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PERFORMING PASSING: THEATRICALITY IN ZOË WICOMB'S *PLAYING IN THE LIGHT* AND NELLA LARSEN'S *PASSING*

by

JENNIFER L. APGAR

Under the Direction of Dr. Pearl McHaney and Dr. Renée Schatteman

ABSTRACT

Acts of "passing" inform the plots of Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Nella Larsen's *Passing*. Examples of contemporary South African fiction and Harlem Renaissance fiction respectively, these texts explore racial passing and its correlative, social passing. Social passing includes enactment of social relationships, responds to class anxieties, and requires repression of emotions as participating characters attempt to fix their performed roles into permanent identities. At issue are the texts' multiple enactments of passing with special interest paid to these acts' constitutive theatricality. Characters perform within narrative settings, locations subsequently deconstructed exposing both implicit and explicit theatrical functions. Threshold spaces of doors and windows form frames within settings, focusing the audience's gaze and simultaneously creating and dismantling private and public places to reconstitute them as theater. This study culminates in reflections on the tension between the relative freedom and containment of characters that pass.

INDEX WORDS: Performance, Passing, Theatricality, Zoë Wicomb, Nella Larsen, South African fiction, Harlem Renaissance, Windows, Doors, Settings, Playing in the Light, Passing

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Master of Arts

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Georgia State University

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INTRODUCTION

Divided by the span of seventy-seven years and two continents, the texts *Playing in the Light* and *Passing* by Zoë Wicomb and Nella Larsen, respectively, connect in addressing the same topic: "passing." Though Wicomb's novel has yet to receive much critical attention versus Larsen's novel which has received extensive critical response, both of these two texts have yet to be examined through the lens of the performative nature of the act of passing itself. It is the project of this study to establish and employ a theatrical paradigm exploring performance, setting, audience, and threshold frames to identify the multiple functions of these texts' presentations of passing.

Beginning with the conviction that confluences exist between these works of different periods and disparate cultures, I believe a productive scholarly methodology requires the creation of a hybrid paradigmatic lens. This paradigm uses the language and critical framework of the theater to extend this project of comparative literary criticism. As characters in the two novels create hybrid racial and social identities through their performances, these acts must be studied from a broader perspective than that provided by multiculturalism or postcolonial studies. Inherent in the acts that form the basis of the individual plots is a theatricality requiring scholarly engagement.

If a theatrical performance is defined by its audience and performer both situated within physical locations serving as theater spaces and agreeing, more or less, on the willing suspension of disbelief, then what occurs in the novels above can be termed performative acts. The acts, in both cases, involve the transformations of the actors into stage characters through physical movements, costumes, makeup, masks, and the collusion of supporting ensemble members before the eyes of an audience. These elements alone are productive as discrete entities of study, yet it is the purpose of this investigation to further complicate them through the addition of analyses of the nuances of settings in which the various acts occur. Acts must be contextualized; they must locate characters within spaces that frame the actions as performances. Threshold spaces such as windows and doors

are framing devices within settings that further serve to focus the gaze of the audience in much the same way as a theater's proscenium arch. The critical function of setting has yet to receive the focused attention it requires as the location of these theatrical acts of passing. The following analyses of setting focus on locations, descriptions, manipulations by the actor(s), perception of the audience (including the reader), and the dialectical relationship of performer and performance space leading to transformation, not only of the performance, but of the space as well. By the end of the study we will ask ourselves who, or even what, ultimately is passing?

Racial passing shapes the narrative of both novels, and in particular provides material for much of the critical response to *Passing*. But a variation of passing also appears to complicate our perceptions of this act. This study investigates this variation, which I identify as *social passing*, and its use in establishing social status and enacting relationship roles. This form of passing, as presented in the novels in question, most frequently requires a performance based on the suppression of emotions as characters sublimate their desires beneath the privileged concerns about maintaining a perceived position in relationships. Thus racial passing in its constitutive theatricality appears to open the door for other types of performances. Performative acts of multiple varieties also underscore the theatricality of the two novels' plots through their location in and shaping of setting.

Wicomb's novel *Playing in the Light* (2006) charts the journey of Marion Campbell, a white business owner living in Cape Town, who sets out to investigate her parents' history. She learns that her parents, Helen and John, are coloured, but took the opportunity to pass as white when they moved from the country to the city. The third person narrator of the novel deploys flashbacks from multiple perspectives in order to reveal the methods by which Helen and John achieved their goal – to live as whites in the neighborhood of Observatory and raise their daughter as a white girl. Marion's discovery of her family's past and her own racial identity triggers a series of negotiations of

her work life, relationships with coworkers, friends, and family. Although her physical journey takes her to Europe and back, the greatest distance she travels is the psychological road to her future.

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* (1929) begins with Irene Redfield's reflections on a journey – a trip to Chicago that brought her back into unexpected contact with her childhood acquaintance Clare Kendry. Irene learns that Clare's disappearance during their teenage years was due to her decision to pass as a white woman, thereby escaping life with her disapproving white aunts and simultaneously securing a comfortable existence with a wealthy white husband, John Bellew. Years later, Clare reveals to Irene that she longs to return to black society. In fact, Clare sees Irene as the facilitator of that goal. The novel follows the two women as Irene struggles with her suspicions about her putative friend, and ultimately ends in the tragic, mysterious death of Clare Kendry.

Despite surface correspondences between the plots' engagement with acts of passing mentioned in the plot synopses, it is not my intention to imply direct parallels between *Playing in the Light* as an example of post-apartheid South African fiction and *Passing,* the work of fiction of an African American novelist written during the Harlem Renaissance. I do not suggest that there can never be a direct correlation between the two, for I agree with Rob Nixon when in the introduction to *Homelands, Harlem and Hollywood* he acknowledges "[t]he inevitably partial character of the connections" (3) between the two countries, and, resultingly, between their cultural products. Rather, it is my purpose to identify subtle confluences between the two novels' depictions of the performativity of the act of passing as located in and dialectically engaged with the physical locations in which the act takes place. Unspanned gaps divide the experiences of the novelists and the characters themselves, yet surprising bridges offer new scholarly paradigms for readers.

CHAPTER I: PERFORMING PASSING

The act of passing as portrayed in Zoë Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Nella Larsen's *Passing* is inextricably intertwined with theatrical performance. Although Wicomb's novel has yet to receive extensive critical attention so that there is no body of scholarship from which to draw, some critics of Larsen's work touch on the issue of performance but to great extent do not consider the theatricality of the act. Scholars who acknowledge and engage with the performativity apparent in Larsen's work include Catherine Rottenberg, Sara Ahmed, and Jennifer DeVere Brody. These scholars all approach their studies of performativity from slightly different perspectives. Rottenberg, in "*Passing*: Race, Identification, and Desire," helps identify important distinctions between the critical projects of the other writers. She summarizes Ahmed's project as an attempt to employ Judith Butler's theories of gender performativity. She critiques Brody's project by calling it a "convincing" study of "how gender and race norms are articulated through one another," and finds that the project ultimately fails to firmly establish race performativity as "a unique *modality* of performativity" that can be differentiated from Butler's gender performativity (490). Rottenberg, herself, appears to want to differentiate her own work by pushing beyond Brody's efforts in order to create a "historically specific examination of performativity" (491) that will focus on "*irreducible* features of race performativity" (490). I differentiate my study from the work of the preceding scholars by seeking to expand beyond these current critical comments on gender and race performativity to argue for the benefits of analyzing these works through a purely theatrical lens. Theatricality and performance in these novels are complex and varied enough to merit their own investigation. Also of interest to this study is the multiplicity of forms of passing evident in these novels. Acts of passing extend beyond the racial passing that appears as the texts' main conceit to include other performative acts relating to social position, class, and personal relationships. These

acts, for the purposes of this study, are referred to as social passing. In order to properly investigate all performative acts, they must be contextualized within a theatrical paradigm.

Placing all acts of passing in a theatrical context requires the constitutive transformation of an actor into a character. In these novels the black actors transform into characters with white identities; however, they also disappear into characters that represent a certain social or class status, as well as characters that hide their emotional lives to pass without detection in their personal lives. In order to craft a seamless performance, the actors in the novels who pass must change the ways in which they present themselves to the public gaze as they become characters in performances. The changes that occur can be divided into *primary* and *secondary* performance aspects. I use the labels *primary* and *secondary* not as indicators of levels of importance, but for the designation of the order in which they might be registered by a watching (or reading) audience and, practically, for the order in which I will treat them. Studies of performative acts, regardless of the type of passing enacted (racial or social), can benefit from attention to the primary performance aspects including the exterior presentation of the individual, as well as the secondary performance aspects such as changes to the actor's exterior world and relationships. The adoption of these aspects, as we shall see, inevitably creates theatrical performances regardless of whether or not the performance's audience is comprised of willing participants or not, and regardless of if they are even aware that they are watching a performance. Additional issues related to audience including composition and function will receive further treatment in Chapter III.

In terms of primary changes to the exterior presentation of the characters, the most obvious include costume, make up/masks, behavior, and speech. The two novels handle these primary exterior or surface changes to the characters' presentation in similar ways. In fact, Helen of *Playing in the Light* shares similarities with Clare of *Passing* in the above listed aspects and, more remarkably, she also shares them with Irene of the same novel. I draw attention to this particular cross-textual

connection between Helen and Irene because Clare is the character who more obviously engages with passing, specifically racial passing, while Irene's performance is more covert, more understated, and includes both racial and social passing. The subtlety of her performance causes her to pass detection by critics such as Brody who describes Irene as "puritanical and anti-theatrical" (397). Irene, as we shall see, is anything but anti-theatrical, and her complex, multi-layered performance corresponds to that of Helen.

Helen's relationship with her chosen costumes is complex, each carefully selected for maximum effect on her audience. The strongest scenic example of the impact of her costume choices appears as she gives her most challenging performance, one conducted under the pressure of a meeting with "Councillor Carter" (138) in which she strives to convince him that her husband has simply "lost his birth certificate" (143) and thus, although her family "had always been white, on the right side so to speak" (142), she would need the Councillor to give her an affidavit "that the Campbells were known members of the white community" (143). This affidavit would become Helen's and John's physical pass to whiteness. Interestingly, Helen manipulates the 1950 Population Registration Act to serve her purposes in an act of appropriation that subverts the law's intention to police the location of the black and coloured populations of South Africa.[1] She uses the Act as her excuse for approaching Councillor Carter with her request for an affidavit. Councillor Carter is amenable to meeting with Helen, but not entirely out of altruism. He requires that their meeting take place "after hours, without disturbances, without involving his secretary," (139) indicating a "lewdness" (143) against which Helen would need to protect herself. Thus, Helen must carefully select her costume and monitor her appearance in preparation for the performance: "she admonished the sad face in the mirror of her powder compact, coaxed it into smiling, for sacrifices had to be made" (140). When he sees her, Councillor Carter judges her based on her costume: "she had far too little of her calves showing – a prude" (140), which is precisely the estimation of her

character that she wished him to have. Helen believes that "innocence was her only defence" so she "looked in her mirror to buck herself up, but not to refresh her lipstick, nor to rearrange her hair, nor to dab on seductive perfume for the return to his office" (142). Those enhancements to her appearance might have been read by her audience as an explicit desire to appear attractive, even alluring. Helen wants to do something far more complex with her performance; she wants to be appealing to Carter without appearing to participate in a seduction. Helen wants to play the role of victim rather than the role of a temptress. This position allows her to maintain her integrity while engaging in undeniably questionable behaviors. It is only over time, during the repeat visits the Councillor requires, that he wears her down, forcing her into a series of tiny equivocations in order to reach her goal.

Clare, the character who most notably passes in Larsen's novel, crafts performances that are certainly complemented by the costumes she selects. Her appearance always has a dramatic effect on her audience, one that is continually remarked upon by Irene who possesses an appreciative eye for the nuances of a fine performance (perhaps, as we shall see, because she is also performing). The narrator also remarks on Clare's flair for the dramatic by saying "she had, too, a strange capacity of transforming warmth and passion, verging sometimes on theatrical heroics" (10). Evidence of this dynamic theatricality appears in various descriptions of Clare as epitomized in the scene in which she arrives at the Redmonds' home prior to attending a Negro Welfare League party. Irene utters a "little choked exclamation of admiration" when she sees "Clare, exquisite, golden, flagrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta" and immediately "regretted that she hadn't counseled Clare to wear something ordinary and inconspicuous" (74). As we will see in a moment, Irene frequently struggles to compete with Clare for the spotlight.

