1. "A Hand on Clare's Bare Arm': Destabilizing Space, Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Nella Larson's Passing"

Submitted: November 2018

Both the first reader, Beth Capo, and the second reader, Guy Mark Foster, recommended publication. Copies of the readers' reports and the author's description of revisions are attached.

Your comments, for use in the board's discussion and in the letter to the author:
This is a well-written and insightful contribution to studies of modern American literature. It offers an exciting new “assemblage analytic” as a method of close reading Larsen’s *Passing* that combines queer theory, trans theory, and critical race studies. The spatial conceptualization and inclusion of figures was an original way of explaining the intersectional theories of passing, queering, and transing. The article is well-situated in scholarship, especially Ahmed’s theoretical work and recent articles by Cutter, Schalk, and Walker on Larsen. It should have wide appeal “to those concerned with the study of language and literature,” as per Editorial Policy.

Minor revisions are needed, and other readers may find #1 to be more than minor or, conversely, not an issue at all.

1. The argument is convincing and clearly made, but what exactly is the “radical potential” inherent in Clare’s instability? That is, the end of the argument is almost too understated. Well the close reading is very well-done, “so what” remains—what can/does the novel and/or this interpretation of it do?

2. In terms of references, the first footnote, which sets up the critical reading against which the article is arguing, only mentions “the most recent instance of this conclusion.” While other scholars who support this are noted in note 30 (of 32), there should at least
be a “see also” in note 1 to establish the ubiquity of this reading. I also notice that footnotes #5 & #9 mention sources that are not included in the works cited.

3. There are a few minor typos and errors that should be cleaned up before publication ("desire" rather than “desired” on page 6; “orders” rather than “order” on page 12; “touch” rather than “touched” on page 17; a few quotations with unclear citations or missing page #s; footnote 23 needs explanation, as does the last sentence re “analytic of queer temporality” in footnote 24; how does color work in footnote 26?).
I find this paper to be immensely satisfying — both theoretically provocative and productive. The writer forwards a novel thesis in seeking to challenge a particular orthodox reading of this well-regarded text. The writer’s effort to combine three methodological approaches to the novel — passing (racial discourse), queering (sexual discourse), and transing (trans* discourse) — is well-developed and rigorous. Too, the author’s engagement with extant criticism is economical and collegial rather than adversarial. I am especially impressed with the incisive and original close readings of the novel, including a dashing re-reading of the novel’s deployment of the em-dash. I admire the diligence the writer takes in examining different editions of the novel that either leave off or include the book’s final paragraph, and thus leading to an ambiguity about Clare Kendry’s death. These readings are nothing short of brilliant. Quite frankly, I have read and taught Larsen’s novel numerous times, but many of this writer’s readings, coupled with his/her/their theoretical sophistication, have allowed me to see greater nuance and theoretical complexity in the work — a complexity that I believe revitalizes the novel for future generations of readers and scholars. The author also does a wonderful job of hinting at the limitations of the concept of intersectionality without dismissing the concept altogether. The writer may have included a footnote by Jennifer Nash, Jasbir Puar, or other scholars who address this matter in their work.
Nash has a new volume out that expands on an earlier published essay on these limitations.

Any of the quibbles I have about the essay are minor. These are as follows:

While I find most of the footnotes elucidating, some were unnecessary. These include footnotes 9, 15 (the author doesn't read Clare as a “queer child,” so I failed to see this relevance. The concept of “nausea” seems important to the writer’s argument. It appears early in the paper (on p. 3), as well as later on pp. 22, 23, 24. However, the writer buries a discussion of the Sartrean notion in fn. 22 on p. 17. If this concept/term is so important to the paper, then it seems the discussion of Sartre (or at least Ahmed’s reference to him) should be in the body of the paper rather than in a footnote. Another comment on footnotes: the author includes a reference to “Schroedingerian (un)death” on p. 23, without including a footnote explaining this term. If there is a need for a footnote, this would be it, I’d think.

Including illustrations at the end of the paper to make visible the type of spatial analysis the writer advances is generally quite useful. This is especially the case for Figures 1-4. However, the discussion of Figures 5 and 6, on page 25-26 could have been a bit clearer to this reader. I found myself straining to connect the writer’s discussions here with the images he/she/they provides.

Finally, this last point needs a bit more space, though this too is a small quibble that should not hinder this essay being published in PMLA. Here goes: Although I admire the writer’s theoretical rereading of Larsen’s novel — and the mixed-race character in general — I worry that such a reading overlooks/downplays/minimizes the material experiences of mixed-race people. I found myself thinking of Hazel Carby’s effort to reformulate critical interpretations of the mulatto from her book Reconstructing Womanhood, in which she argues for reading this character as a “device of mediation.” I find Carby’s intervention quite similar to what the writer is doing in this essay and wonder if a reference to Carby would be helpful. My concern arise from reading the final paragraphs of the writer’s paper, in which theoretical sophistication overshadows or dwarfs the lived experience of such characters like Irene and Clare. By the end of the essay the writer argues that Clare and Irene are “mixed-race queer[s],” a phrase that rematerializes particular “bodies,” not theoretical abstractions. The effort to transfer the “radical potential” from Clare to Irene (or to both of them rather than just to Clare) seems a bit forced, or perhaps “abstract” is a better way to put this. In suggesting that this transfer “leaves space for a new politics” (p. 26), I wonder just what the writer means here. The closing lines hints at an answer, but I’m not sure I buy it: “Clare’s death, if we choose to believe in it, is not the end of all hope. It is, instead, a re-positioning of that hope — its backward transference into, though the destabilization of, that once-stalwart figure, Irene.” These sentences left me pondering this: But hasn’t Irene always already been an unstable character? Is it the case that the novel merely dramatizes the making visible of Irene’s instability to the reader — but not to Irene herself? If to the former, then perhaps I am more understanding of the “hope” the writer advances here. But if such hope is meant to be a reference to Irene (and, forgive me,
I’m not sure if this is what the writer is suggesting or intending; the writing is a bit imprecise here, or vague), then I don’t see it. This is the case since the novel appears to dramatize to the reader Irene’s interior life, a life that no one in the novel has access to, no one except perhaps Irene herself, that is, and of course the reader. So is this “new politics” meant to incite the reader to “see” or to “know” something that he/she/they did not “see” or “know” before reading Larsen’s novel? What type of “politics” might result from this insight, I wonder? Is it a “theoretical” politics or one grounded in the materiality of real people’s lives?

Again, these are quibbles. I love this essay and applaud the writer’s hard work here. My comments should not be construed to suggest that the essay should not be published. On the contrary. It is important that readers interested in the questions the writer poses here have access to such an erudite work.
I am very excited to submit this revision of my article for review by the PMLA Editorial Board. I am profoundly grateful for the attentive suggestions and guidance provided by my reviewers. In what follows, I detail the changes I’ve made in response to their comments.

