “types” categorized by supposed blood fractions, and tell us that these books are sister texts about so-called octoroons. In the version for Passing, the skin has been lightened perhaps to fit the description of the alabaster-completed Clare, though it does not render her blonde hair. Like the publishers of other “passing” novels in recent years—see, for example, recent covers for Iola Leroy, whose protagonist, like Clare, is blonde—the book designers did not wish to confuse their clientele by putting a blonde woman on the cover of these “black” novels lest it provoke precisely the sort of category crisis Larsen, in particular, seems to have intended.

At the beginning of Passing, Irene is sitting in a restaurant wondering why a blonde white woman is staring at her, thinking, surely she can’t tell
that I’m really black; white people are always so stupid about such things. In fact, the white woman is not only “black” but Irene’s old friend, Clare; and Irene does not realize the fact until Clare tells her directly. Neither, of course, does the reader. In a departure from the convention of identifying black characters racially from the moment they are introduced into a text, Larsen deliberately withheld the racial identity of Irene until page 18 of the first edition, in the second chapter, when Irene asks herself, “Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?” The question has a performative dimension since it is the very gesture through which the reader, accustomed to “unmarked” characters being white, suddenly realizes that Irene is a Negro. Yet Clare’s identity is withheld even longer (to page 22 in the first edition), so that Larsen can heighten the ironic turn when Irene (and thus the reader) suddenly realizes that the “white” woman who has been staring at her is herself a Negro, and not only that but an old friend she doesn’t recognize because she thinks of the woman as white. An interesting experiment would be to put the portrait of a blonde, apparently white woman on the cover of *Passing*, yet to do so might imperil that edition’s sales unless other external markers—or growing familiarity with Larsen in the book-buying public—identified the novel as Black.

While Fauset and Harper use the blonde “passing” heroine to affirm racial differentiation and to look toward a New Negro future severed from intimate relations with whites, Larsen’s novels may, in contrast, suggest that the attempt to make one’s peace with racial seclusion by embracing its logic is only another dead end in an elaborate trap. One can certainly argue with this stance or question whether this is really Larsen’s position. Yet the presentation of her texts has made it inconceivable. Thus the relationship of a novel such as *Passing* to constructions of racial tradition, and its marketing within the parameters of such categorization, tends to blunt its unsettling power while affirming a distinction through which the novel appears as a minority within a minority—merely a special case of a certain type of African American fiction. The minority/majority distinction can accommodate this positioning quite well.

Larsen quite likely wanted her novel to be judged independent of racial categorization, even as she presented an unprecedented exploration of the psychology of black and white racialization in relation to women’s sexuality. Her next novel, like her first two published short stories, featured suburban white characters and again focused on women’s
sexuality and marital dysfunction. Arna Bontemps, hearing of this novel from Larsen’s ex-husband Elmer Imes in the early 1930s, wrote Langston Hughes that he eagerly awaited its publication, evidently suspecting it would mark a breakthrough for black authors. Rejected by Knopf, the manuscript is lost.

Notes


2. This point has been made, particularly with respect to textual studies and editorial theory, in John K. Young, *Black Writers, White Publishers: Marketplace Politics in Twentieth-Century African American Literature* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2006), 7–10.


5. “Heritage,” Box 164-22, folder 4, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University. As far as I know, scholars have yet to notice this version.

6. Jeremy Braddock has discussed the different published versions of “Heritage” and Cullen’s correspondence with Locke at the time he was composing it (Spring 1923), in “The Poetics of Conjecture: Countee Cullen’s Subversive Exemplarity,” *Callaloo* 25, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 1250–71.
7. James Kelley, “Blossoming in Strange New Forms: Male Homosexuality and the Harlem Renaissance,” *Soundings* 80, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 507–11. Contrary to Kelley’s speculations, it appears that “Locke’s” version of “Heritage” was closer to the earliest typescript version by Cullen than was the version Cullen later used in his own selected poems.

8. Kelley (511) and Braddock (1267) have previously discussed this positioning.


15. Kelley, 511. Kelley states, mistakenly, that the Charles Cullen illustration for “Heritage” preceded *The New Negro*, but the illustrated version of *Color*, including “Heritage,” was in printings from 1927 on, after Locke’s anthology.


19. See, for example, Charles R. Larson, *Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer and Nella Larsen* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1993), xviii–xix, and Davis, 22. Startlingly, even Carla Kaplan’s recent Norton Critical Edition of *Passing*, published after major features of Larsen’s story of her life—that she lived with her mother throughout her youth, that she visited Denmark as a young child and again as a teenager—had been confirmed in the most recent biography, includes a chronology that presents that as only one “version” of her life, surely an almost unprecedented practice for a simple chronology, and one that the editor told me was required by the publishers.


21. The most recent and extended such argument is Beth A. McCoy’s “Speaking of Dedications: Carl Van Vechten and Nella Larsen,” *Intertexts* 8, no. 1 (Spring 2004): 37–54.


25. See Mary Mackay to Walter White, 12 February 1929, NAACP Papers, and “Copy of form letter to N.A.A.C.P. list of 350” from Frederick Stokes Co., 6 March 1929, Walter White Papers, NAACP Papers, LOC; and Carl Van Vechten 1929 Daybook, 23 February 1929, Box 111, CVV Collection, NYPL.


29. I discuss the extensive, and strikingly precise, inversions of plot elements between *Plum Bun* and *Passing* in *In Search*, 315–16.

30. J. A. Rogers, review of *Fine Clothes to the Jew*, *Pittsburgh Courier*, 12 February 1927, section 1, p. 4. I should add that the physical book design may indeed have been developed to appeal to white readers, the majority audience; but this is not what the critics chiefly had in mind.

31. 3 April 1929, Carl Van Vechten Daybook of 1929, Carl Van Vechten Papers, Rare Books and Manuscripts Division, New York Public Library. I discuss this episode and other aspects of the marketing of *Passing* in greater detail in *In Search*, 318–20.

32. Entry for 4 April 1929, Carl Van Vechten Daybook for 1929.


37. Fuller, 14.

38. Fuller, 14.

39. Fuller, 18–19.

40. Fuller, 24.


42. McDowell, xv.

43. McDowell, xxiii.
44. McDowell, xxiii.
45. McDowell, xxx.
46. McDowell, xxx–xxxi.
47. I should point out that a later printing of the Modern Library edition (2002) has a different cover and includes a long “Critical Foreword” by Mae Henderson.
49. Shange, xii.
50. Shange, xiii–xiv.