Performances by Clare and Helen are not "one woman shows." Their performances require the support of other characters in order to create the illusion of a complete life as the characters they

profess to be. Outside of Councillor Carter's office, in the broader context of her life in Observatory, Helen's performance is also bolstered by the supporting performance of her mother, Tokkie. The reader does not learn of this dual performance, however, until late in the narrative, because Marion, Helen's daughter, provides the reader's introduction to Tokkie prior to the narrative's revelation of Helen's and John's secret. In a neat subversion of expectations, Wicomb allows Marion to reflect sentimentally on the "old coloured servant [Tokkie] who indulged her as a child" (31) whose death Marion grieves over as she blames Helen for mistreating Tokkie. This is, of course, Marion's position before she discovers their familial connections. However, even upon learning of the family ties connecting Marion, Helen, and Tokkie, Marion still misperceives the true relationship between the other two women. She becomes angry with her mother as she feels guilt over her memories of Tokkie, wondering "[h]ow am I to bear the fact that my Tokkie, my own grandmother, sat in the backyard drinking coffee from a servant's mug, and that my mother, her own daughter, put that mug in her hands?" (103). Marion thinks that this was an arrangement forced on Tokkie by Helen, that Tokkie had no choice but to be subservient to Helen. Marian does not know, however, that she herself is an audience member watching a theatrical scene; as audience, what Marion does not perceive is the truth of the joint performance taking place between Helen and her mother Tokkie. It is the narrator who reveals the behind-the-scenes story, the close relationship between Helen and Mamma. The reader learns that Tokkie in fact creates her own role:

> It was Mamma's idea to wear the funny wrap-around apron when she came for a visit at the new terraced house, to use the back gate; that way, in the role of a servant, she could visit every week and at the same time provide a history of [the Campbells'] old family retainer, which the types who were working their way up in that part of Observatory could not boast of. Helen did not think it was necessary, but Mamma insisted that one could not be too careful with the neighbors. (132)

In this excerpt from the text the reader sees that Tokkie selects her own costume and composes a kind of back story for her character that informs the neighbors' perception of the Campbells. Tokkie believes that Observatory, a modest white neighborhood, would be impressed with the class status a family servant provided. The reader simultaneously learns that Marion's dismay over Tokkie's relegation to the backyard was also misdirected at Helen. Tokkie's perceived exile to the backyard and the substandard (in Marion's eyes) mug from which she drinks takes on new significance once the narrator reveals that "[i]n the Observatory backyard she sipped coffee from an enamel mug, which embarrassed Helen. But no, Mamma said, it was her favourite mug; she'd had it for years, and there was after all so little to this walk-on role as servant to lesser whites that she enjoyed playing the part"(133). The truth, then, is that Helen wanted better for her mother, but Tokkie relished her role, adding nuances to her performance that Helen never required from her. Readers also come to learn that Tokkie participates in coaching Helen on her behavior so that she can convincingly perform the role of a white South African woman. Working for a wealthy white family in Constantia, Tokkie observes all the small nuances of their existence from "décor and taste" (133) to gardening and then delivers tidbits about cultural information and class markers to Helen. Although Helen's performance is persuasive in its own right, Tokkie's supporting performance brings completion to it.

In *Passing*, Clare's performance of racial passing is also bolstered by that of Irene who, like Tokkie, performs her own "walk on role." It is important to keep in mind that although Irene may appear to pass in a supporting role for the majority of the novel, it seems by the end that she is determined to steal the show. It is also the project of this study to argue that Irene is actually more adept at performing her preferred version of passing, a kind of social passing, than Clare. For now, we begin by considering Irene's supporting role in the scene in which it is most apparent – the afternoon in Chicago when Clare invites her two black childhood friends Irene and Gertrude over

for tea. All of the characters in this scene move in and out of different performance dynamics, although it is critical to note that Clare's investment in her performance of racial passing is arguably deeper than that of her peers due to the fact that she has permanently moved into the white world while the other two ladies only selectively pass when the occasion presents itself. The characters' levels of awareness of and engagement with performance vary through the course of the scene. For example, there is a brief moment in which Gertrude, another character with the ability to racially pass, misunderstands the performance that she sees occurring between Irene and Clare when Irene makes veiled accusations that Clare does everything "for gain" (37-8). To cover the awkward moments, Clare leads the conversation away from touchy subjects. As Irene notes, "It was the most brilliant exhibition of conversational weightlifting that [she] had ever seen" (38). It takes one performer to recognize the feats of another performer. They all become wrapped in the performance that they willingly or unwillingly create, making sure "the illusion of general conversation was nearly perfect" (38). Irene and Gertrude first adopt supporting social roles as polite guests, and "Clare talked on, her voice, her gestures colouring all she said…But it couldn't last, this verbal feat" (38). Implicit in the nature of performance is that the curtain must fall, the audience and performers grow tired, and the dialogue or story inevitably draws to a close. Clare supports the weight of the entire show until her husband Jack Bellew enters the scene and the performance dynamics shift again. The scene resumes with yet another performance – the performance of the conventions of introductions after Bellew makes his famous greeting of "Hello, Nig" (39) to Clare. The performers in the room wait for their roles to be revealed while Clare encourages Bellew to perform for her guests his explanation of his offensive greeting. Irene and Gertrude are momentarily at a loss – does Clare expect them to perform the role of the childhood friends they are, or does she need them to pass so that her relationship with Bellew can continue without the hitch caused by Bellew's anticipated discomfort with her association with black women?

Gertrude and Irene, in an unspoken agreement, select the second performance option and pass as white women. Irene is torn over both the performance she watches and the one she delivers. Her laughter during the performance grows until she almost loses control. But it only takes the "sight of Clare's face" (39) for Irene to quickly remember "the need for a more quiet enjoyment of this priceless joke." Ultimately, Irene controls her performance, her presentation of herself. Her moment of fighting back laughter is reflective of moments on stage when actors struggle between maintaining their characters and the impulse to laugh. Such hysteria wells up and threatens to take apart the entire performance because an inside joke or even the underlying suspicion of the true absurdity of performance hits the actor, challenging his/her self control. Irene also has the actor's ability to step back from the scene to consider what the performance would look like to another viewer: "An on-looker, Irene reflected, would have thought it a most congenial teaparty" (40). It is important to note that Irene takes on the part automatically yet unwillingly, controlling her reflexive response to Bellew's overt racism although her "rage had not retreated, but was held by some dam of caution and allegiance to Clare" (41). For reasons that the narrator does not describe explictly, ones that Irene may not even recognize herself, she plays the part assigned to her in order that Clare's performance as a white woman not be compromised. It takes a tremendous act of will on Irene's part and "all the while she was speaking, she was thinking how amazing it was that her voice did not tremble, that outwardly she was calm. Only her hands shook slightly. She drew them inward from their rest in her lap and pressed the tips of her fingers together to still them" (41). Irene's performance is arguably even more controlled and masterful than that by Clare, the character who passes more than any other in the novel.

In another scene of shifting performance dynamics, Irene performs a kind of social passing in which she plays the role of the middle class race-conscious wife of a prominent doctor. This type of passing is a complex variation on racial passing. It involves enactment of social conventions

reinforcing social roles, class positions, as well as affecting the disappearance of the needs and emotions of the actor into the character. On hearing of Clare's arrival for a visit at the Redmond home, Irene makes sure her own costume is in place and practices the lines that she wants to say, "[b]ut that was as far as she got in her rehearsal" (64). Her rehearsal is abbreviated, interrupted because Clare disrupts the conventions of the performance by not waiting for her entrance cue. Instead she comes "softly into the room without knocking" (65). Clare takes control of the stage. Even though she is not performing her act of racial passing, she still manages to usurp the stage of Irene's production of her social self. Clare proceeds to seat "herself slantwise in Irene's favorite chair" (65). As demonstrated by this behavior, she is comfortable in this setting and appropriative of the set pieces. She doesn't even follow the conventions for sitting in a chair properly, but breaks even the smallest of social conventions by provocatively sitting any way she wishes. She momentarily forces Irene back into performing a supporting role in her own house.

Irene experiences a moment of discomfort when Clare acknowledges her friend's performance. Irene's recently performed dramatic gesture of ignoring Clare's pleading letter to see her (62). A part of her performance of social passing in which she performs selected social roles, Irene also performs the role of a friend to Clare. Her concern for Clare never goes beyond self-interest, and therefore Irene experiences the resulting "uncomfortable feeling that one has when one has not been wholly kind or wholly true" (65). At this moment, Clare has her on the spot, asking why her letter wasn't answered, and Irene has to then stall for time with another gesture – she "kept Clare waiting while she lit a cigarette, blew out the match, and dropped it in a tray" (65) – so that she can formulate her response. In addition to being another objective correlative[2] to Clare's death, this cigarette and the accompanying gesture form one of many examples of Irene's reliance on performance gestures, a technique for controlling a scene which she employs with her husband Brian even more than with anyone else.

One key difference between Clare and Irene as performers is that when Clare is upset, she cannot control her performance to the extent that Irene can. Irene is the consummate performer even though Clare is the one who receives narrative attention for passing on a regular basis. In a moment of openness, Clare admits her loneliness and sense of loss to Irene, and she weeps. She doesn't worry about the effects on her costume as her tears "[ruin] the priceless velvet of her dress" (67). Thus it seems that this person whom Irene describes as "having" (20) has few concerns about material comforts and possessions. Clare does not perform the social passing that Irene favors; instead, she allows her emotions to show rather than repressing them beneath the exterior of a social character. "Her effort to speak moderately was obvious, but not successful" (67) unlike Irene who can always control her voice even under duress or high emotion. It is arguable, though, that in a moment of high stakes, Irene's gestures betray her, as become apparent in the final scene of the novel. However, we can see her control her gestures in this scene, in which she feels some empathy with Clare whose words "brought the tears to her own eyes, though she didn't allow them to fall. The truth was that she knew weeping did not become her. Few women, she imagined, wept as attractively as Clare" (67). Irene elects to sublimate her emotions to her character portrayal – the performance is more important than her emotional life. It is also interesting to see her critique the elements of Clare's performance. Clare's emotions are evident in her body language: "[h]er clasped hands swayed forward and back again, and her scarlet mouth trembled irrepressibly" (68). These little giveaways suggest that Clare is not the performer that Irene is.

As a performer, Clare even disappoints Irene in her role as an entertaining dinner guest. Irene appreciates the beauty that Clare brings to the room, and the "aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her," but Clare doesn't contribute to the dialogue enough for Irene's taste: "she contributed little, sitting for the most part silent, an odd dreaming look in her hypnotic eyes" (80). Essentially, Clare becomes the audience at the dinner table while Irene expects her to perform, to be

relied on to "talk fluently and entertainingly" (80). Clare does, however, perform to the extent that she crafts her appearance, and she doesn't "object to appearing a bit pathetic and ill-used, so that people could feel sorry for her" (80). It is not, however, a performance that benefits Irene whose motivation for including Clare at a dinner party was purely to make herself look like a successful hostess.

In a conversation with Irene later that spring, Clare makes a curious statement that raises questions about many of the motivations underlying each woman's motivation to pass. Clare says, "I haven't any proper morals or sense of duty, as you have, that makes me act as I do" (81). Is she implying that Irene's performances are motivated by morals and duty? It seems more likely that Irene's motivations are less elevated, that she is more "having" than Clare, and Clare simply has little insight into her friend's nature. Irene wants to have things exactly the way that she wants them, too. It is just that she wants them configured in a different way than Clare does. Clare overtly acknowledges that she is "not safe," and that she will "do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away" (81) in order to have what she wants. Inevitably, Irene would behave as ruthlessly (and arguably does at the end of the novel). It can only be that Clare is completely deceived by Irene's performances. Irene truly acts out of a self-interest that she cloaks as service to her family and community. In fact, as we have just seen, it seems that Clare, who is criticized (perhaps envied) for bold racial passing, can be more authentic than Irene who is always performing her form of social passing. At the end of this scene, Clare cries "for no reason that Irene could discover," though that may simply be because Irene isn't capable of that depth of empathy.

Returning to the challenge of connecting Irene's performances to those of Helen in *Playing in the Light*, we must consider the scene in which Irene believes she discovers her husband Brian's infidelity. Here Irene seems to parallel Helen who, when she reaches a certain stage in her performance for Councillor Carter, feels she needs to hide behind the mask provided by her make-

up: "she had taken to wearing her lipstick, a woman could not expect to retain her courage without and besides, the touch of red made her skin look paler" (144). Helen reaches a point in which she must abandon her victim role and become a part of the seduction scene she scripted from the start. In order to do this, Helen adds social passing to her performance as she uses make up to mask her emotions and identity. Her face must be covered in order to hide the real emotions, in order to perform. Similarly, all the while that Irene talks to Brian about Clare, she puts on her makeup, dons a mask. The narrator says: "She completed the bright red arch of her full lips" (88), a moment reminiscent of the one Helen experiences (144), and one that indicates Irene's hiding behind her mask as well.

Along with the costume come changes in behavior and speech that support the creation of the new character. It is not enough to wear the clothing, but the physical life of the character must be adapted and monitored as well. This is the performance aspect in which the exterior changes are most similar between Helen and Irene, two characters who search for stability as they strive to forever fix their performed identity. In other words, they wish to step into their roles and find themselves permanently transformed. It is as if they believe someday they will exit the stage and proceed with real lives as the characters they created. We return once again to the scene in which Helen approaches Councillor Carter, to observe how she carefully monitors her behavior in order to walk the delicate line of protecting herself from the Counciller's unwanted advances while still achieving her goal of securing an affidavit. In the Councillor's office she "sat down according to the instructions of her well-thumbed etiquette book, with her legs at an angle and crossed at the ankles" (139). Even under duress as she is groped by the Councillor, she forces herself to monitor her vocal delivery: "[i]n a thin voice, focusing hard on her vowels, she begged" (143). She can't afford to allow any suspicious vocal intonation to cause him to suspect she is not who she says she is. It is details of performances such as this one that, once revealed by the narrator, create a poignant

awareness in the reading audience of Marion's misperception of her mother, one that keeps her from sharing the compassion for Helen that readers may feel. The poignancy of this loss of relationship between daughter and mother underscores the tragedy of the performance of passing. Her daughter, Marion, and her husband, John, would never know the sacrifices that Helen made, ones she bore silently, so that once she received her affidavit she allowed herself only the small act of defiance of destroying the icon of her performance, her costume, "cutting it up with a pair of sharp scissors before putting it in the dustbin" (145). With this act, Helen abandons the role of "the woman in the lemon blouse, the one obligated to Carter" (145), though she does not, cannot, abandon her performance of white identity entirely.

A secondary category of changes for performances of passing includes those of location, of companions, and/or relationships to family and friends. These significant aspects of performance impact both the characters who choose to pass and their family and friends. It is also this category of performance in which Helen and Irene bear the most similarities, as they attempt to permanently locate their performed identities within a select geography. Both novels approach the constitutive displacement, the loss of home that forms a component of the performative act as characters migrate to new locations strategically linked to new identities. In *Playing in the Light*, the narrator relates the journey of Helen and John as they leave life in the country and arrive in Cape Town. Soon after reaching Cape Town, John's identity is mistaken by the traffic department when he applies for a job, and Helen seizes the opportunity for them to pass. They leave their initial residence in "the Bates's respectable coloured home" (128) for "rented rooms – no more than refurbished servant's quarters, but in a decent white area" (130) where Helen makes a break from her acquaintance with Mrs. Bates, insisting that "[t]hey were going to live in a couple rooms where she could not possibly entertain anyone" (129). After breaking the connection formed through relationships, it is time to disconnect from places that are linked to old identities. The next and final

step to complete their performance of passing is acquiring "their own little terraced house in Observatory" (131). Thus, as we can see from the progression described above, there is a physical element to the transformation that requires the appropriate location in order to confirm the race of the individual.