1. The most holistic revision that the reviewers recommended was a more precise and specific detailing, at the paper’s end, of the radical potential and new politics toward which I gestured too vaguely—to clarify the paper’s stakes by making explicit what the potential is, what the new politics looks like and who it serves, and how it stems from Irene’s experience in and the reader’s experience of Passing. Reviewer Two also asked me to consider materiality, and to center the multiracial body to a greater extent than my theoretical apparatus originally allowed. I am very grateful for these suggestions, which reminded me to consider the real-world stakes of my project, and to make more explicit both to myself and my readers the potential and politics I identify here. I have added a new conclusion to the paper which I hope articulates the importance of my argument, which focuses on the lived realities of black, queer, multi-racial, trans*, and otherwise structurally disempowered people. In this conclusion, I have also addressed Reviewer Two’s confusion about the audience for the making-visible of Irene’s instability. I have also added a brief clarifying line on page two that makes the stakes of the argument explicit earlier in the paper.

2. The other suggested edits from the reviewers were minor. I detail my responses to them briefly below.
   A. I relocated a footnote demonstrating the ubiquity of the critical reading against which I argue; those sources are now available in note 1.
   B. I added two missing sources to the Works Cited.
   C. I have added quotations from Nash, Puar, and Carby, as suggested. I am grateful to the reviewers for these suggested sources, which significantly deepened my own understanding of my project.
   D. I fixed typos, clarified language and citations, and deleted some unnecessary footnotes. I have cited according to MLA guidelines regarding successive quotations from the same page/source in the same paragraph, but would be happy to add direct citations after each quotation if this is preferred.
   E. I have clarified the “analytic of queer temporality” (note 26) and the relevance of color (note 28), added a footnote (31) to explain “Schrödingerian (un)death,” and moved my discussion of nausea from a footnote to the body of the article, all as suggested.
   F. I have clarified both the visual diagrams (Fig. 5-6) and my discussion of them.

I am indebted to both reviewers for their time, thoughtful suggestions, and generous enthusiasm, all of which have helped me strengthen this work. I am excited to submit this draft for board
review, and I look forward to hearing from you in October. Please don’t hesitate to contact me if you need anything else in the meantime.

Sincerely,
Author
“A Hand on Clare's Bare Arm”: Destabilizing Space, Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Nella Larsen’s *Passing*

Nella Larsen’s *Passing* (1929) has often been read as closing down the radical potential embodied by the unusually mobile character of Clare Kendry. In what follows, I use a multi-pronged spatial analysis to argue that *Passing* in fact sustains this potential. My argument includes two major projects: the theorization of a new assemblage analytic of instability, and a close reading of *Passing* for the radical politics this assemblage makes visible. First, I propose a theoretical framework that interrogates the relationship between three imbricated spatial- and movement-based analytics: passing, queering, and transing. This framework allows me to read instability more broadly than treating race, gender, and sexuality as separate categories would allow; it also allows a reading of instability as mobile and transferable between characters and locations, rather than as an identity category itself. Second, I propose that Clare’s passage through the window may be read as a destabilizing movement that allows Clare’s radical potential to extend past the novel’s end—both via Clare’s movement through the window and that movement’s relocation of Clare’s instability backward into Irene through the touch of Irene’s “hand on Clare’s bare arm” (Larsen 111). Clare’s (un)death in the novel—her body never seen, the fact of her death unstated in one edition and qualified in another—simultaneously retains her potential as a mobile, unstable figure and recreates Irene as another site of and container for this instability. It also opens an ongoing radical space for the reader after the

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1 See, i.e., Deborah McDowell, David Blackmore, Sami Schalk, and Rafael Walker. For Blackmore, the potential is the “liberating option of homosexuality” (483); for Schalk, it is a specifically trans “potential for escape, liberation, or sustained freedom” (153). The most recent instance of this conclusion is Rafael Walker’s (2016) claim that, with Clare’s death, “society wins out” (185) when Irene kills Clare, thereby reinstating the order she so desires.

2 My refusal to assume Clare’s death avoids what Snorton and Haritaworn critique as “the value extracted from trans of color death” (67); instead, I follow Snorton in reading omission as opportunity (*Black* 11), and imagine Clare’s ongoing potential through her disappearance.
novel's end: a space for a new politics that refuses the comforting liberal promise of good
abjects' eventual social incorporation. With this argument, I contribute to the alternative tradition
of reading Clare's radical potential as surviving the novel's end, thereby extending the radical
potential of *Passing* as a literary work. And for the first time, I bring a queer of color lens and a
spatial analytic together in service of this alternative reading, thereby providing some redress for
the theoretical difficulties of intersectionality.

I first approached this project with a queer\(^3\) and trans theoretical focus, intending to use
Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and Sami Schalk's "Transing: Resistance to Eugenic
Ideology in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" to read Clare's intrusion into Irene's life as a disruptive and
ecstatic repositioning that invests Irene with Clare's destabilizing queerness. I considered a
reading in which Irene receives, as a trans(-)itory phenomenon, the queerness that Clare has been
carrying throughout the novel. As I continued working, however, it became clear that this
reading was undermined by my ignorance of the complicated imbrications of queer and trans
theory with theories of (neo-)passing. This led me to assemblage as tool for navigating some of
the difficulties of additive and intersectional theorizing,\(^4\) and to a consideration of the
simultaneously important specificity and distressing siloing of transing, passing, and queering
within independent academic conversations. As a result, I shifted my argument from a
theorization of transing as a way of moving or relocating queerness to an argument about

\(^3\) I use "queer" here to refer to what J. Halberstam calls "nonnormative logics and organizations
of community, sexual identity, embodiment, and activity in space and time" (6).

\(^4\) A movement inspired by Jasbir Puar "I Would Rather Be a Cyborg Than A Goddess" (2011).
This piece is often considered a criticism of intersectionality, but never actually refuses its value:
"""[m]y concern is not about the formative, generative, and necessary intervention of Crenshaw's
work [on intersectionality], but of both the changed geopolitics of reception as well as a tendency
towards reification in the deployment of intersectionality" (Puar, n.p.). Jennifer Nash notes
Puar's status, following this piece, as "the paradigmatic critic" of intersectionality (53) and
suggests that the field might be released from its defensive stance "if we began to imagine new
forms of agency...to embrace the possibility of other ways to be and feel black feminist" (58).
mobility and spatiality in all three theories—and, meta-theoretically, in academia itself. In what follows, I offer a reading using an assemblage of these three spatial analytics, in which motion between categories destabilizes both the categories and the person or thing moving between them. My assemblage analytic of destabilization yields a reading of Clare as a passing, transing, and queer character who takes joy in all of these qualities, and Irene as a stabilizing figure who, even when she moves between categories, does so with an anxious investment in them. At the novel’s end, Clare’s destabilization is relocated into Irene, thereby extending Passing’s radical potential both through and past Clare’s (un)death.