A similar journey is mirrored in the text of *Passing*. It begins, however, not with Clare's own calculations as Helen's did, but at the requirement of her white aunts who whisk her away to "the west side" of Chicago upon the death of her father. Clare was young, only fifteen, and "[f]or about a year or more afterwards she would appear occasionally among her old friends and acquaintances on the south side for short little visits" (18). Unlike Helen and John, she tries to maintain the relationships that connect her to her previous identity. It wasn't long, however, until "[t]he visits dwindled, becoming shorter, fewer, and further apart until at last they ceased" (19). Thus Clare's life eventually moves entirely to the west side of Chicago, and she begins to associate only with whites, escaping from her aunts' house and passing more frequently and in more contexts than they might have imagined. Although Clare never speaks of her passing as an act forced upon her by her aunts, they were certainly implicated in her decision to pass. The aunts are related by blood to Clare's father Bob Kendry, "a son of their brother's, on the left hand" (25), meaning that their brother had been involved in a relationship with a black woman, and Bob Kendry was their biracial offspring. Clare mentions the aunts position on race in her retelling of the tale, "[t]hey forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbors, or even to mention the southside" (27), thereby effectively pushing her into her new white identity, without ostensibly requiring it. Clare's performance is thus initiated. She continues "slipping off" (27) to meet Bellew and other white acquaintances. She is observed, however, by her old childhood acquaintances and rumors start flying in her old social circles. Interestingly, in a reversal from Helen's premeditated denial of friends, it is possible that Clare's final act of passing is cemented when she is ignored by an old acquaintance. Clare tells Irene of this

incident which had such impact on her: "once I met Margaret Hammer in Marshall Field's. I'd have spoken, was on the very point of doing it, but she cut me dead. My dear 'Rene, I assure you that from the way she looked through me, even I was uncertain whether I was actually there in the flesh or not" (21). Denied acknowledgement by her old acquaintance, the break with the past social circle becomes inevitable for Clare; she tells Irene that "[i]t was that very thing which, in a way, finally decided me not to go out and see you one last time" (21). She proceeds to tell Irene about Jack Bellew and how she inevitably "stopped slipping off to the south side and slipped off to meet him instead. I couldn't manage both" (27). Eventually, Clare runs away from her aunts to marry Bellew, and her journey then takes her to Manhattan. Escaping from her aunts' moral (and racial) dictates, Clare empowers herself to determine the standards for her own moral choices, as well as her choices relating to her performances of racial passing. By becoming sole arbiter of her morality and her racial identity, Clare removes the privilege and burden of decision-making from her aunts entirely. Thus, from a comparison between Helen and Clare, we can see that a change in personal relationships and in physical location accompanies their decisions to pass and bolsters their performances.

Of the characters that pass, Helen and Irene in particular perform not only for the public, but for their families and friends, creating relationships that are more distant, more superficial than they might otherwise have been. Irene is especially guilty of engaging in this kind of social passing, one that cements social roles and subjugates emotions, when she isn't performing racial passing. It comes as a surprise when her controlled performance slips and she expresses anger with Clare's performance as she reads one of Clare's letters. What is even more surprising is that Irene comments on Clare's performance as if she didn't know from the start that they were both acting. She would like to position herself only as audience, not as a fellow performer. She says that Clare's letter "roused again that old suspicion that Clare was acting, not consciously, perhaps – that is, not

too consciously, but none the less, acting" (52). This judgment comes as a surprise because the reader has had fifty-odd pages of watching performances from both the women.[3] As far as the reading audience can see, all descriptions of Irene and Clare are of inscrutable exterior presentations offering little or no access to authentic interiority.

Irene also questions her own complicity in hiding the truth during the performance at tea in Chicago, when she decided in the face of Bellew's racism not to speak up. Irene's habit of choking off her speech and communicating only through gestures reappears throughout her performances in the novel and creates the same climate of silence in her relationships and her household that we will see in Helen's house. A particularly ironic moment occurs when Brian catches Irene swearing and says "[c]aught you in the act" (53), even though he doesn't actually ever truly catch her acting the real role she has chosen and consistently performs for him. He misreads the actual performance. Moments later, Irene does perform for him and catches herself in the act, so to speak: "[s]he passed the letter to him, and in the act made a little mental frown. For, with a nicety of perception, she saw that she was doing it instead of answering his questions with words, so that he might be occupied while she hurried through her dressing" (53). This moment illustrates multiple layers of performances. Irene controls the scene with her husband by replying with actions instead of words, and thereby manipulates the situation so that she can have what she wants, in this case the time to finish dressing. The performance then continues as an enactment of avoidance on Irene's part. In this particular moment she avoids having to talk about Clare and can respond to Brian's question with a nod before moving on with what she really wants – to start the already late morning. Over breakfast Brian and Irene fall into conversation about Clare's passing, and Brian asserts that in such cases the people passing have the advantage because they have knowledge while the people who are unaware of the act of passing do not have knowledge. Brian goes on to discuss passing and how it leaves the passer dissatisfied and trying always to "slip back" (55). In response, Irene references

Clare's tea party as "that scene in Chicago" (55) acknowledging the performance that took place that afternoon. The discussion of passing between Irene and Brian places his determination that passing is an act that indicates the "[i]nstinct of the race to survive and expand" (56) as the final word in the conversation. We have the impression that Irene disagrees with him on this point but chooses not to debate him because she feels for some reason that he is more knowledgeable on the subject than she is. We are not privy to the reasoning for her decision to defer to his opinion although we might suspect that once again she suppresses her thoughts and feelings to disappear into the role of the wife. Considering that she is the one who passes (he can't pass because his skin tone is darker), she actually has more practical expertise in this area. But Irene always performs for Brian – not in the sense that she performs racial passing when around him, but she covers her feelings and fears from him by controlling her presentation of herself: "[h]er voice had been even and her step was firm, but in her there was no slackening of the agitation" (57). Again, she performs a kind of social passing in which she masks her true feelings and presents herself in the role of accommodating wife.

Irene manages her performance for Brian one more time in a conversation about her concerns about their son. She doesn't seem to ever be authentically herself or to voice her real concerns and desires; instead, she tries to manipulate every situation through her performances. In this particular scene the narrator describes her in the following terms: "[h]er manner was consciously light. Apparently she was intent of [sic] the maze of traffic, but she was still watching Brian's face closely" (59). Then Irene indicates her displeasure by slamming the car door in response to Brian's comments on her concerns about their son. Again, she communicates with gestures, rather than with her words when dealing with Brian. She claims that she didn't intend "to behave like this" (60), but her emotions got the better of her and manifested in her behavior. When she returns to the car she displays a moment of disconnection from herself. She becomes a spectator to her own behaviors with the following commentary on her own speech: "she heard

herself saying in a calm, metallic voice" (60). Brian also, though less frequently, performs his displeasure with his gestures as we see when the narrator tells us he "doffed his hat in that maddening polite way" (60). The narrator then goes on to reveal that Irene's conversation had actually been a lead into another topic – the topic of Brian traveling to Europe with their son. It is a topic she decides she introduced at the wrong moment, or if she had chosen "other more favorable opening methods" (60) then she could have once again manipulated the situation to her desires.

Studying behavioral nuances such as the above noted uses of gestures instead of speech reinforces the critical practice of performance in both *Playing in the Light* and *Passing*. Other vital aspects of performance manifest themselves not only in the characters' carefully crafted appearances but also in their relationships to both their homes and communities and to their friends and family. As the characters fight to establish their performed identities, some with the hopes of permanence, all moving between racial and social passing, their experiences find physical grounding in their similar experiences of setting. As we will see in the chapters to come, setting forms both the performance space of the characters and simultaneously influences the performative act itself. Also, in the chapters to come, we will move to consider specific liminal spaces within these settings, in particular, thresholds such as doors and windows that both demand and facilitate performance.

CHAPTER II: TRANSFORMATIONS AND SUBVERSIONS OF SETTING

Setting, both in Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Larsen's *Passing*, forms a critical yet easily overlooked component of the narratives of passing. In their most basic functions, settings illuminate tensions in the novels between the characters' desires both for fixed and for fluid identities. Specifically, some of the novels' actors perform identities they wish to remain permanently fixed, while others desire a fluid movement between identities. These competing desires find expression and location in settings. Just as the characters' passing is performance, settings also demonstrate similar theatrical qualities. Such connections will be explored at length in Chapter III. But to set the stage, so to speak, for the arguments to come, we must first engage with settings as discrete entitities to discover the ways they function in the two texts. I will begin this investigation by analyzing Wicomb's critical work for insight into how the author develops theoretical paradigms for the social creation of setting and then read these strategies against her novel as well as against Larsen's fiction looking for an understanding of how these writers both transform and subvert setting.

Reading Wicomb's 2005 critical essay "Setting, Intertextuality, and the Resurrection of the Postcolonial Author," one encounters explicit political allusions which inflect the settings that contain the characters in her novel. For Wicomb, setting is not simply a fictional location, but, instead, is a real product of the society that forms the context of the work. Wicomb states that: "setting is the representation of physical surroundings that is crucially bound up with a culture and its dominant ideologies, providing ready-made, recognizable meanings. In other words, setting functions much like intertextuality" (146). Wicomb, as might be expected, is specifically interested in the ways intertextuality is mobilized in South African fiction when she observes that "settings like the servant's room in the backyard or the master bedroom in the suburbs operate as intertexts with ready-made conventionalized meanings that interact with the narrative discourse and presentation of character to offer revised meanings" (146). This study takes Wicomb's observation and seeks to

extrapolate from it new paradigms with which to read her South African fiction back against Nella Larsen's Harlem Renaissance text for confluences in the functioning of settings that create such "revised meanings." The form of textual analysis that I will adopt begins with Wicomb's critical writing on intertextuality that directs attention to social and political commentaries embedded in the text and proceeds to a study of the practical results of these commentaries.

Wicomb's critical work considers alternate uses of setting, specifically departing from what in the past, others have claimed as setting's purpose, in postcolonial writing in particular, in order to develop her own strategies for setting's use. She notes that the accepted purpose of setting in postcolonial writing changes when the writer "revises the empty space of colonialism and through writing and naming turns it into place" (145). But Wicomb insists her own project is "more mundane" than the project of postcolonial writing in that she intends to mine select narratological theories for a method of employing the "*mise-en-scène*" that goes beyond merely providing "facts…evidence of narrator…or its role in promoting verisimilitude" (145). Specifically, Wicomb is interested in differentiating her work with setting from previous uses of "trait-connoting metonymies," or instances of ways "setting becomes absorbed into character" (145), as formed the practical usage of setting in the past. I will go one step further to differentiate this study's work from Wicomb's by using her critical writing's re-definition of setting to reexamine connections between characters and setting in terms of transformation and subversion, strategies shared with the performative act of passing.

A consideration of the characters' experience of inhabiting settings forms the initial entry point to this discussion. That awareness of embodiment within a designated location can be entitled *proprioceptivity*. As it is presented by Wicomb, the term proprioceptivity is "[d]istinguishable from identity that depends on the image, in that proprioceptivity is bound up with the body's sensation of occupying a point in space, and the terms under which it does so" (152). Wicomb's somewhat

vague reference to "the terms" by which a body relates to space I take to mean the particular location's socio-political climate which allows more or less freedom to different individuals. Working through the genealogy of Wicomb's use of proprioceptivity takes the reader on a journey back to Mieke Bal[4] who links the concept to setting. According to Bal, setting accomplishes the "concretization and subjectification of space into place" (Wicomb, "Setting" 152). According to Wicomb, Bal takes her inspiration from Kaja Silverman[5] who sees proprioceptivity as "the apprehension of the subject of his/her ownness" ("Setting" 152). Bal "borrows" from Silverman the idea that a proprioceptive encounter with space/place has to do with both a physical and mental notion of "hereness" and "ownness" (Wicomb, "Setting" 152). For the purposes of this study, I use the term proprioceptivity to describe a kind of being authentically at home within the physical body within a given location. Thus I will look for a sense of being one's own self located in a specific place as experienced by the characters of the two novels.

I will proceed from Wicomb's comments on proprioceptivity and settings[6] to reflect on the implications for the characters themselves as they show themselves to have varying levels of grounded, embodied experiences of place. Before moving forward to consider specific textual examples from *Playing in the Light* and *Passing*, it is critical to establish what exactly we are searching for in terms of "grounded" and "embodied" experiences of place within the two texts. The search, then, must be for textual examples that connect location to the body of the character, giving evidence of setting's "real" existence for the characters.

As discussed above, setting makes a critical contribution to Wicomb's and Larsen's work; thus it would be fruitful to look at the varieties of settings these authors use including, and beyond, the primary location of the home. Wicomb explicitly states her intention to explore two aspects of setting when she states, "for the postcolonial writer it is the transformative effect of intertextuality that is of significance" (146). Those two aspects embedded in this quote, we can assume, are

transformation and intertextuality. We can take this to indicate that her work with settings should be read as examples of intertextuality. But where does that lead us in terms of transformation? When Wicomb comments that the intertexts of place "offer revised meanings" (146), she appears to be stating that the common settings found in her novel – home, street, office – are revised, transformed, and, as I will argue, subverted. The question follows, does Larsen do the same thing? If not, what does she do?

The settings that we find transformed and subverted in *Playing in the Light* include Marion's childhood home, her current flat, her office, and the parking lot next to the office. More settings such as the library and Brenda's family's home are also subverted and are worthy of study, but for the sake of conciseness I will limit my discussion to the above named locations. The setting of Marion's current flat serves to highlight themes of class aspiration, safety, and lack of homeliness. When we first meet Marion, she is on the balcony of her house – a liminal space to which she returns again and again. It is referenced as "the space both inside and outside where she spends much of her time at home" (1). This reference is placed in the first sentence of the novel, alerting the reader to Marion's relation to her home. She actually prefers to be on the balcony, a pseudo-interior/pseudo-exterior space that is added on to the exterior of the flat. The introduction to the flat initiates the narrative's preoccupation with security. We get the feeling from the narrator that safety is of primary importance to Marion and that it is not necessarily to be found in the home's physical confines or walls.

Marion's apartment is also called "the fulfillment of an adolescent dream" (2). She decorates her home from suggestions out of magazines and then feels affirmation and class affiliation when she opens a magazine and sees her same furnishings. Her bed is a "house unto itself" where she shuts herself off from the world in a "retreat" (2) at the end of the day. She also connects the bed to what a "fairy princess" (2) would have, thus connecting herself to Western mythology. It is a

"marker of her success" and she "deserves" (2) it. However, she has lately come to feel that the bed "has turned against her" and she frequently finds herself tangled in the "draped muslin" (2). As we can see, the setting of home draws further and further away from its stereotypical connotations, becoming a place of subverted expectations where home is not safe, not comforting, not a refuge at the end of the working day, but instead, a location with agency to turn against its inhabitant.

The setting of the parking lot adjacent to the offices of Marion's business MCTravel, continues the motif of the novel's subversive settings through its exploration of the theme of safety. In an incident near the beginning of the narrative, Marion arrives at the car park expecting to see its usual attendant, but instead "two ragged men rush towards her, vying for her attention" (27). She gloomily takes this as a sign that the regular attendant "Piet Skiet who has minded this parking lot for more than a year, is not there; no doubt he has been bumped off by these two unsavoury characters" (27). As we saw with Marion's flat, the assumption is that one's person and one's property are always in danger. Marion's mind immediately jumps to the assumption that some crime has been committed against Piet and is doubtless in the process of being enacted upon her. Expectations are constantly being subverted in this scene continuing with the fact that we learn from Marion that she owns the parking lot. Marion expects to be able to park her car in the lot each day at no cost and with no trouble. But her expectation has no impact on the two men who approach her: "See, Madam, the short one says, I'll look after the car for you, you can't just leave a Merc like that here among the city thieves" (27). His position, then, is that what he is doing is not thievery, but a service to protect her from real thieves. It is also interesting to note that the men's approach is indicated in theatrical terms as "they guide her into the space with melodramatic gestures" (27). Theatricality is highlighted throughout this description – the men are performing, but they are also performing poorly as they over-act their parts. Because they do not play their parts subtly, they cause Marion to be even more mistrustful, to suspect that they are imposters. As she leaves her car

and crosses the street to her office, Marion reacts with internal judgments on the men thinking "[y]ou can't go anywhere nowadays without a flock of unsavoury people crowding around you making demands, trying to make you feel guilty for being white and hardworking, earning your living" (28). Of course what Marion can't see is the industry and ingenuity with which those people are also striving to earn a living by any means available to them. Marion experiences a moment of introspection when she moves from entertaining her conservative opinions into an attempt to differentiate herself from the conservative Nationalist Party, claiming that "[e]ven though she voted for the Nationalists, she knew deep down that those policies were not viable" (28). She can apparently hear in her internal judgments an approaching untenable position and then backs away with a rationalization. Thus we have the subversion of the setting of the car park – a place where the car is not safe. It is a place where the service paid for is not so much the parking of the car, but the service of having the car watched at an extra cost. In other words, extra pay is required for what is an assumed service. Once the owners walk away, they have no control over what may happen to their property and no recourse should something happen as they declined the service to begin with. The power is in the hands of the loiterers, not the woman driving the Mercedes.

The space of the office perpetuates the themes of safety and power and adds to them the subversion of gender roles while expanding the problem of a sense of lacking a home. We are introduced to the space of the office when Marion is contacted on her cellphone by "armed response" (13), the security company that monitors the office. In an interesting subversion of the sense of safety one might expect to be invoked by the rapid response of a security company, when Marion answers the phone "a sinister voice assures her that they were on their way to investigate, guns at the ready" (13). This description gives the impression not so much of security but more of armed warfare. Although it turns out that the only evidence of an attempted break in is a broken window, Marion's response is violent. She hopes armed response: "[s]hot them down like flies,

Marion hopes, then revises the thought – she wouldn't like to trip over dead bodies" (15). Her revised thought, then, does not amend the bloodthirsty nature of her response, but instead considers her own convenience and expresses her desire to be shielded from the violent retributive act she wishes occurred in retaliation for the attempted breach of her security.

The challenge to her position of power as owner of the business also fuels her anger. Marion makes very clear for herself and her employees that she is the boss. She insists on her "prerogative: determining where things go" (16) in the office, but she does allow her employees the small freedom to arrange their own desks (with a few minor restrictions). The office is "her little kingdom" (16). Even the smallest of disruptions, such as rearranging the shelves without her permission, bothers her and illustrates her need for control. Even though old patriarchal power structures are challenged by her position as female owner and operator of a successful travel business, there seems to be a strange ambivalence created by the text's author. Specifically, I am referring to two moments in the text when we find Marion sitting in her employee's chair instead of her own. After a bad day, she feels she "cannot face going home; she goes to the office and sits in Boetie's chair in the kitchen with her head in her hands" (57). She sits in the male seat of power in the office's kitchen, a room she has attempted to imbue with a homey feel, instead of going to her own home at the end of the day. The office stops being a place of work and becomes a home for Marion, one that she forces on her employees as well. Marion loves Mondays – as a child she was glad to leave home and the "silence" and "bickering" (25) she found there. She makes the office homey (in her mind) so that, she reasons, her employees will be happier. Then in a later scene, after the trip that has revealed her family's secret, Marion sits in the office's kitchen with her employees as they talk and joke. She finds herself questioning why they would gather there despite the fact that she has carefully created this setting for them. She is not herself. She sits in Boetie's chair again, but this time she is "light and empty as a ghost" (105). She has been emptied of her ideas of self, of her

personal history. One final subversion of the office space happens after the introduction of the character Vumile, a man whose BMW Marion hits accidentally. Marion leaves a card on the windshield of his car so that he can find her place of business. When Vumile enters the office he "asks Boetie if he is Mr. Campbell" (107). Vumile's assumption upon walking into the travel agency is that surely it is owned by a man.

As we have just seen, the search for evidence of transformations and of subversions of setting in *Playing in the Light* is particularly fruitful in the novel's depictions of the settings of Marion's flat, her office's parking lot, and the office itself. For example, these settings offer multiple subversions of the characters' proprioceptive experience. The question remains, can we locate confluences in the use of setting as we turn from Wicomb to focus on Larsen's use of setting? As aspects of the performative act of passing, both transformation and subversion in depictions of setting help to reinforce the theatricality embedded in the text of *Passing*. As *Playing in the Light* simultaneously transforms and subverts expectations of safety, home, and gender through setting, *Passing* focuses on subversions of perceptions of ease of movement, encouraging further discussions of the possibilities of permanently fixing identity versus maintaining fluid identities.

Thadious M. Davis' 1997 introduction to the Penguin edition of *Passing* takes up some of the issues of space and place within Larsen's text in terms of the act of racial passing that forms the plot of this narrative. Davis defines passing as "the movement of a person who is legally or socially designated black into a white racial category or white social identity" (viii). This definition forefronts the issue of movement, one that will receive attention in this study. Davis contextualizes this movement as a response to *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Thus the action is an outgrowth of the country's legislative process. The same can be argued about South African apartheid legislations. Davis notes that, in reference to American blacks of the time, "[w]hen passing as white, these individuals merely relocated themselves to a space not demarcated as black" (viii). Davis also notes that the "aftermath

of *Plessy*" (viii) was a climate of more polarized "haves" and "have nots" determined by racial factors. Davis thus determines that the act of passing served those who performed it "to escape containment" (viii), though it is just this assumption of escape or freedom that I hope to complicate by my analysis of the ways that the two authors deploy settings in their novels.

Sweeping across the United States between New York and Chicago, while simultaneously moving forward and backward in time, Larsen's novel might give the impression of tremendous movement. Clare Kendry's fearless boundary crossing exemplified by her sustained acts of racial passing also implies movement. As Davis notes, Clare considers passing to be "a movement in gesture as well as space: a psychological, social, cultural movement" (ix). Deeper engagement with the text, particularly in analyses of setting, complicates these notions of movement by unveiling the ways the text also indicates containment. Settings in *Passing* center around the home, hotels, and the street. With the exception of the Negro Welfare League dance, the majority of the settings in the novel fall into these three categories of location and almost exclusively subvert any possibility of movement.

Settings within homes include the Redmond and Freeland homes, private residences that do not give the impression of being either private or homey. The few private moments that we see in the Redmond home never feature relaxation from acts of passing. Distance caused by Irene's ceaseless performance of social passing compromises any potential for intimate exchanges with her husband and her friends. What might be considered public moments, moments in which social visits are paid to the Redmond home change the home environment into a place for entertaining and socializing. The Freeland apartment, the only other home that we see in the novel, houses only the social engagement that culminates in the confrontation between Bellew and Clare at the end of the narrative. Expectations for privacy are complicated when this private residence is converted to a public venue in which a public confrontation occurs, one which should have been a private

discussion between Clare and her husband. Homes, then, in this novel, are fixed in depictions of lack, specifically the lack of a sense of home similar to that characterized by *Playing in the Light*.

Hotel settings in the novel include scenes at the fictional Drayton and Morgan. Although hotels might represent for readers the possibility of travel, of physical movement, in *Passing* these locations are settings that require characters to commit to fixed identities. This means that the settings demand performance from the characters. The first example is the setting of the Drayton Hotel where Irene escapes the heat of a Chicago summer day. The hotel offers her that retreat in its rooftop restaurant, but it also requires her performance of a white identity. Tension occurs when her identity is unveiled as an act of passing by the arrival of her childhood friend Clare, and its subsequent restoration as Clare's performance cements her own. What Irene does not realize in that moment is how her act of passing, witnessed by Clare, impresses upon Clare her sanction of the act, legitimizing Clare's act by her own participation in a similar performance. In the next hotel scene at the Morgan where Clare lives temporarily, the hotel becomes the venue in which Clare illicits a performance from her friends Irene and Gertrude. The tea scene, discussed in Chapter I, requires Irene and Gertrude to perform their identities so that Clare's true identity will remain hidden from Bellew. Thus, as we can see, the anticipation of movement that attaches to the figure of a hotel is subverted and moves uneasily back and forth between allowing and requiring identity performances from the characters.

Those brief scenes in *Passing* that occur on the street, first in Chicago and then in Manhattan, offer evidence of another location that implies movement but is subverted by similar tensions to those discussed above. The first scene offers unbearable physical challenges in the form of blazing summer heat which could not be borne, but had to be escaped. The escape entails, as we learn, an act of racial passing on the part of Irene as she is transported to the Drayton Hotel. The second street scene forces Irene to select her racial identity as she encounters Bellew. She holds her black

friend's arm and refuses to acknowledge Bellew who greets her and recognizes her as his wife's white friend. In her refusal to reenact the identity she previously performed for Bellew, she thereby declares to him her identity as a black woman.

As we can see from the preceding textual samples, settings in Larsen's fiction vacillate between offering options for movement and requiring fixed identity performances. Similar setting vacillations appear in Wicomb's fiction as signaled by her interest in proprioceptivity discussed in the opening portions of this chapter. Proprioceptivity creates tensions of movement for her characters, and, in her critical work, problematizes her confessed dis-ease with what she perceives as Homi Bhabha's location of the postcolonial subject in "inbetween" spaces (Wicomb, "Setting" 153). Although it is not the project of this study to treat the characters as representations of postcoloniality, a brief segue into Wicomb's comments on Homi Bhabha can lead to productive conclusions for this study of settings. Wicomb cites an excerpt from Bhabha's examination of Nadine Gordimer's work *My Son's Story*, a sample of which will help us understand Wicomb's placement of characters and experience within settings. In Wicomb's 1998 essay "Shame and Identity: The Case of the Coloured in South Africa," she disagrees with how Bhabha characterizes hybrid races (she considers South African coloureds to be one such hybrid race) as inhabiting an in-between state. Specifically, she cites his phrase pointing to "a subject that inhabits the rim of an inbetween reality" ("Shame" 101). She feels that this imposed liminality never offers hybrid subjects ownership of a legitimate social or cultural position – they can only remain in between two legitimate positions. They are in effect without a home. I agree, to a certain extent, with her position, because it seems that in order to have an experience of place, the characters must first land in a location that is concrete, if not legitimate, than a state of liminality which, according to Bhabha, is a state of being always between two identities. But Wicomb's apparent interest in fixing characters within stable locations, and her desire to posit an originary home appears to me to be disjunctive

with the textual examples from her work in *Playing in the Light* that we have considered in this chapter. That story is a narrative that resists closure, and the characters themselves appear to struggle with issues of fixity both in terms of place and of their identity. The text in fact repeatedly implies at least the continuous crossing of the main character, Marion – crossings of states of awareness, crossings of continents, crossings of color lines – rather than a static location in a home whether it be a liminal space or not. As we have also seen, similar examples of movement occur in Larsen's work which also investigates the tension between fixity and flow without ever coming to rest in a static position.

By clarifying the details of Wicomb's critical project on setting as it explores the position of the postcolonial author, we better position this project to explore the application of her ideas to her own work of fiction and that of others. She claims that the author's "envelope of space" links to the "house of fiction," a "setting…which is literally foundational, which is to say that it can be taken for granted" ("Setting" 153). It is here that she finds connection to Bhabha's "unhomeliness" and a "concomitant creativity" (Wicomb, "Setting" 153) that she finds there. If she does indeed posit the possibility of creating a sense of the "homeliness of that constructed space" ("Setting" 153), one might wonder what Wicomb is trying to say by showing us, in her fiction, such fluidity in direct opposition to what she proposes in her critical work? Specifically, Wicomb (and Larsen, too) shows the flexibility and fragility of the settings, particularly settings of home, and the characters' experiences of this space – experiences which are always shifting, rarely fixed.