I begin with queer theory, my own disciplinary home. Queer and trans theory have as a common genealogy the discussions and debates of late-twentieth-century Western feminism. As the fields began to grow apart in the early 2000s, both schools retained a fundamental understanding of the instability of identity categories—particularly gender and sexuality. In both fields, this critique was expressed through analytics of position and movement, and a concern with what Sara Ahmed has called “orientation…the relationship between bodies and space” (13). Within that critique, queer theory focused on destabilization, and trans theory on crossing, spanning, and existing outside of boundaries (Stryker, Transgender 1, Stryker, “Introduction” 11, Bey 285, Schalk 154).

Queer theory has been criticized for a gender-exclusionary focus on sexual orientation and sexual identity, a commitment to poststructuralism at the expense of embodiment, and a failure to account for other important categories of identity and social difference.\(^5\) Trans theory is more confident in its efforts to encompass and address these categories. Although explicitly

\(^5\) Cohen’s “Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens” (1997) offers an early example of this critique, which extends through Muñoz (2009) and Love (2014). Queer of color critique more intentionally centers race and ethnicity.
focused on gender, transing—theorized early on as "the movement across a socially imposed boundary from an unchosen starting place" (Stryker, Transgender 1)—is explicitly and intentionally applicable to other "bio-social-historical categories" (Green n.p.) like race. The relationship between race (particularly blackness) and transing is being productively theorized as of this writing by scholars like C. Riley Snorton and Marquis Bey. It suffices here to say that transing, like queering, is a movement-based analytic that undermines stable positionality, stable temporality, and the absolute identities that rely on that stability.

Transing and queering share with ethnic and critical race studies, particularly African American studies, a concern with the spatial analytic of passing. Passing is an important idea in both racial and gendered critical conversations, and in trans, black, and trans black lives. Historically, racial and gendered passing has been understood as a social lie: an embodied pretending to an identity or inheritance that the body in question does not, socio-biologically, have rights to. In this understanding of "conventional passing" (Godfrey 136), the passer moves either permanently or temporarily across a binary divide. The more nuanced contemporary understanding of "neo-passing" retains the theoretical importance of movement while rejecting the central binaries of the earlier concept; "neo-passing is an elastic, intersectional, and ever-present state of being" (136) that blurs distinctions and calls categories themselves into question. Neo-passing is understood in African American Studies to "remobilize passing as a trope that interrogates race through other categories of distinction, challenging static conceptions of class, sexual desire, gender identity, and racial authenticity all at once" (5). Snorton articulates the

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6 Bey conceives of "trans*ness" and blackness as "analytic[s] of radical destabilization" (276, 286). Trans* indicates for Bey a "pervasive moving nonmovement" that simultaneously inhabits and gestures toward "the unclassifiable and illegible" (285). For Snorton "the condensation of transness into the category of transgender is a racial narrative" (Black 8).

7 Passing is currently a more active concern in trans than queer theory.

8 It is also important, of course, for other racial and ethnic groups.
foundational critical claim of neo-passing theory: “we should resist taking narratives of passing as clear-cut (black and/to white)” (“Hope” 90). We find in neo-passing parallels both to queer theory’s destabilization of, and trans’ theory’s refusal of and passage over, boundaries and binaries.

The questions raised by this brief genealogy are complex. We have three movement analytics that correspond in their origins (though not their entirety) to three different identity categories: passing to race, queering to sexuality, and transing to gender. This separate parsing of theories is simultaneously vital to disciplinary history and problematic for praxis, disappearing as it does the lives and bodies at the intersection of these categories: in particular, those of trans and queer people of color. It also results both in and from a lack of interdisciplinary conversation that leads to the reproduction of already-extant work. Ideally, all these theories could work together to produce something simultaneously more specific—an understanding of how these lives operate—and more general—how identity categories function (as opposed to how specific identity categories function). But efforts at combining the theories tend to succumb to at least one of two problems: the attenuations and generalizations that shift intersectionality from a critical analytic and mode of praxis into a popular buzzword, or a hierarchical insistence that one field has produced a better term that should replace the others’. This sort of competitive, though well-intentioned, subsumption overlooks the genuinely intersectional work done in fields other than the authors’ own. I propose instead a spatial analytic that considers boundary-crossing from a multiplicity of disciplinary perspectives without sacrificing the specificity of the individual schools of thought: what I call an assemblage of destabilization.

9 “[T]he language of intersectionality, its very invocation...largely substitutes for intersectional analysis itself” (Puar n.p.)
Ahmed has defined queerness as misalignment, as being off the grid that dictates boundaries and categories of belonging, as skewing and disruptive (107). Queer theory identifies and furthers this disruption, activating its own poststructuralist tradition to deconstruct and destabilize straight and binary categories—for instance, the right-angled requirements of the family tree (Fig. 1), in which touch (figured as horizontal) exists only to further (vertical) reproduction, with no place for pleasure or the frustrated desire of the unconsummated reach (66-67, 83). Queerness "move[s] us sideways" (105) putting new bodies within reach. The queer is thus automatically in a deviant relation to the horizon (which figures a sexual relation in its concern with touchability, on which more later) and the vertical lines of reproduction, replication, and futurity that the horizon produces. The queer offers a non-reproductive erotic off the heterosexual, future-oriented grid of "reproductive futurism" (Edelman 4). Queerness's deviation skews and destabilizes the straight lines of hetero-reproductive futurity (Fig 2a and 2b).

The vertical's implication as generational extension in the family tree is only part of its symbolic relevance. Ahmed also offers a compelling analysis of the vertical as hierarchical, and therefore race-related: "if whiteness [is] what is 'above,' then whiteness is what allows some bodies to move 'upward'" (137) socially and economically. Bi- and multiracial bodies are confusingly situated within the racial hierarchy; they are often better positioned, visually, to move up than are bodies of color, but they also risk, in any upward attempt, the lingering force and fury of the one-drop rule, which interprets passing as a form of lying (ignoring both multiracial people and the flexible presentations and presumptions that can categorize the same body differently in different places and times). In Passing, both Clare and Irene are capable of

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10 See also Cutter, "White." For more on the mulatto figure as a convention of African American literature, see Carby: "The mulatto figure is a narrative device of mediation; it allows for a
passing as white; both, presumably, are multiracial, and are certainly “racially ambiguous” (Walker 165). But instead of unidirectional movements—over into whiteness and up into privilege, an inverse movement through the family tree—the novel offers what Walker calls an “ontology...of oscillation...[that] seriously undermines [the color line’s] value as an ideological system” (167, 180; Fig. 3).