It is difficult to avoid designating home as the primary setting in both Wicomb's and Larsen's texts. Neither texts are examples of domestic fiction, defined by Nancy Armstrong in her work *Desire and Domestic Fiction: A Political History of the Novel* as a particularly 19th century response to social and cultural concerns of the day (28). These two novels do, however, unquestionably demonstrate female novelists' interrogation of domestic space. Wicomb's critical work, mentioned

above, also positions us for considerations of this domestic setting when she invokes the famous Henry James metaphor of the "house of fiction" ("Setting" 153), also deployed by Bhabha in *The Location of Culture*. Questions of correspondences and disjunctions between Wicomb's idea of "homeliness" and Bhabha's "unhomeliness" ("Setting" 153) merit brief consideration. If Bhabha proposes that "house" offers the possibility of exploring "ambivalences and ambiguities" as well as the possibility "to affirm a profound desire for social solidarity" (27), it seems to connect more than it diverges from Wicomb's project. Wicomb appears to want to posit the location of a similar place of creativity in the writer's space; she finds that "constructed space" has a "homeliness" about it that "allows fictional characters to act and interact in the context of a shared history and a common identity" ("Setting" 153). Unfortunately, I use settings to argue that characters in both Wicomb's and Larsen's fiction more often than not find themselves with conflicted feelings about home, or even without a home entirely, whether that home be in actuality a representation of an emotional haven or a sense of social belonging. I hope that Wicomb does not intend to posit that characters actually possess, instead, a home within the work of fiction. It seems a bit of a sentimental project to want to house these characters within the covers of a book. In fact, it seems that such a project aims to fix the characters in a location in a way that undermines the depictions of fluidity seeking to become actualized in the pages of the novel. Ultimately, we will see that only the ambiguous, open ending of her novel indicates that she is not attempting to come to any fixed conclusion, that she wants the dialogue of continuous movement to continue.

Larsen and Wicomb, although they share some intriguing similarities, cannot be argued to be actively approaching their works in precisely the same way. As we have noted, Wicomb's intentions can be deduced from her critical works. We cannot, however, make similar assumptions in terms of Larsen's work due to the absence of her critical perspective and her minimal non-fiction. What we can do, however, is examine the functions of setting and then remark on confluences or disjunctions

with Wicomb's work regarding the main aspects of connection being issues of fixity and flow. We will return to these characteristics in conjunction with components of the theatrical context.

CHAPTER III: THE THEATRICAL CONTEXT

For a performance to take place, there must be a performer and a place where the performance occurs. To these elements, examined in Chapters I and II, is added the third element, the audience. If we posit that each act of passing in Wicomb's *Playing in the Light* and Larsen's *Passing* is performative, that it is a theatrical event, it is imperative that we then establish the audience and the physical context of the theatre space in which the acts take place. Rather than give primary consideration to the socio-economic conditions that shape the context of these acts, I will instead focus on the audience and the theatre spaces created by the physical settings of the novels. Taking into account the nature of proprioceptivity as discussed in Chapter II, we find that the characters of these novels exhibit an awareness of their physical presence in space, thus transforming that space into place. Just as the black box theatre space becomes a place with the performance of the actors, the settings in the novels also become "real" theatre spaces in which the characters perform their chosen identity.

In order for a character to perform an identity, there must be an audience to observe the act. In these novels the role of the audience member is mutable; it shifts from the reader, to the other characters, and even moves to the performers themselves as they step back and observe themselves in the process of performing. The reader is the most obvious audience member for the performance of the characters in the two novels. But the reader is the most passive of the three possible audiences as the reader's presence obviously can never register on the performer in the text. As a result, performers in the text can never sense the impact of their actions on the reading audience and adapt their performance as they would for a stage audience. More active audience/performer relationships are found between the performers and other characters and also surprisingly within the performers themselves. Other characters watch the performances delivered by those characters who decide to pass from positions of differing levels of awareness of what they

are actually observing. In other words, there are characters who are aware that the person next to them is performing, and there are characters who have no inkling that a performance is taking place.

Those characters who operate with awareness of what they see are complicit in the performance in two ways: they either become participants themselves, or agree to be audience members, or vacillate between the two positions. Irene, in *Passing,* is a good example of a character who is aware of the performance of her friend Clare. Irene functions both as a scene partner and a discerning audience member. Irene's awareness of Clare's performance draws her into complicity as she finds herself compelled to perform a supporting role in order to avoid compromising Clare's performance for her husband, Bellew. Irene also watches Clare with an evaluative eye for the nuances of her performance, and thus enacts the role of the audience member to Clare's theatrics.

John, Helen's husband in *Playing in the Light,* performs a similar function to that of Irene; he is both complicit in the performance and an observer as well. His passing begins as the result of a case of mistaken identity when "in ignorance, not knowing that the job of traffic cop was reserved for whites" (127) he applied for the job, and the superintendent "heard with nostalgia the sunburnt young man's rough, rolling r's as the language of a white farmer" (127). Thus John is "[c]aught accidentally in a beam of light" (127), but it is Helen who pushed him to continue passing in order to capitalize on what he characterizes a "matter of opportunity" (157). Like Irene serves Clare, John is an example of a supporting character who is required to perform so that Helen's performance is not compromised. She instructs him and monitors his performance, never satisfied with what he does or says. As much as she watches him, the observer's gaze moves both ways as John also acts reciprocally as audience to Helen's passing, developing his own opinion of the act and its repercussions. He wishes he never told Helen about being mistaken for white because he thinks that "set her alight with ambition to turn white" (156). He comes to feel that the constant striving ultimately can never lead to the desired fixed white identity.

> Vigilance is everything; to achieve whiteness is to keep on your toes. Which, John reasons, indicates that they cannot achieve it after all; being white in the world is surely about being at ease, since the world belongs to you. But they, it would seem, cannot progress beyond vigilance, in other words, beyond play-whites, which as far as he can see has bugger-all to do with playing. Only once, with a gleeful, spiteful vision of her destruction – the demise of her pancake make-up like the cracking of mud into geometric patterns in the sun, the buckling of knees, the crumpled heap – does he think of saying this. (152)

But John decides to keep his revelation to himself, "for the sake of sparing the child [Marion], of giving her the ease of whiteness" (152) he says, even as he watches Helen's performance crumble.

In *Playing in the Light* and *Passing,* the performers occasionally find themselves split between acting and observing their own actions. Helen's moments of self-scrutiny are rarer than those of Irene. Her few moments of self-reflection center around her encounters with Councillor Carter, but these moments of introspection are short-lived as she focuses on reinventing herself: "[s]he may have been defiled, but she'd also been obliterated" (144). In Helen's mind, her old identity entirely ceases to be, and the ends justify the means, so to speak. She justifies her actions with the language of the church, assuring herself that her actions "could not be offensive to God who exalted the poor" (145). Not long after she receives her affidavit stating her fictional white heritage, when Father Gilbert chooses her for "the Maundy Thursday midnight ceremony of humbly washing the feet of his parishioners, as Christ had washed those of his disciples" (160), Helen is convinced that her transformation is finally complete. With this ceremony "[t]he last trace of her sins would be washed away, and she would finally be white as driven snow" (160). Helen's position on her own actions is surprisingly less critical than Irene's, who considers her actions in the context of a racialized society. Whereas Helen's thoughts and behavior demonstrate her internalization of the

stigma ascribed to coloured identity by apartheid and cause her to strive to lose her previous identity, Irene feels a responsibility to her race. Irene is able to gaze at her own actions with a bit more objectivity than does Helen. Her moments of self-reflection tend to come during periods of introspection or in moments of crisis when her emotions threaten to betray her true feelings to those who are watching. In a conversation with Hugh Wentworth about Clare, Irene speaks of how she "went on with a little laugh that didn't, she was sure, sound the least bit forced" (94-5). We can see from her comments that she actively evaluates and monitors her performance in order to hide her feelings and intentions. Perhaps the most telling moment of self-examination while performing occurs early in *Passing* during a scene in which Irene passes at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago. As happened with John, Irene's passing initially occurs accidentally when a taxi driver assumes she is white and drives her to the hotel. The opportunity to pass is facilitated by the taxi driver. Irene does not actively decide to pass, but neither does she reject it. She capitalizes on an opportunity in much the same way as do John and Helen. In this particular scene Irene enjoys a respite from the summer heat in the hotel's restaurant when suddenly "by some sixth sense she was acutely aware that someone was watching her" (15). At first she doesn't object, and thinks "Oh well, let her look" (16), but after bearing the extensive scrutiny for several minutes "gradually there rose in Irene a small inner disturbance, odious and hatefully familiar. She laughed softly, but her eyes flashed. Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (16). Revealed in this moment is the character's awareness of her own performance and the potential impact of the audience's gaze to accept it or to see through her performance to the actor behind the performance of the role.

Audience members in the two novels are not always aware that they are witnessing performances. The two novels also give two particularly effective examples of characters with little or no awareness of the act taking place before them; these characters are Bellew in *Passing* and

Marion in *Playing in the Light*. Of the two, Clare's husband Bellew is the most obvious example of a character who does not know that his wife is black and is passing as white. In fact, it is his ignorance of her performance that allows for the major conflict of the novel – the ambiguous moment in which Bellew confronts Clare, and she jumps/falls/is pushed through a window to her death. He is, therefore, an unwilling audience member in that he doesn't even realize that he is one. Many of the other characters act in complicity with Clare's performance to deceive Bellew; nothing is required of him other than that he exist in ignorance.

Something quite different happens in *Playing in the Light* when Helen and John conspire to hide their performed identity from their daughter, Marion. Raising her as a white child, Helen and John perform the parts of white parents for their child even though she does not register what she is seeing. Interestingly, Helen monitors Marion's behavior, forcing her to conform to Helen's ideas of correct performance even though Marion doesn't know, at the time, why her behavior is being corrected. Helen wants Marion to be a supporting character but hopes to draw a performance from her without her knowledge. When, as a young child, Marion pretends to be a mermaid, instead of encouraging imaginative play, Helen is critical. The narrator shows Helen's comments to her daughter even while she grudgingly assists Marion: "I'm a mermaid with a fishtail, the little girl sang as she struggled to bandage her legs together…Her mother snorted, even as she helped to wind the cloth into a bound tail. No good being half woman and half fish, half this and half that; you have to be fully one thing or another, otherwise you're lost" (47). Helen's criticism of the hybrid nature of the mermaid inevitably contains traces of her opinions of coloured identity. As we can see, Helen reacts to Marion's performance by telling her that she must choose forever a single identity and not waiver from it. In fact, Helen forces Marion to commit to an identity even while in the midst of the game, by binding her legs and saying "now you're all bound up, you won't be able to move" (47). Such statements are consistent with Helen's project to permanently adopt a white identity. From

her perspective, the implication is that if fluctuations or fluidity in identity were allowed, her fragile new identity would be threatened or dismantled entirely. Not knowing, at the time, why her mother would take such a position, it is only later in life when Marion discovers her parents' secret that she begins to understand Helen's motivations. If Helen desires the fixity of a permanent white identity, she must force her daughter to strive for the same. One summer night when Marion is carried away by her game, imagining herself a mermaid in the moonlight, she takes off her clothes. Helen's horror manifests in her voice as she "spoke quietly, hissing with rage and disgust. What kind of child was she? Where had she come from? How could she behave like a disgusting native, rolling half naked in the grass?" (60). Because of the stigma she internalized from the apartheid government, Helen operates with a specific set of strict guidelines for what she deems appropriate behavior, that is, behavior appropriate to performing a white identity, and she requires the same from her daughter. These stringent guidelines and the ferocity with which she enforces them also demonstrate a deep self-loathing on Helen's part.

Performers and audience members are inextricably tied to the settings of these novels, the places that become theatres in which they perform. Primary settings/performance spaces include both public areas and the private area of the home. There is no place that is not a performance space for characters who are never themselves, but always performing both for themselves or for others. Helen and John's performances occur infrequently in public, but are without respite within the space of the home. At Helen's request, the family puts on rare public performances when she "insisted that they go out as a family, promenade the seafront, eat an ice cream together in public" (147). With their conventional actions, consciously on the part of Helen and John, but unconsciously on the part of Marion, they perform their white identities. Helen monitors Marion's costume and public behavior. Public performances are rare, however, and the majority of the family's performances center around the home. These domestic performances exclude Marion as

performer but include her as audience member. Marion's memories of events in the home that she didn't understand as a child but that she reflects upon as an adult offer the reader glimpses into this home setting turned into theatre. Helen dresses the set carefully according to social conventions she learns in the workplace. The Campbells' livingroom's "fresh arrangement of artificial blooms replaced on Friday evenings by the flower company" must go after Helen listens as "a chic customer spoke of her mother-in-law's vulgarity, her pride in the plastic bouquets" (6). This off-hand remark carries the weight of a mandate for Helen. She is susceptible to outside opinions in her desperation to act her part to perfection. As the chic customer expresses her opinion, Helen "nodded in a flush of embarrassment," a gesture that becomes an expression of her lack of agency and her interiorized self-judgment. She goes home and begins orchestrating the hasty removal of the incriminating set decoration.

> Helen called the company to have them removed; she wanted them out, ruffled doily and all, and did not even hear John's objections. Her head kept nodding like a mechanical toy; she said over and over that it had been a mistake. No she had no complaints about the quality of the service, she said to the saleswoman, and no, she definitely couldn't wait until Friday. And then Helen's voice grew shrill and hysterical as she threatened to put the flowers in the dustbin that instant, so that a coloured chap on an inferior motorcycle arrived within half an hour to take the arrangement of sweetpeas, roses and crisp green ferns away in his delivery box. Only then did she stop nodding. (6)

Helen's physical response is that of a puppet, a marionette with a bobbing head attached to a string, a theatrical device that is controlled by external forces. Her over-reaction to the presence of the flowers once she learns of the possible associations with vulgarity stems from her perception of the fragility of her position as performer. She fears that the wrong prop or set dressing could bring her

entire world crashing. Her fear is so intense that she does not realize how it took only one person's unqualified opinion to shake her confidence. The extent of her fear exposes how the Campbell home came to be transformed into the performance space of Marion's childhood.

Marion's relationship to the Campbell home is complex; she hates the street they lived on when she was a child, "the terraced houses so close to the pavement, where families distinguished themselves from their neighbors by painting their doors in violently clashing colours" (9). Marion would have preferred "a row of houses in uniform whitewash" (9). Although in this excerpt Marion focuses her dislike on her home's exterior, closer analysis shows that her aversion comes from the environment constructed in the home's interior. It is an environment of "secrecy," a home that is "hermetic, so that even the ordinary acquired an air of conspiracy" (60). The conspiracy she senses is the shared performance of the parents for their child. As an adult Marion realizes that "[h]er parents hated each other, but they had connived, conspired against her in the whispering that stopped when she entered a room" (60). The home thus become something other than a refuge, the characteristic that Marion searches for in her flat as an adult but cannot ultimately find. But Marion is not the only one denied refuge in the Campbell home. John's mother rebukes him for not welcoming his siblings to his house in the city. She says, "your house should be the family home away from home," and John "squirmed" (111) at this accusation. He cannot explain to his mother that his house has become a theater space allowing only fellow actors who can carry the chosen plot line depicting the life of a white family. In reality, the home is not a refuge for Helen and John, either. Their performance allows for no intermissions, no break between scenes: "[n]ot even in the privacy of their home, between their own four walls, could they let up, act the fool, laugh at those who'd been duped, or mimic their public selves" (123). Helen and John could never rest from performing. Their energy went to patching the façade of the characters they created until they were no longer sure how they could ever return to their former identities. As far as John was concerned,

for himself and for Helen "the self was already a mended structure; it was a matter of mixing as best you could your own mortar with which to fill in the cracks that kept on appearing" (123). It is not surprising then that Marion grows to adulthood without a clear understanding of what a home might feel and look like. Raised in a theatre, Marion must consult magazines for pictures of how a home might be decorated. Then she instead exercises her decorating skills on her office, the space she prefers to her own flat. Although her employees might acknowledge that "Marion knows how to make a place look homey," this is not an innate skill she possesses from her own experience, but is instead the result of information gathered when "she followed a recent style feature in *Cosmopolitan* to the letter" (35). To some extent Marion mirrors her mother's way of looking to outside sources to dress the set in a manner that might be appropriate for the chosen role. For Helen that role is of a white woman, and for Marion that role is of a business owner.

In Nella Larsen's *Passing* setting also functions as a stage or black box theatre for performances given by its characters. We see Clare's performances primarily in public settings with the exception of the scene in which she invites Irene and Gertrude to tea to meet her husband. On the other hand we see Irene perform in public settings on rare occasions, saving the majority of her acting for the private setting of the home. Clare's performance of passing is so bold and extreme that it follows that she should be viewed in public settings, just as the very covert nature of Irene's version of emotional passing are highlighted in the private settings in which her performances take place.

Clare's performance stretches beyond her physical body to the props that accompany her. A study of the envelope found in the opening scene of the novel reveals it to be more than one of the many objective correlatives for Clare that fill the pages of the novel. This prop, sent from Clare directly to Irene's hands, carries all the connotations of the character who sent it and whom it represents. It is the detail, the prop, like Helen's silk flowers, that cements the performance of

character by adding to the setting of the action. The envelope is described as "[f]urtive, but yet in some peculiar, determined way a little flaunting" (9). These descriptors also relate to Clare's performance throughout the novel. Just as the envelope is mobile, moving between locations, and is described in flamboyant terms, the settings in which we see Clare are overtly, dramatically public – the Drayton and Morgan Hotels in Chicago, Irene's home in New York, the Negro Welfare League dance, and finally at the party in the Freelands' apartment. Her identity is so fluid that she can transport it successfully to every location she enters and perform it successfully. She does not have quite the same fear or self-recrimination as does Helen, nor does she have Helen's ties to a single setting. The only moment in which Clare's interior life is revealed within a specific setting occurs when she is a child, before she begins to pass. Set in her childhood home in Chicago, the scene unfolds between Clare and her drunken father as described and therefore mediated by Irene. The authority of Irene's narration may be questioned, however, due to the qualification inherent in the words "Irene Redfield seemed to see" (9), which introduce the scene she prepares to describe. Was Irene actually present that day, or was this her rendition of an anecdote previously confided by Clare? The room is "shabby" and the sofa on which Clare sits sewing is "ragged" (9). Irene describes the scene for the reader, saying that the child (not named as Clare) "had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthest corner of the sofa" (9), and it is this self-marginalizing placement that serves as a clue to the audience that the child is disturbed by her father's behavior. This speculative remembrance is the closest Irene comes to understanding Clare's emotional life as she watches it unfold in this private setting. In the public settings Clare's performance remains inscrutable to Irene.

Surprisingly, Irene can also be seen in terms of the envelope discussed above. That object alerts the reader to the performative nature of the act of passing. Irene exhibits the same dichotomy in appearance as does the envelope with its fluctuation between hiding and flaunting. In the setting

of the rooftop restaurant of the Drayton Hotel, Irene is caught between the performance impulses to be covert and to be overt. She wants to avoid the gaze of the other woman (yet to be revealed as Clare), and yet Irene also wants to stare her down. Although she is depicted as passing in three public locations (the Drayton Hotel, Clare's room at the Morgan, and on the street in New York), the majority of the kind of Irene's performances are a kind of social passing, which happens primarily in the setting of her own home. The Redmond home forms the setting for the performance of the relationship between Irene and Brian, which changes once Clare enters their lives. Irene comes to suspect that Brian and Clare are having an affair, and the aftermath of this suspicion as it unfolds through Irene's interior monologue gives clues as to the function of the domestic setting in terms of her performances.

Sitting alone in her bedroom just moments after her suspicions about the affair materialize, Irene remembers she must go downstairs and begin entertaining a group of guests at a tea party in her home. But first Irene must gather the remnants of her performed identity before stepping onto the stage to act the part of the hostess for the guests in her home.

> When she was sure that she had done crying, she wiped away the warm remaining tears and got up. After bathing her swollen face in cold, refreshing water and carefully applying a stinging splash of toilet water, she went back to the mirror and regarded herself gravely. Satisfied that there lingered no betraying evidence of weeping, she dusted a little powder on her dark-white face and again examined it carefully, and with a kind of ridiculing contempt. (90)

First she hides the evidence of her emotional life, then she reconstructs her mask prior to making her entrance on the stage. She is then positioned to perform her act of social passing. Once she is onstage, she is able to split her consciousness so that she can perform her duties as a hostess while her mind is preoccupied with the dilemma at hand – how to maintain the stable home she had

constructed. The scene unfolds in a Prufrockian manner, with Irene drifting among her guests where she "[m]ade repetitions of her smile. Answered questions. Manufactured conversation" (91). She has the same sensation that Eliot's Prufrock experiences of the repetition of the minutiae of social conventions, the stretching of a moment into eternity, the portent that it may continue on forever. Irene experiences a moment of introspection in which she thinks "I feel like the oldest person in the world with the longest stretch of life before me" (91) and in the next moment feels reassured by that remaining stretch of time which she will use for future ruminations on her marriage. She decides that "she mustn't think yet. Time enough for that after. All the time in the world" (91). But with her consciousness thus split, her performance falters and her audience, the guests at the tea party, register that change. Felise Freeland tells Irene, "You look like the second gravedigger," which is the only "hint" (92) Irene needs to refocus her energy on her performance.

Irene's desire for fixity in both her life and her identity corresponds closely to Helen's similar desire. Irene needs her family to remain forever moored to their domestic setting in their New York home, and she feels deeply troubled by her husband Brian's desire to move to Brazil. It is first through the narrator that we learn of this conflict between husband and wife; we are told that "[i]t was as if she had admitted to herself that against that easy surface of her husband's concordance with her wishes, which had, since the war had given him back to her physically unimpaired, covered an increasing inclination to tear himself and his possessions loose from their proper setting" (63-4). What is of particular note in this excerpt is the delineation of the existence of "proper" settings and those that can be assumed to be improper, and Irene's position as the arbiter of this judgment. She is the silent worker for the status quo, never directly stating her needs, but always working to "subvert" (64) any action that could destabilize her home setting. Irene's desire for control extends even to the weather which she wished would be similarly contained and circumspect. She admits that "[s]he didn't like it to be warm and springy when it should have been cold and crisp, or grey and

cloudy as if snow was about to fall. The weather, like people, ought to enter into the spirit of the season" (85). With these two examples we as readers can observe with skepticism the impossible desire for fixity over elements that will never be controlled. It is this uncontrollable dynamic that is reminiscent of live theatre in which the various elements of performer, audience, and setting are put into play. Participants in performances are never ultimately in complete control of the outcome; they are more likely to be at the mercy of the unfolding dynamic relationships between the theatrical elements of performers, audience, and setting. Perhaps Irene and Helen truly wish to be more like directors than actors, roles that would give them the illusion of control over all performance elements.

Discussion of the elements of audience and setting as they combine with the theatrical act of passing opens the path to consideration of how to focus the gaze on the functions of the various theatrical elements. What binds and contains these actions in a unified whole? Similar to the function of the proscenium arch in the theatre, in these novels thresholds such as doors and windows provide frames for the settings. They train the eye of the reader and of other audience members on the scene unfolding in concurrent settings. Most importantly, as we will see, threshold spaces draw focus onto the particular details of the performances of passing taking place.

CHAPTER IV: THRESHOLDS AND PERFORMANCE SPACES

Doors and windows are overdetermined places in the novels *Playing in the Light* and *Passing*. As settings in the novels, these threshold spaces perform multiple functions in critical capacities that are both symbolic and real. In their symbolic function, doors and, particularly, windows create various manifestations of opportunity. On the other hand, in their capacity as real agents within the narratives, these thresholds are settings with real influence over the characters and their performances. There are, however, key differences in the strategic deployment of these settings in the two texts. The influence occurs as the thresholds focus the gaze of the audience on the performers, and as they provide settings for the theatrical performances of passing.

Thresholds are deployed as symbols in two ways in *Playing in the Light*. Doors and windows cease to be mere architectural aspects, and become, in two phases, symbolic of theatrical spaces and then psychological phenomena. The first phase is the deployment of thresholds as symbols of the presence of an audience. The presence of an audience results in the transformation of places into theater space in which the performative act may occur. The second phase occurs when the thresholds begin to infiltrate the subconscious of the characters, influencing their behaviors and then forming the background of thoughts and dreams.

The first phase of the move into the symbolic order centers around Helen's experiences primarily, and John's secondarily. Helen is a devoted member of the Anglican Church, a church she adopts due to her perception of its higher social status over that of the Moravian Mission Church, as well as for the associated opportunity to be closer to Councillor Carter who holds the power to confer the affidavit she seeks. Helen talks herself into religious fervor, and comes to appreciate the teachings of Father Gilbert, a church leader who, she trusts, allows "plenty of room for inventing a new self" (141). She particularly appreciates Father Gilbert's idea of "opportunity as a window through which, with minimum effort, you could manoeuvre the body" (141). In fact, it is a window,

or rather the sunlight through the stained glass window at St Luke's that leads her "like a star directly to the pew opposite the Carters" (141). Helen thus takes the first steps towards her goal of ingratiating herself with Councillor Carter. "[I]n the urgency of having to act," Helen adapts Father Gilbert's window metaphor to become "the image of a door: opportunity as a threshold over which you stepped lightly" (142). According to her husband John, stepping lightly over boundaries is not at all possible in the racially charged climate in which they live. John's thoughts are mediated by the narrator in the following comment: "[i]t is not a matter of donning whiteness as you trip daintily out of the house, and then on your return, as you lock the doors, slumping back into your old ways – hotnos ways, as they have taken to saying" (151). John admits what Helen denies – that the freedom Helen believed she was achieving through her performance was only the opportunity to live by another set of restrictions. As we will see in depth in Chapter V, behavior inside the domestic space is forever altered by the performative act of passing.

The second phase of the move into the symbolic order, the creation of a psychological symbol, occurs predominantly in Marion's experiences of thresholds. The first instance of this movement, also the first indicator that thresholds adopt deeper meanings for the characters, occurs early in the novel in Marion's dreams. The particular dream described proves to be a recurring one, and Marion decides "the focus is clearly on doors" (31). In her dream, Marion approaches and then enters a "house in a green valley" that "seems to pulsate with light" (31). In this recurring dream, Marion notices in later iterations that the doors and windows are shut and the woodwork is painted black (connecting to her childhood visit to John's family's farm). She climbs the ladder to the loft while her mother pleads with her not to do so. She opens the loft door letting in the light and sees an old woman, a basin on her lap illuminated by the light. She is surrounded by peaches. Marion is not invited in so she descends the ladder leaving the woman who "disappears slowly in bands of darkness" (31). The woman in the dream connects in Marion's mind to Tokkie who used to come

to the house in Observatory once a week. The house itself connects to John's family's home remembered from a childhood visit she and her father paid. In this dream Marion's subconscious appears to be preoccupied with issues of home. In this context, light is a metaphor for understanding or insight and is controlled by the threshold spaces of doors and windows.

Although the symbolic functioning of threshold spaces in both of these novels is illuminating, of more profound significance is the real force these spaces actively exert on the behavior of the characters in *Playing in the Light* in contrast to the threshold's more passive, facilitative role in *Passing*. The settings of thresholds, like the other settings we've seen in the novels, become real entities through the characters' proprioceptive experience of them. Thus the threshold settings have the power to put forth palpable influence on the characters' actions. In *Playing in the Light* they do this by focusing the gaze of the audience on the performance space, thereby putting pressure on the performers to maintain their performance. The threshold sites thus contain the potential for viewing both by and of the characters. In *Passing*, on the other hand, threshold settings become sites containing the potential for action.