This oscillation is more complex than early passing theory acknowledged, and it affects more than just the characters’ racial positions. Even as Clare passes determinedly into whiteness, she does not rest comfortably in that or any other stable identity; instead, she moves back and forth, destabilizing categorical boundaries as she crosses them. Living with her white aunts on Chicago’s west side after her father’s death, Clare wanted many things: a loving family, financial comfort, access to the black community. But the first and second of these seemed to contradict the third, and Clare chose to pass into whiteness in order to access “Jack, a [white] schoolboy...with untold gold.” She stopped going to the predominantly black south side and “slipped off to meet him instead. I couldn’t manage both” (Larsen 27). Faced with a raced and classed choice, Clare chose wealth and whiteness. For a while, this unidirectional passage seemed sufficient. But in her letter to Irene, Clare expresses a complex desire to return to blackness without giving up any of her whiteness: “You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free.

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As she continues interrupting and inserting herself into Irene’s life, Clare refuses the static suffocation of entrapment in a falsely monolithic identity.\(^{12}\)

It is this refusal that led Schalk to identify Clare as a transing figure. With the explicit intention of offering a more intersectional reading (149-150), Schalk argues that “Clare deeply challenges the solidity of identity binaries—not by a simple, unidirectional passing from one to another…but rather by her desire for both/and, to live on or have consistent access to both sides at once” (152-153). It is “living ‘betwixt and between’ identity positions” (153) that makes Clare a transing figure for Schalk; it is this desire that makes her a complex neo-passing figure for Cutter and Walker.

Judith Butler has read queerness in *Passing* as explicitly opposed to and destructive of stability (176). Ahmed reads queerness more generally as opposed to the “good”—specifically, a “queer life might be one that fails to make…gestures of return” (21). “Return” here indicates both the sense of paying back a debt and a return to the same place: the next, repetitive nexus on the family tree, reached by a set of right-angled movements that repeat prior generations’ (Fig. 1). For both Butler and Ahmed, then, the queer is opposed to the stable—for Butler, through the disruption of language, and for Ahmed, through the refusal to replicate interpersonal positional relations. In *Passing*, we can map these two positions—the stable and the queer—onto Irene and Clare, respectively.

Irene does not immediately read as a stable character. Disoriented by her blackness, her whiteness, and the social requirement to occupy only one line of racial inheritance,\(^{13}\) Irene is out of alignment, and therefore in an important way queer from the outset. But to accept this label is

\(^{12}\) Snorton identifies the same desire in *Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (*Black* 135), although unlike Johnson’s unnamed narrator, Clare insists on retaining both her blackness and her whiteness.

\(^{13}\) For a discussion of the white world’s disorientation of black bodies, see Ahmed (111).
to ignore Irene’s own agency and choices. Despite being inherently disoriented, Irene attempts to straighten herself as much as possible; she has selected and devoted herself to what Ahmed calls the black “racial line” (143), disavowing though not refusing the passing privileges that come with a body that can be read as white. In the face of this inevitable racial instability, she invests in a second mode of stabilizing reorientation: the vertical line of reproductive futurity. Reproduction of the black collective family line during the Harlem Renaissance could be familial or political (through a commitment to respectability), requiring in either case an investment in the future. Irene is invested in both modes of reproduction: the familial through her darker-skinned sons and husband, and the political through her work with the Negro Welfare League and her stringent management of her husband and their darker-skinned servant.

Irene, then, works to stabilize her inherently unstable life, straightening and realigning herself through an imagined collective futurity. She will accept the benefits of being read as white—access to “restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that”—but she has formed for herself an “instinctive loyalty to a race” (Larsen 100) that provides her with a straight line to follow. Because she disavows the disorientations attending her raced body, Irene cannot be considered queer. Her position may be disoriented, but her goal and strategy are realignment. She invests in stability, and hopes for a return on that investment.

14 This decision is perhaps the most basic instance of Irene’s well-noted desire for security, tranquility, and safety (see, i.e., Larsen 67, 107; see Cutter, “Sliding,” Toth, and Wagner), which—along with the disingenuous notion she uses to achieve these goals—has garnered critical scorn. It should be noted that living as a black woman in Harlem at this time would not guarantee any stability or security. Without endorsing the outcomes of Irene’s desire, I would like to recuperate Irene as a woman for whom stability is desired not simply as a balm to a boring mind, but as a safety cushion for a dangerous life.

15 A model used to great effect by Ahmed, but rejected by Irene, who responds to Hugh Wentworth’s suggestion that “the trick” to racial recognition is a “feeling of kinship, or something like that” with a decisive, “Good heavens, no!” (77).
Clare, on the other hand, is adamantly queer. She claims access to her white racial line and the orientation that attaches to white bodies, including the increased vertical reach represented by tea on the roof of the Drayton. But her alignment into whiteness is socially false, and leaves her disoriented by way of that same orienting claim; the legal and social understandings of race keep her in a dangerous position. Her daughter, invisible throughout the novel, is a source of fear rather than security (Larsen 36), a figure whose constant absence underscores Clare’s racial instability by undermining any vertical stability potentially achieved through reproductive futurity. But despite the theoretical danger, Clare accesses whiteness and its privileges easily, recreating herself as a white body—and, like all white bodies, relying on non-white bodies like Irene’s as “orientation devices” (Ahmed 128). Writing herself as white, Clare interacts with the black world through what Ahmed describes as proximity: “[t]o become black through proximity to others is not to be black; it is to be ‘not black’ by the very extension of the body toward blackness” (128). As Clare moves, over the course of the novel, like a tourist through her old disavowed black world, she orients herself as white/not-black through her proximity to black people—a socially untrue and thereby unstable orientation.

Clare’s discombobulated racial position is threatening to Irene; it rouses in her a sense of “being outnumbered...of aloneness, in her adherence to her own class and kind...in the whole pattern of her life” (Larsen 34). This devotion to the straight line, more than racial reproduction or loyalty, sets Irene apart from Clare. Irene wants to walk carefully along the grid; Clare wants to tangle it. Clare desires difference as a mode of possession, as an extension of her bodily horizon—both her vertical reach for privilege (augmented by whiteness) and her horizontal reach for social access (into both the black and white communities). Clare herself articulates this distinction to Irene: “I haven’t any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have...to get the things
I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away” (Larsen 81). Clare is, Irene thinks, “[s]tepping always on the edge of danger. Always aware, but not drawing back or turning aside” (9). This worries Irene, but not Clare, who declares, “One risk more or less, if we’re not safe in the world, if even you’re not, it can’t make all the difference in the world…Besides, I’m used to risks” (67). As she articulates the futility of striving for stability, Clare also announces a desire for everything at once: to be white (i.e. not-black), to traverse the line into being-black, and to return to whiteness. She wants to attend the Negro Welfare League dance both as a white person, “to see Negroes” (69) and as a black person. In what Irene calls her “having way” (20), Clare wants to access blackness while retaining the privileges of whiteness, to slip between unreal categories while keeping the comforts that come from a privileged position within those categories.

Irene and Clare are differently (dis)oriented in relation to race; this necessarily puts them in different relations to queerness. When the two women meet at the beginning of the novel, the narrative foreshadows their reorientation, the queer slant that develops over the course of the story. We can map both modes of destabilization onto vertical and horizontal axes in the opening scene at the Drayton.

For Irene, the elevator ride to the roof is “like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world.” Once there, she relaxes, “look[ing] out…to an undetected horizon…gazing…at the specks of cars and people creeping about in streets.” She is familiar enough with passing privilege and the elevation it offers that, like the iced tea she orders, it is “so much…what she had desired and expected that after the first deep cooling drink she was able to forget it” (13).

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But these privileges are impermanent and restricted for Irene, always threatening the indignity of exposure and ejection.

Clare is perfectly comfortable with the heights of attainment. The “odd upward smile” (14) with which she greets the waiter and her laugh, with its “trill” (20), indicate the achieved vertical access of whiteness. And when Clare reveals herself to Irene, who has been worrying that this supposedly white stranger was about to expose her, they mark the moment with a vertical shift that confirms their positions: “So great was her astonishment that [Irene] had started to rise. ‘No, no, don’t get up,’ Clare Kendry commanded, and sat down herself” (21). In this first moment, Irene betrays her desire to rise; Clare begins her touristic descent, confirmed in the safety of her whiteness by Irene’s not-whiteness. Soon after, Irene first notes Clare’s “having way,” and her “success in having a few of the things she wanted” (23): access, whiteness, and privilege. At first, Irene reimagines her own desire for upward social access as desire for Clare: “it seemed a dreadful thing to think of never seeing Clare Kendry again...Irene had the desire, the hope, that this parting wouldn’t be the last” (29). But Irene and Clare desire each other for different reasons and in different ways. For Irene, Clare marks the chance to stabilize, to move up more permanently without naming or admitting that desire; for Clare, Irene serves to confirm her vertical rise and to offer her renewed access to lower social positions—a chance to play with instability. As the story unfolds, Clare moves constantly around and off the norm-grid: back and forth between racial groups and positions, north and south in the city, up and down between classes. And she interacts constantly with Irene: moving close and retreating, reaching for, touching, and pulling away from her. In this way, she creates constant movement around Irene, who does her best to refuse it.

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17 Clare’s laugh can be compared to Irene’s “uneasy little laugh” (18).
To review, Irene attempts to live a straight collective life in a racially disoriented body. Because she respects, for the most part, racial lines and reproductive futurity, she is a stable (one might say, stagnant) figure. Clare—the queer—refuses the externally imposed disorientation of blackness, but desires the instability of crossing, playing with, and deconstructing boundaries.

So far, I have focused on verticality. But we can and should also read the women’s desires as horizontal—as, like Ahmed’s lesbian desire, “bring[ing] certain objects near, including sexual objects...that might not have otherwise been reachable” (103). This is both an absolute and a relative movement, affecting the body’s field of reach: what can be touched, what shrinks from touch, what touches back. Irene’s and Clare’s desire for each other may or may not, as important scholarship has suggested, be sexual. But it is (at least, or also) the horizontal desire of identification.

Touch is an important element of this horizontal reach. To be reachable is, literally, to be touchable by the body. Irene and Clare touch for the first time at the end of their meeting at the Drayton: “They stood up. [Irene] put out her hand. Clare took and held it” (Larsen 29). As they rearrange and reorient themselves vertically (in terms of racial position) and horizontally (socio-sexually) in relation to one another, they reposition themselves within one another’s reach. Their touch is simultaneously mutual—they agree, without speaking, to touch one another—and contingent, in that Clare has the final decision about whether to consummate the touch. Clare’s kiss at the end of the scene must be inferred from her dialogue; it goes undescribed by the narrative voice and, as such, is also under Clare’s control.

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18 I don’t reject the reading of erotic desire between the two women convincingly advanced by, among others, McDowell and Blackmore. More important than the type of desire, though, is that desire exists.
At the Drayton, then, we have a two-dimensional mapping of Irene and Clare's different positions. Irene has occasional vertical racial access that temporarily broadens her horizon; Clare has constant vertical access, and desires to step "down" into blackness to expand her social horizon. Irene moves upward while disavowing the desire to move; Clare, having achieved height, wants to slide up, down, and all around. At the same time, the two women shift horizontally, newly positioned in relation to one another, starting the together-and-apart dance that structures the rest of the plot. After the Drayton meeting, Irene and Clare are newly accessible to one another—though not equally, as Irene quickly realizes: "Clare had only to pick up the telephone to communicate with her, or to drop her a card, or to jump into a taxi. But she [Irene] couldn't reach Clare in any way" (30). Offended, Irene decides that she is "through with Clare Kendry" (31). But as readers know from the letter that opens the book, Irene's boundaries prove more porous than she had planned.

When Clare returns to Irene's life, she provokes a glitch, a reorientation. By returning out of Irene's past, she disrupts the steady linear progression of Irene's life, in which time moves forward, the race is on a path to uplift, and children are raised toward an improved adulthood. By reappearing at the Drayton, by "catching" Irene on the "wrong" side of a boundary that she has invested deeply in respecting, by reminding Irene of the racial exposure that could destroy her bourgeois dignity and respectability; by doing all of these things, Clare threatens Irene's normative stability.

She does this through physical approach as the women's lives intertwine. At times, Clare literally moves into Irene's social location, "go[ing] alone with Brian to some bridge party or benefit dance" (80). This increasing closeness, of course, is what leads Irene to conclude that

19 Wagner reads this disruption as sublime, Toth as fantastic and race-related, McDowell and Blackmore as sexual.
Brian and Clare are having an affair. But Irene, too, is an object of Clare’s approach. Irene and Clare touch during six scenes in *Passing,* and the language of touch threads through the book even when there is no actual physical contact. Irene feels “petted and caressed” (26) by Clare’s smiling eyes at the Drayton, “pass[es] over [a] touch of derision” (67) in Clare’s voice as they discuss Clare’s loneliness, and rejects “the caress of Clare’s smile” (70) as she wheedles an invitation to the Negro Welfare League dance. And in a fateful moment that recalls and reverses the women’s first touch, Irene refuses John Bellew’s handshake (99).