Turning first to *Playing in the Light*, we find that the window's power to focus the gaze induces the characters' anxiety over the possible discovery of their acts of passing. Will they be seen by a passerby on the street who will then betray them to the authorities? The space of the window thus becomes a threatening presence for the characters, a space that oscillates between being a locus of perception and of deception. This threat of perception frequently causes the characters to cover the windows to avoid the potential gaze of the Other on the street and thereby, ironically, shield their performances from view. Consequently, the very performance that is intended for an audience becomes hidden from sight. For example, John faces a moment soon after his decision to pass when he uses the space of the window to hide and avoid detection. In this particular scene, John and Marion are on the train returning from a visit to John's mother in the country. This is, in fact,

the very visit that supplies the memories of the black frames on doors and windows which reappear in Marion's recurring dreams. In this scene, John's mother arranges for John's younger brother Paul to meet them as they pass through the station in Mossel Bay. But as the train pulls into the station, John is filled with the fear that his brother might prove to be "a railway constable, patrolling the coloured platform" (115) in which case a meeting could jeopardize John's performed identity, calling attention, in the eyes of watching strangers, to his connections with a coloured man. John is torn by his decision, feels the train's coal and steam as "squeezing hands around his throat" (115). At the last moment, "John pulled down the blind and switched off the light" (115) and hid from his brother. With this gesture of rejection, he selects his new role over his family; he surrenders to his fear that his position is so fragile that any incident might bring the performance to an end.

The curtains on the windows in the Campbells' house in Observatory were likewise always drawn signaling a desire to avoid the gaze of neighbors and passersby on the street. Covered windows operate as masks in much the same way as costumes and makeup do. Not all houses in the novel exhibit this masking behavior. For example, John's sister Elsie's house stands in contrast to the Campbell house in this respect. Elsie married for love a man named Fourie, a teacher who was considered to be quite successful. He had dark skin, a fact that infuriated Helen: "Elsie knew how things were and she deliberately chose to make an impossible marriage" (168). It is impossible in Helen's eyes only. Elsie had nothing to hide, no role to perform other than the one given her by her family – to be "the one who kept the family together here in town" (167-8). Standing in contrast to John who divides the family, Elsie unifies it to the best of her ability. Against John's need to hide, Elsie is open. Her openness is reflected in the windows of her "sitting room where the late light now simmers, unhindered by lace curtains" (172). If we position curtains as masking devices, not only for the window space itself, but also for the characters' identity, we can see that Elsie does not hide anything about her home or herself. Her kitchen window also has no curtains, yet the view is

partially blocked by prickly pear cacti. The cacti grows in the border area between Elsie's house and the neighbors' house and is therefore shared by both occupants. The narrator explains that "[a]s the housing expanded, the new neighbors were more than happy to keep the cacti, although they never helped themselves to the fruit, despite Elsie's urging" (169). Elsie views the cacti as communal property, generously offering its fruit to the neighbors; it clearly does not illicit any contention over its ownership. Although they don't partake of the fruit, the neighbors allow the plants to flourish, and Elsie's attempt to share its fruit demonstrates a harmonious neighborhood community very much in contrast to the relationships of suspicion and distrust that characterize the Campbells' interactions with their neighbors.

The windows in Elsie's house are only one example of the multiple versions of unmasked windows the novel offers in counterpoint to the masked windows in the Campbell's house. Unmasked windows also appear in Marion's travels. In her flat in England, the openness, the lack of privacy, does not disturb her; she does not "draw the blind against the fading light" (193), but sits in contemplation of a trapezoidal space on the apartment's interior wall where the remnants of the day's sunshine remain. Following the typical pattern of this symbol, we deduce that after her family's secrets are revealed and Marion embarks on her journey of self-discovery, she no longer gives in to her conditioned behavior of hiding. The behavior was learned from her parents and becomes her default approach to all relationships – both personal and professional. Over the course of the narrative, she hides information and feelings almost second handedly because her parents did so and, through their behavior, taught her to do the same. Rather than commenting on the tension between hiding and revealing, however, this English window signals the duality of the gaze that will be discussed in Chapter V; it "frames the curious marmalade brown of London's night sky" (193), and simultaneously functions as the portal for the exterior light to enter the interior. The "modern" skylight window in Marion's attic room in London functions primarily as a portal for light, for a

view of the rainy sky as Marion weeps "for representations of herself" (191). Descriptions of the window, the light, and the rain are the subject of poetic passages of contemplations on the self. Marion "looks up at the wall to find a rectangle of light projected opposite the window" (192). Here also is a long meditation on the light; it is a "painting," a "picture in time," a "translation" (192) of the rain into light, clearly connecting back to the descriptions of passing as "playing in the light" (122).

Another example of unmasked windows appears in the narrative concerning Marion's travel to Scotland. While wandering the streets of Glasgow, Marion becomes a voyeur. She becomes the representation of the exterior gaze on the inhabitants of the houses she passes, the very gaze that her parents feared as she "peers into tall windows of tenement houses, where blinds or curtains are not drawn against the dying light, where young people with haloed red heads clink glasses and laugh; they are actors in a silent film" (201). We will return to study the filmic nature of the scene in Chapter V, but for now note the description of the building as a "tenement" connoting poverty among the working class. Also of importance is the openness to the gaze demonstrated in this representation of Glasgow society versus the protection from the gaze we have seen in the novel's representations of South African culture.

Another form of protection from the gaze manifests in the windows of Marion's business, a travel agency called MCTravel. Marion is pleased with the "facelift" (26) she gives the office building's façade and enjoys the appreciation she reads in the window cleaner's demeanor as he cleans and shines the office's new front window. She believes the cleaner also "takes pleasure in the new plate-glass with the fine lettering" (26). The lettering on the glass, "MCTravel" (26), is another form of masking as Marion simultaneously marks the building as the possession of her professional persona and obscures the view through the glass with her own initials. Marion's sense of ownership reveals her chosen primary identity, one that masks her identity as an individual as she becomes an

economic force in her community. This sense of proprietorship over the window appears in connection with her flat's "picture window" (55) where she can see Robben Island. Characteristic of her disengagement from politics, Marion does not reflect on the history of Robben Island, but readers must note that it was the site, from 1962 to 1991, of the imprisonment of political prisoners who opposed the apartheid regime (Buntman 3).[7] For Marion, however, the picture window resembles a piece of art contained within a frame. Her view of Robben Island is purely aesthetic in its considerations and, like a photograph, bears the implications of a view captured. This view is thus domesticated and owned as a decoration in the form of a "picture" on the wall.

Windows are not the only influences on performance in *Playing in the Light*. Doors also function as barriers that control and privatize performance. One scene of particular note is revisited throughout the narrative from multiple perspectives – those of Marion as well as her parents – giving the reader the perspective of both the viewer and the viewed. The scene is that of John's periodic home pedicure of Helen's feet. Helen and John treat this practice as a "ritual" (148) and John jokingly states that "these feet…keep us together" (148-9). For Helen this ritual perfects her appearance by removing the traces of the calluses she equates with her past and her youthful "going barefoot in the village" (147). Because the skin thickening on her feet strikes her as "the body's refusal to acknowledge the new woman" (148) she feels she has become, Helen acquiesces to John's offer of help as a practical solution to her problem. For John, the act creates a physical and emotional connection that "kept alive the memory of the pretty young girl from Wuppertal" and allows him "access" (148) to his wife in rare moments of intimacy. It is also, undeniably, a collaborative attempt to create a performance that the two rehearse privately in their bedroom behind closed doors. When John accidentally cuts Helen's foot causing her to cry out, Marion runs into the room and discovers them – Helen bleeding, and all the evidence of the procedure scattered about them. Too young to fully understand what she sees, Marion is not too young to feel excluded

and forced into the role of an observer of their performance. At that time she simply registers "closed doors that locked her out" (60) without understanding the layers of complexity in the relationship between her parents.

In *Passing* doors and windows are less symbolic in function and instead serve a more facilitative purpose than that depicted in *Playing in the Light*. They assist the narrative by offering spaces of possibility for performances. As we will see, rather than concentrating the gaze as they do in *Playing in the Light*, these spaces frustrate sight but focus the characters' actions. The symbolism of these threshold spaces is reversed, and these settings' potential for active participation (described in depth in Chapter V) turns to passive presence in the form of theatre sets for entrances and exits. The thresholds thus become sites of opportunity and potential for performance.

Passing opens with a dramatic scene that mirrors the narrative's equally dramatic ending. Through Irene's mediation of the narrative, the reader learns of a moment in Clare's childhood that involves a disappearance through a door that parallels the character's final "disappearance" at the end of the novel. In this early scene, Clare reacts to her father's death by standing "silent and staring" (10). Her non-reaction then transitions into a violently emotional response leading to her abrupt exit. Clare "glanced quickly about the bare room, taking everyone in, in a sharp look of flashing scorn. And, in the next instant, she had turned and vanished through the door" (10). Parallels with the final scene occur overtly in the space of opportunity provided by the door and window respectively and the punitive figures of the policemen in the first scene correspond to Bellew and Irene in the final moments.

Doors signal an opportunity for the characters of *Passing*. Beginning with Irene's opportunistic entrance to the Drayton in the opening pages of the novel, the symbolism of the door continues throughout the narrative. The taxi driver who interprets Irene's request for tea "[o]n a roof somewhere" (13) by taking her to the prestigious Drayton Hotel modeled after Chicago's Drake

Hotel (116) provides the opportunity for her to pass. Similarly to Helen's experience with the "invitation" to pass provided by Councillor Carter, there is an exchange of some sort expected. Irene responds to the implied recompense for the driver's service by "thanking him smilingly as well as in a more substantial manner for his kind helpfulness and understanding" (13). The payment is monetary in Irene's case and sexual in Helen's. Irene thus both performs and essentially purchases her entrance through "the Drayton's wide doors" (13).

Conversely, doors can also signal the removal of an opportunity as seen in key moments in Irene's relationship with her husband Brian. Two incidents in particular involve the closing of a door as the conclusion to discussions between the characters. The first takes place in the setting of the Redmonds' house during Irene's realization of a suspected affair between Brian and Clare. Irene cannot voice her accusation to Brian, though "within her she felt a hardness from feeling, not absent, but repressed" (89). She feels "a choking in her throat" (89) similar to the one that John felt in hiding from his brother at the train station, as she represses her feelings and performs the role of the dutiful wife. The moment, one in which she might have reconnected with her husband and clarified what might have only been a misunderstanding, passes as "she heard the gentle impact of the door as it closed behind him" (90). Another opportunity to break through the restrictions of her performance appears in a similar scene between Irene and Brian, this time after Irene's chance encounter with Bellew on the street in which her identity is revealed. Irene feels she should tell Brian (if not Clare) of this event, but once again Irene "failed to speak" (101). This second opportunity also passes as "[s]he heard the outer door open. Close. Brian had gone out" (101). The epitome of this symbol of movement and possibility in its reversal, as frustrated opportunity, occurs in the final moments of the novel after Clare's death. Irene waits, frozen, in the Freelands' apartment as she listens to the party-goers' "rush of frenzied feet down long flights of stairs. The slamming of distant doors" (111). As the drama unfolds, the sound of the doors signals the others'

participation in contrast to Irene's inaction. Irene, however, is caught "backstage" in the performance of this drama and can only hear "through the still open door" of the apartment as the other performers return.

Returning to the early scenes in Chicago and in the Drayton Hotel, we find the first uses of windows as symbols that reoccur throughout the novel. Windows become sites of frustrated gaze rather than facilitators of vision. On the first page of the novel, as Irene walks the streets of Chicago looking for gifts for her sons, she notices how "the glass of the shop-windows threw out a blinding radiance" (12) as the summer sun and heat hit the glass causing a reflection that creates a barrier to her sight. The next time the window appears in its symbolic function is after the tea party scene in which Irene is shocked by Bellew's racist comments towards his wife. Irene is at a loss as to Clare's intention in withholding the truth of her identity from her husband and the truth of this choice from her friends. At home, Irene "stood at her window frowning out into the dark rain and puzzling again over that look on Clare's incredibly beautiful face. She couldn't however, come to any conclusion about its meaning, try as she might" (45). In this moment, Irene appears to be searching for insight that she never gains. The symbolism, then, is quite clear – the window's nighttime view of dark and rain is as masked as Clare's face. We can see this depiction of blocked [in]sight evolve in a later scene between Irene and Brian in which he treats her as if she were a window herself. Irene and Brian debate their opinions of Hugh Wentworth, a common friend. As Irene resumes dressing for a tea party that she will be hosting in their home, "Brian didn't speak. He continued to stand beside the bed, seeming to look at nothing in particular. Certainly not at her. True, his gaze was on her, but in it there was some quality that made her feel that at that moment she was no more to him than a pane of glass through which he stared" (87-8). Sight is doubly frustrated; Brian cannot see in Irene what he searches for, and Irene cannot fathom what he sees. One wonders if Brian is looking for insight into his wife as Irene's performed identity becomes the

pane of glass separating her repressed or hidden feelings from her husband. This symbolic use of the window is rich in ambiguity in contrast to the more easily analyzed real function of windows as set pieces.

Irene feels proprietary of the windows that we see in the text. In the early scene in the Drayton Hotel, Irene sits at "a table just in front of a long window whose gently moving curtains suggested a cool breeze" (13). She feels disappointed when a couple approaches (Clare, as yet unrecognized, and her male companion) because she may have to share her coveted position. Within moments, Clare approaches her and a reunion takes place in this contested setting – Clare invading Irene's turf, so to speak, in a prelude to later invasions of Irene's home and marital relationship. The setting is fraught, then, with tension. Irene retreats to a window setting in another confrontation with Clare – this one taking place over Clare's desire to attend the Negro Welfare League dance with the Redmonds. Clare pushes her position with Irene who "had risen again as she spoke and was standing at the window lifting and spreading the small yellow chrysanthemums in the grey stone jar on the sill. Her hands shook slightly, for she was in a near rage of impatience and exasperation" (71). We can see that Irene, in a moment of potential weakness in her performance, turns to an activity at the window in order to gather her thoughts and emotions in order to prevent compromising her pretense, her act, of caring for Clare: "[a]ll I'm concerned about is the unpleasantness and possible danger which your going might incur" (71). Although we can see the tension building within the confrontations taking place in these fraught settings, the two scenes we have just studied are mild in intensity in comparison to the tension generated in the final scene of the novel.