In most of these moments of physical touch—five of the seven listed above—Clare has control over her physical contact with Irene in the same way that she had control, after leaving the Drayton, over their social contact. Clare accepts an offered hand, or places her own hands or lips on Irene. Even when Irene does have control, which happens only twice—grasping and caressing Clare when she appears at the Harlem apartment, and placing her hand on her arm in the final scene—that control is unsteady or incomplete. She touches Clare passionately the first time, only to reject her in anger moments later when Clare mocks her prized values of stability and security. The final touch, of course, is also quite complex. Overall, Irene’s body is available to Clare in a way that Clare’s is not to Irene; this mimics the privileges of their respective social positions, in which Clare has access both to whiteness and, increasingly, to the black social world. In this way, even as their socio-sexual horizons bring them closer together,

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20 At the Drayton (29-30); before and after the tea party (33, 43); when Clare first comes to Harlem (65-66); at the end of Part II (81); before Irene’s party (105); and in the final scene (111).
21 On the importance of hands, see Ahmed (165); for hands and lesbian sexuality, see Mandy Merck. Lips have clear erotic symbolism, while also alluding to speech, subjectivity, and agency.
22 As she pulls her hand away, “[w]ith a gesture of impatience, she s[its] down” (Larsen 66) lowering herself vertically to confirm her racial location and the value of stability in that identity position.
23 Margaret Breen notes in conversation the parallels between Clare’s access to Irene’s body and the historical availability of black to white bodies in and after slavery.
their raced verticality keeps them apart. Clare can reach down to Irene quite easily, but Irene’s upward reach is limited.

As Clare is most frequently the toucher, Irene is most often the object of Clare’s touch. If we take this as a literal objectification, we can identify a new layer of destabilization in Passing; Irene, already disoriented by Clare’s social and emotional presence in her life, is further disoriented by their physical encounters. In part, this could be an erotic or socio-sexual disorientation. But there is also, for Irene, the disorientation of “becoming an object” (Ahmed 159), of losing control over the life she directs so consciously. Clare recreates Irene as an object on her horizon, within her reach.

Ahmed uses Sartre’s conception of nausea to explain the disorienting feeling of objects refusing to stay within their boundaries (163-165); she describes how the touched sometimes fails to respect its boundaries, instead transmitting something of itself backward to the toucher. In these directionally queered moments, there is a misalignment and a disorientation; in a moment of transmission, the touched thing touches back. In the rare moments when Irene is the toucher, the radical movement-potential of Clare-the-object seems to reverberate back and disorient her. The sensation of nausea, like the language of touch, permeates the book.24 Clare isn’t nauseated when she touches Irene-the-object. In fact, her pleasure in disorientation, in her transing life and her having way, is in marked contrast to Irene’s nauseated anxiety at the same. Irene may be more vulnerable to nausea because she is accustomed to stillness; it may simply be that the reader has more narrative access to her nausea. But the women’s different relationships to object-transmissions can also be read as effects of their relationship to the object position.

When she initiates physical contact with Clare for the first time, Irene has a dramatic reaction, “a

24 See, i.e., Larsen, 12-13, 58, 89.
dim premonition of some impending disaster” (Larsen 66). Irene cannot, by touching Clare, achieve or consummate anything—stability, possession, imitation, even sexual pleasure. Instead, Clare refuses to accept her object status, somehow reasserting agency through backward transmissions that could be, but are not, satisfyingly erotic. Instead, they are disruptive, distressing, even disastrous.

But Irene is either powerless or unwilling to stop this disorientation. Clare repeatedly surprises her, intrudes in rooms and at parties, builds a relationship of some sort with Brian, and interacts with Irene’s children and servants in unsettling ways. Irene’s own interest in Clare disorients her by distracting her from the straight lines that she attempts to follow: racial uplift, the return of the debt of her life to the black bourgeois community. She wishes “for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro” (98). At one point, she even admits that she is “beginning to believe…that no one is ever completely happy, or free, or safe” (66). Irene works herself into a psychological frenzy over Clare’s intrusions. When she drops and shatters a teacup, foreshadowing the novel’s end,25 the narration itself shatters, leaving only one-sided fragments of dialogue to suggest Irene’s chaotic mental state (67).

By the end of the novel, Irene is thoroughly destabilized; her belief in absolute truths and cohesive communities, her very grip on reality, have been disturbed. She and the reader have increasing difficulty distinguishing fantasy from fact—are Clare and Brian having an affair? Or is that Irene’s imagination, a defensive projection that rewrites her ontological anxiety in the face of Clare’s joyful instability as a recognizable threat to her family’s bourgeois dignity?26 This

25 See Butler 170.
26 “Above everything else [Irene] had wanted, had striven, to keep undisturbed the pleasant routine of her life. And now Clare Kendry had come into it, and with her the menace of impermanence” (Larsen 101). I develop this reading from Toth, Carr, and McDowell. Clare’s “menace of impermanence” could also be read through the analytic of queer temporality—
anxiety is specifically tied to futurity and respectability: “It hurt like hell. But it didn’t matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before. If the boys were safe” (95). In the penultimate scene, Irene ponders security, stability, safety, and permanence, deciding finally that “[s]he wanted only to be tranquil...to be allowed to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband.” Though she finds in herself no romantic feelings for Brian, she “mean[s] to keep him,” “her husband and the father of her sons,” to refuse Clare’s destabilizing influence: “if Clare was freed, anything might happen” (107). “Anything” here is, of course, specifically tied to Irene’s relationship with Brian; if Clare were free, she could disrupt Irene’s marriage. But more broadly, Irene means exactly what she articulates here. If Clare was free, anything might happen; all of Irene’s illusions of stability and certainty would be ruined.27

As we enter the final scene, we see echoes and parallels to the vertical shifts of the opening at the Drayton. Clare bestows upon Brian the same “upward glance” (15) she gave the waiter; he warns her, in another moment of foreshadowing, “not to fall” (109). This warning is playful, but it also sounds a serious note about Clare’s relationship to the raced work of elevation. As a child, Clare was accustomed to hard work, but by the final scene, she is unused to the labor of elevation, to height unassociated with privilege.28 Working to rise and still ending up in the black world—exerting “nigger power” (108) to achieve only the elevation of a Harlem apartment—is a surprising idea. Upstairs, Irene opens “one of the long casement-windows of which the Freelands were so proud” and throws her cigarette out the window, “watching the tiny

specifically, through Edelman’s reproductive futurism and responses like Halberstam’s In A Queer Time and Place.
27 For more on Clare’s “freedom,” see Walker (181-182).
28 Clare’s “shining red gown” in the final scene, and the “flame of red and gold” she calls to Irene’s mind as moves through the window, blend her youthful and current socioeconomic positions (105, 11); Cutter describes how the dress in this final scene “flaunts [Clare’s] wealth but is also mean to be a reminder of Clare’s poorer days when she sat sewing a ‘pathetic little red frock’...[The dress] connects the ‘old’ Clare with the ‘new’ one” (“Sliding” 91).
spark drop slowly down to the white ground below.” Then she wanders through the party, dazed, until Dave Freeland guides her horizontally “across the room” (110), away from the vertical drop.

Soon, the vertical and the horizontal begin to intersect, descriptively highlighting the grid that Clare has spent the novel playing with and which she will soon escape. When John Bellew arrives, both Felise and Brian “r[un] out to the door” (110), only for him to “pus[h] past them all into the room...[Clare] got up from her chair, backing a little from his approach...The men...sprung forward. Felise had leapt between them and Bellew” (110-111). The chaos of Irene’s relationship with Clare, in which verticality and horizontality entangle in racial, social, and perhaps erotic confusion, spilling outward into their physical surroundings.

After backing away from John, Clare stands still. Irene’s focus narrows in on her: “Clare stood at the window...as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her. She seemed unaware of any danger or uncaring. There was even a faint smile on her full, red lips.” Then, in her second moment of initiating touch, Irene begins to move: “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] free.” As she runs, or perhaps after she arrives, or even after she touches Clare, the narrative inserts what we can assume to be Irene’s awareness of the room around her, which she sees as a horizontal tableau: “Before them stood John Bellew, speechless now...Beyond them the little huddle of other people, and Brian stepping out from among them.” Is it the sight of Brian approaching—moving horizontally, socio-sexually, toward Clare—that causes Irene to act? The reader doesn’t know. “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Not clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing...The next she was gone” (111). The reader is unmoored. Time, like space, has
turned chaotic; we know the effect but not the cause. Clare has passed through the window and disappeared, in a tangle of cause-and-effect that refuses to resolve itself. Did Irene push Clare, as Irene herself seems to believe? If so, why does no one else draw this conclusion? Alternatively, did Clare fall, or jump? The novel refuses to answer these questions, and although readers have their opinions, the uncertainty may well be the point.

Clare’s passage through the window—the movement, the drop, the falling away—may be read as a destabilizing moment of the kinds of spatial movement underlying all three analytics under discussion here. She passes, queers, and transes her way through the window’s boundary. Her movement is queering in that a moment of (same-sex) physical contact shifts the horizon and the community’s spatial/vertical boundaries; it is transing in that she moves across a boundary from an “unchosen starting place” (Stryker, *Transgender* 173) into a new space that disrupts the old categorical definitions; it is neo-passing in that it is one of return, of oscillation over a boundary. All these things are true because we do not know what happens. We assume that Clare moves through the window, that she falls and dies. But the narrative tells us only that Clare was there, then suddenly gone.29 This is itself disorientating, destabilizing; too, it recreates Clare herself as Marquis’ “radically unstable non/site” (287). By moving, as figure, she has destabilized the ground.

There are many things we don’t know about this final movement. But we do know that Irene and Clare touch before Clare’s passage through the window; Irene lays a hand on Clare without her acquiescence or mutual consent, thereby transforming Clare (for only the second time) into an object. When Irene reaches for Clare, the unstable object of her disorientating

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29 Thadius M. Davis remarks upon this in her introduction to the text: “[Clare’s] death by going out an open window is so open to speculation and interpretation...one might be tempted to read her disappearance out the window not as death but as an escape into a new life” (xxx).
desire, she is acting defensively. The only solution she can conceive is the removal of that slippery obstacle, Clare. But her straightening (non)action of (not-)murdering Clare has two self-defeating, destabilizing consequences. First, by treating Clare as an object, she opens the way for Clare to transmit something of herself back to Irene. And second, Irene’s moment of defensive action takes her completely outside the boundaries of her safe and stable life; whether or not she actually pushes Clare, the moment of touch creates an uncertainty that is unending and unavoidable. She will never allow herself to remember what happened; she will never again be stable or safe. Irene’s position earlier in the book suggests that she should, by rights, end in the deathly stagnation of stability. But by trying to accomplish that stability, she destroys it—or at least her place in it. The “necessary, constitutive [un]killing” (Bey 290) she performs places her outside and in motion beyond the structure she defends.

A sizable group of critics agree that the radical potential of the novel is closed down at the end by what is often read as Clare’s death. Martha Cutter, in contrast, has offered a reading of the novel’s end as “a stroke of genius that maintains [Clare’s] problematic ‘passing’ presence...[and] the questions Clare has raised...Irene herself is the one who falls into the void of nothingness, of vertigo” (“Sliding” 96-97). Cutter’s reading gestures toward the spatiality and nausea of this moment. Irene’s attempt to remove Clare from her world, to restore it to order by ejecting Clare and the disorienting chaos that attends her, has rebounded upon her in a sort of ontological touchback that sets her even further off and outside the norm-grid of her community than did Clare’s presence. She is literally left behind, high above her community (where she has elected, over and over again, not to be) as the party-goers rush outside. Whether or not Irene caused Clare’s movement through the window, that movement has disoriented and ejected her.

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30 See note 1.
The only thing we know for sure is that Irene touched Clare’s arm. It was this moment of touch that allowed for Clare’s instability to move backward, nauseously, through Irene’s hand. By deviating from her rigidly stable morality to remove Clare (the disorienting obstacle), Irene is herself destabilized—more so because of Irene’s (and the reader’s) confusion about whether a murder occurred at all. The unsolvable (un)murder and Clare’s temporarily Schrödingerian (un)death violently replace Irene outside the boundaries of her stable, respectable life. As Clare transes, queers, and passes through the window and its attendant symbolic boundaries, she leaves her instability behind, transferred to Irene through their final touch.

Irene’s destabilization is announced by a hinge moment marked visually with an em-dash—a horizontal line that reaches out in a simultaneously connective and disjointed touch: “What would the others think? That Clare had fallen? That she had deliberately leaned backward? Certainly one or the other. Not— But [Irene] mustn’t, she warned herself, think of that. She was too tired, and too shocked. And, indeed, both were true” (111). Although referring directly to Irene’s feelings of both exhaustion and shock, this acceptance of a multiple, non-binary, unstable truth is in direct contrast to Irene’s reaching throughout the rest of the novel for certainty and stability. The destabilization transferred from Clare to Irene is thus marked

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31 Physicist Erwin Schrödinger proposed a famous thought experiment regarding a cat enclosed in a box with a radioactive substance which, upon its decay, releases poison that kills the cat. But because the radioactive delay is random, there is no way of knowing without direct observation whether the cat has died. Schrödinger argues that until the cat is directly observed, it must be theorized as—in effect, it is—both dead and alive, simultaneously.

32 Irene’s refusal to consider her own involvement with Clare’s death could be another instance of her standard grasp for stability. But the larger narrative chaos after Clare’s death indicates that this refusal, even if it is a final grasp for stability, fails. The em-dash and the hyphen help indicate Irene’s internal chaos, figuring importantly as the characters stammer and stumble through the penultimate and final scenes. Neither the em-dash nor the hyphen have single directions; both touch back and forth. Like Irene’s hand, they could be pushing or pulling, killing or saving. Stryker focuses on the hyphen as a figure of transing (Stryker, “Introduction”). I read the em-dash as a related marker of instability, and as a carrier of destabilizing potential.
discursively by Irene’s acceptance, for the first time, of an instability. It is a self-protective instability, to be sure, one intended to guard Irene against a terrible certainty. And it does not afford her any joy—indeed, Irene’s only explicit experience of nausea takes place after Clare moves through the window. As she attempts to follow her community “down, down, down” to the street, Irene suddenly has “a thought so terrifying, so horrible that she had...to grasp hold of the banister to save herself from pitching downwards...What if Clare was not dead? She felt nauseated, as much at the idea of the glorious body mutilated as from fear” (112-113). Her action—whatever, exactly, it was—and her desire, even if partial, to see Clare gone (to say nothing of her queer desire for Clare’s body), has separated her from the stable community she surrounded herself with and served. She takes no joy in this disorientation. But she accepts the instability, and moves on with it.

On to what exactly, we do not know. The novel refuses to give us a happy ending—or indeed any ending—for Irene. It also refuses to confirm Clare’s death. Neither Irene nor Brian (the two with the closest social relationships to Clare, and the two who have been read as having erotic desire for her) can speak the word: “Irene stammered: ‘Is she—is she—?’” (113). Brian offers “a slightly perfunctory attempt to comfort her: ‘There, there, Irene. You mustn’t. You’ll make yourself sick. She’s—’ His voice broke suddenly” (113). The narrative offers no description or mention of Clare’s dead body until the final paragraph, which was included in the first and second printing of the first edition but dropped in the third: “Centuries after, she heard the strange man saying: ‘Death by misadventure, I’m inclined to believe. Let’s go up and have another look at that window’” (114). Thadious M. Davis retains these lines in the Penguin Classic edition, arguing that “there is no indication that Larsen herself recommended, sought, or approved the excision of this final paragraph” (xxxv). But she includes in her introduction to the
text "the questions surrounding the dropped final paragraph" as ones that metatextually "cloud and destabilize any but the most open reading of the conclusion and what happened when Clare goes out the window" (xxxi). Clare’s movement through the window therefore remains a destabilizing one, full of radical potential, whether or not this final paragraph is included; her death may be assumed, but it is never confirmed.

With or without the final paragraph, the novel ends with a vertical reference. The shorter version ends with Irene saying, "'[Clare] just fell, before anybody could stop her. I—' [Irene’s] quaking knees gave way under her. She moaned, and sank down; moaned again...she was dimly conscious of strong arms lifting her up. Then everything was dark” (114) The alternative ending concludes, “Let’s go up and have another look at that window” (114). In neither case is the downward fall—Irene’s or Clare’s—entirely final. Instead, the novel begins a new lifting, a return to the original vertical location, whether through the height of a body lifting Irene’s or a gesture toward the sixth floor. As such, the novel draws a circle around the norm-grid, moving out-down-in-up, showing that the straight lines and right angles can be softened and rearranged into an entirely different sort of shape; the grid turns, through return, into a circle. With the shorter ending, Irene’s lifting upward returns us backward to the opening scene of the novel; she begins to rise again, though in a very different way. The circle becomes even more explicit with the longer ending (Fig. 4); Clare’s horizontal movement through the window and supposed vertical fall to the street is set up for a reversed repetition, with a movement back, horizontally, to the building and up, vertically, to the apartment (Figure 4 includes a circle superimposed upon this right-angled movement for easier visualization). As such, the confirmation of Clare’s death in these lines does not, in fact, close down her radical potential, but re-initiates it in three ways:

33 It also includes another self-protective em-dash, as Irene cuts off any statement of her own uncertain involvement in Clare’s fall.
first, by changing the grid into a circle, with the refusal of the straight world’s sharp angles and clear orientations; second, by moving backward through the grid, upward against the grain of temporal cause and effect in a movement that neither indicates nor achieves privilege or access (as represented by the straight arrow in Figure 5); and finally, by highlighting Clare’s own final escape from that grid (as represented by the smaller circle). She has removed herself or been removed, and is in either case out of the prescribed back-and-forth, up-and-down movements of straight society (Fig. 5). Irene may still operate within it to some extent—she may be carried back up the stairs, or recover her own bodily power and walk—but she has been thoroughly re-placed outside its norms by her final interaction with Clare. She has been destabilized, repositioned in relation to communal boundaries.

Clare’s disappearance thus leaves space for a new politics, one based on the potential Ahmed finds in refusing to “overcome the ‘disalignment’” (172) of living off the norm-grid. We might view Clare’s movement through the window as the victorious escape of an unstable figure who does not fight to re-enter stability, an intentional refusal to accommodate unfair and unviable binary options, whether raced, classed, gendered, sexed, or some combination. The threat of violence to which Clare is subjected cannot be underemphasized; multiracial bodies, assigned as they are to non-whiteness, are in constant danger, in Passing as in our present day. If the novel is pure realism, then Clare—like so many people who exist in dangerous racial spaces—dies for what the world reads as her (racial, sexual, class) transgressions. But if we limit ourselves to this reading and accept that Passing ends by extinguishing Clare’s radical potential, we also accept that the only choices for what Ahmed calls “mixed-race queer[s]” are “to become white and straight or to disappear” (178)—or, perhaps, to live Irene’s life, a third option of anxious and arduous attempts at uplift and incorporation.
On the other hand, if we refuse Clare’s death, we find a new asymptotic stretch of hope: the line that is also a curve, stretching infinitely outward to wherever Clare went after her final visible movement through space. If we read the novel as relocating Clare’s radical positional potential back into Irene, we finally see clearly the narrative’s choice to make visible Irene’s finally victorious, inescapable instability. This victory, accidentally effected by the actions Irene thought would save her, teaches readers that stability is, in the end, a lie. It does not protect us, even the “good” ones who follow the rules. Being good, Larsen suggests, is not a viable strategy; there is no winning in a rigged game. Many twenty-first century readers already know this, and will see it dramatized in Irene’s journey. Others cling to illusions and call for politeness, respectability, a gentle effort at lowering the barriers to safety. Often, the safest among us call on the least safe to respect the very rules that most endanger them.

But Larsen is clear: stability is not an option. It will not be achieved by following the rules. Clare’s radical potential is the chance of living against and across boundaries, refusing the rules that make life unlivable; reading her movement through the window as an (un)death allows us to imagine options other than destruction by norms. The relocation of that potential into Irene shows us that neither assimilation nor individual salvation were ever real possibilities. Instead, we must re-orient toward a new horizon, a new set of possibilities that begin to come within reach—a horizon made visible when we read Passing through the spatial analytic and assemblage of destabilization advanced in this paper. Clare’s death, if we choose to believe in it, is not the end of all hope. It is the re-positioning of that hope—its backward transference into, through the impossible-to-ignore destabilization of, that once stalwartly good but only ever tenuously stable figure, Irene. This is the radical potential of the novel. Accepting it is an important step toward a new and redemptive politics. If the good is unworkable, if the stable is
unsustainable, we are left with something volatile and uncertain: a politics driven by the assignment of indefensible positions, and the righteous, unavoidable rage thus engendered.
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