The setting of this final scene is the space of the window in the Freelands' apartment. Soon after arriving with Brian and Clare, Irene is fully engaged in her performance of a kind of emotional passing in which she hides her true feelings with masking behaviors. She is the only person at the

gathering who is not having a good time: "Only Irene wasn't merry. She sat almost silent, smiling now and then, that she might appear amused" (109). But her friends know her too well not to suspect that something is amiss. Dave Freeland offers to make her a drink which Irene accepts before asserting herself to take control over the space of the window in the Freelands' apartment. Irene says, "'It seems dreadfully warm in here. Mind if I open this window?'" and "[w]ith that she pushed open one of the long casement-windows of which the Freelands were so proud" (110). As we can see, Irene exerts control over the setting she finds herself in, to the point of appropriating ownership. In the next moment the narrative offers another objective correlative for Clare as Irene "finished her cigarette and threw it out, watching the tiny spark drop slowly down to the white ground below" (110). It doesn't seem possible that Irene could be plotting Clare's death, but it is clear that the window has now become a setting of opportunity for the characters, a space in which anything might happen. What happens, of course, is the famous ending of the novel, the ambiguous moment when Clare falls/jumps/is pushed from the window to her death six floors below.[8]

From tools of masking, to symbols of (frustrated) sight to sites of (missed) opportunity, the threshold spaces of windows and doors form an integral part of the various performative acts taking place in *Playing in the Light* and *Passing*. Characters react to such spaces out of fear of perception, and, conversely, reach for those spaces in search of insight. They manipulate these spaces in order to hide or reveal their performances. The flexibility of the spaces encourages the sense that they are places of opportunity for the characters, although, as we have seen, that opportunity (and sight itself) is just as easily frustrated. Although this chapter touches on the more obvious aspects of threshold spaces' connections to the performances of the characters, in Chapter V we will investigate at length a reversal of influence – how the characters and threshold spaces act together to transform themselves from private to public performance venues.

CHAPTER V: SETTINGS PASS

Discussions of performance, setting, audience, and thresholds give us the basic groundwork for the theatrical paradigm of this comparative study. These discussions also prepare us to investigate more subtle connections between setting and the performances taking place in *Playing in the Light* and *Passing*. These subtleties include the nuances of shared influence between performers and performance space focused through the threshold spaces. As noted in the Chapter II discussion of the proprioceptive aspect of settings, the "real" nature of the settings created by the characters' real, embodied experience of these spaces allows both the characters and the spaces themselves the agency to influence each other. A dialectic of influence circulates between characters and settings using performance and thresholds as conduits.

In an early scene in *Playing in the Light* we have a moment of remembrance – Marion recollects an event from her childhood that had a lasting emotional impact for her. Analysis of this moment gives us insight into the "real" function of thresholds as they connect with settings through the performances of the characters as they pass. The scene to which I refer is as follows: Marion's childhood memory is sparked by her feeling of surprise at approaching her father's house one day to find it in disarray – flower boxes are not tended and one of the windows itself is for once neglected: "[t]he lace curtain at his bedroom window is bunched up into the right corner, so she is able to look in" (10). Marion enacts, inadvertently, the surveillant behavior her family always feared when she peers into the window from the street. The lack of masking due to the curtains being pulled back surprises her because "[h]er parents were always meticulous, neurotic really, about curtains" (10). Helen and John policed the space of the window to the extent that they even monitored when they turned on the interior lights so that there'd be no chance anyone outside could see them from the evening darkness on the street. Marion wonders if these open curtains, evidence of her father's changing behavior, can be attributed to his advancing age. Contemplation of his "slide into

someone she doesn't know" (10) worries Marion. Thinking about the window also brings back a buried memory that very early on ingrained in Marion a hyper-awareness of that particular threshold space:

> The window brings a memory of a cold winter's evening, with rain falling heavily, noisily, like dead locusts onto the stoep. Her mother stepping out of the bedroom, wearing John's too-large corduroy trousers. The look in her eyes made them both start, a bold look of defiance as she did up the last fly button and swaggered across the room before returning to the bedroom door, where she assumed a coquettish pose. Their eyes followed her. John said with an uneasy chuckle, Just as well no one'll visit in such terrible weather. Then, as she mimed with poised fingers the smoking of a cigarette, her bottom lip pouted to exhale smoke, he said, Okay Lenie, that's enough now. Get dressed. (10)

Performance and perception are intertwined in this memory. John's words of caution provoke Helen, and her "voice was that of a film star, husky, scornful" (10) as she accuses her husband of being "a poor white" (10). This accusation is fascinating considering that they are both performing the roles of whites. The insult indicates that their transformation into a middle class white couple living in Observatory is evidently inadequate for Helen. Her response to John indicates that she appropriated a form of class aspiration so that becoming white was not sufficient in and of itself, but now she desires class status within white society. These relationship intricacies are beyond the awareness of their young daughter. Marion is positioned as audience to the performance by the nature of her parents' secret so that she doesn't even realize she witnesses a performance. She takes for granted that her parents are who they say they are. That the Marion who remembers the scene has not yet made the discovery of her parents' identity adds to the complexity of the incident. Revelation comes later in the narrative. Thus her parents' deception is reiterated from Marion's

childhood into her adulthood. In the above mentioned scene surrounding the fight before the open window, Marion also demonstrates again her own unknowing internalization of the rules of the performance that her parents live by when she instinctively draws her parents' attention to the dangerous space of the window; she isn't aware that she is also a performer – cast as the white child – yet instinctively she mimics her parents' behavior of policing the window so that their privacy is guarded. As their argument over Helen's costume grows louder, "[t]hey didn't stop shouting until Marion looked up and pointed to the curtain, so close to the street, that had not been drawn. Which made them rush to the window, bumping into each other, the question of trousers dissipated in the panic of being on display" (11). No audience was actually revealed standing outside the window, but the fear itself was enough to refocus Helen's and John's energy from arguing to protecting their performed roles. The interior is thus confirmed as a performance space regulated by the opening or closing of curtains at the window in anticipation and fear of an audience.

Because of the strong influence of threshold spaces such as windows and doors and the awareness of the gaze that can potentially pass through them, settings are forever changed by the behaviors of the characters inhabiting them and using them as performance spaces. In fact, it is this presence of the threshold, invoking the presence of the gaze, that influences the performances in a dialectic switching from private performance for each other to public performance for others and back again. This fluid movement is first signaled by the "reversal" (11) that John notes in his relationship with Marion. He resents the change in roles that old age brings, the tendency of children to appropriate the role of parent resulting in his daughter thinking "she knows best" (12) how he should eat, dress, live. This role reversal foreshadows a less conventional role reversal occurring a mere page later in the narrative. Evidently John's typical pastime is gazing out the window into the street, and on this particular day his experience is atypical:

> He stumbles back into the house, to his seat by the window where he can gaze at the comings and goings through the lace curtain. A young woman in a shrunken top is strutting up and down, puffing furiously at a cigarette, her roll of brown belly trembling. Is she muttering to herself? Has she lost something in the street, a ring perhaps? He leans forward to look and his elbow catches the curtain at the very moment that the girl looks up. She tosses her bleached yellow hair and snarls, Fuck off dirty old man; mind your own fucking business. So that he retreats hastily, pulls back the curtain and sits far back in his chair, shaking with rage and terror. Yes, this is what it boils down to: the young terrorizing the old. No respect, he mutters, and a flash of his former self on the traffic island in Long Street, in his uniform, giving white-gloved directions, comes to his rescue…(13)

This scene is interesting because of the very reversal noted above, the inversion of private and public space as well as the expectations of spectator and viewed subject. Now the performance takes place outside, on the street, in the public arena, and John becomes the audience tucked safely inside his house, anticipating and enjoying the moment of theater on the street. When the woman on the street, the unknowing performer, realizes that she is observed, that John's gaze has turned her into an actor against her will, she yells and swears at him. Up until that moment she assumed she was an anonymous member of the public, and therefore now does not want to bear his private gaze. She does not want to perform for him. We have here an example of how a public figure expects a kind of privacy on the public street, away from the private gaze of those on the interior of the houses. When John finds himself challenged in his status as audience member, he resorts to remembering himself in his traffic guard uniform in what appears to be a bid to regain control over his sense of self. He needs to remember the authority that costume conferred on him in order to reestablish his

role in society rather than accept the role of "dirty old man" assigned him by the woman on the street.

As we can see, performances in *Playing in the Light* create settings that are fluid in their identity – moving from private to public and back. To be specific, in the scene mentioned above, John looks out the window from the privacy of his home to the public space of the street, encountering the gaze of the woman with the bleached hair who expects her own privacy from the gaze while she is on the public street. Her rejection of his gaze and return stare of accusation makes John's space beside the window a public space instead of a private one. A similar blurring of private and public space can be seen in Marion's office, MCTravel. Not only does Marion enjoy the ambiguity she engenders by referring to the renovations of the "frontage of the building" as "my facelift" (26), thus conflating the public nature of the building with her private identity, but she also creates a parallel blending of the public and the private within the office space itself. She does this by leaving the threshold of an internal doorway between the kitchen area and the front office open, creating a "doorway without a door. Boetie had once suggested a bead curtain, but Marion will have none of it" (38). Instead, "the desks are arranged in such a manner that customers can see nothing more than the outsized poster of the Greek island: it fills the doorway entirely" (38). The poster also gives clients the impression that their destination is within their grasp; it's as easy to reach as simply stepping through the door. This lack of masking in the doorway to the break area serves a secondary purpose in Marion's opinion, it creates an effect of "[t]ransparency" which, in Marion's mind "inspires confidence – eating a sandwich can't give offence; it shows we've nothing to hide" (38). However, a by-product of this transparency is the loss of privacy for her employees who now cannot have lunch without impacting the work space, nor can they engage in conversation that might be overheard because Marion believes "that arguments in the background are not good for business" (38-9). Employees have no private space to retreat to away from the perception of clients

or coworkers. Then, in a strange reversal of the move to excise private, intimate space from the public business place, Marion attempts to change the office into a homey place in which "the smell of coffee gives a nice, homey touch that puts people at ease" (38). Marion simultaneously inverts the private areas of this office space into public areas and monitors the dialogue (the performance) of her employees to craft the experience of customers entering the space.

Perhaps it should not be surprising that settings also begin to respond to the performances that take place within them. Settings, arguably, begin to pass in two ways – private passes for public, and public passes for private. Settings perform. One scene in particular gives very overt evidence of this behavior; the scene on the train that was discussed in Chapter IV can be revisited for insight into the functioning of setting as it mirrors the performative behavior of the characters themselves. Returning from a visit to John's family in the country, John and Marion have settled into their compartment, or coupé, on the train and Marion, "tired of exploring the scaled-down, counterfeit world of the coupé – the wooden panelling [sic] that concealed a bed of green leather upholstery, the table unmasked to reveal a shiny little stainless-steel sink and a mirror in which to admire herself – was asleep" (114). She quickly uncovers all there is to discover hidden in the compartment, and becomes bored with its limited offerings. For the child Marion, this space's multiple functionality rapidly loses its interesting public/private duality. Readers, however, can see the coupé as a microcosm of the larger world, a space that masquerades as public transportation while hiding the component furnishings that transform the compartment into a private sleeping area. It is a parallel performance of passing – adopting one identity while hiding another.

Characters in *Passing* don't appear to have the same dual experiences of setting as those in *Playing in the Light* – perhaps because Larsen portrays settings strictly as theatrical spaces in which relationships and plot unfold. Settings function entirely as public performance spaces; they are one-dimensional locations that could just as well be painted flats and scrims placed behind the characters

performing on stage. In contrast to Wicomb's deployment of settings as mirrors of the trope of passing, Larsen allows settings to frame the action of the plot, forming proscenium arches around the actors. There are subtleties to Larsen's technique that underscore the displacement or loss of connection with location occurring as a result of the act of passing. For example, spaces that might have been assumed to be private (homes, hotel rooms) become the location of public social events in *Passing*, while such social gatherings are absent from *Playing in the Light*. When we meet Marion, she doesn't have guests in her home – a reflexive response generated by her parents' rule barring guests from the house in Observatory. Readers of *Playing in the Light* might feel some compassion for Marion growing up in a house where guests are not welcome, are not, in fact, allowed. One might assume that a home opened to the presence of guests would somehow indicate a level of intimacy in the characters' experience of human relations. Standing in contrast to this assumption is the markedly shallow social connections revealed in *Passing*, a narrative whose characters place great emphasis on visiting each other's homes with no resulting creation of connection or intimacy. It is easy to see the effect of guests on the private spaces in *Passing*, an effect of performance that never ends, never relaxes into authenticity. Numerous scenes are crafted around the presence of guests in the home offering opportunities for confrontation and also for avoidance, but never for real connection or a dropping of the characters' performance.

Focusing attention on the performance of passing requires attention to the context in which the performance occurs. Settings, as very real components of the novels *Playing in the Light* and *Passing* show a reciprocal relation with the characters who inhabit them. Settings offer a theatre in which to perform, a stage on which to stand. On the other hand, the performances that take place in that forum change the spaces themselves. Spaces become places marked by duality – the ability to move from private to public. Places become settings that mirror the performative act as they pass

from private to public and back. This flexibility in the identity of setting is misleading, though, as its very fluidity fixes it in a state of unhomeliness.

CONCLUSION

It has been the project of this study to unmask complexities under the surface of acts of passing appearing in *Playing in the Light* and *Passing* by employing a theatrical paradigm from which to perform analyses. Using components of theatrical productions such as actors, settings, and audience we are able to deconstruct the functions of the two texts. Circumventing the impulse to draw direct correlations between two such different texts representing cultural productions of different societies at different historical moments, this study still functions as a space in which to explore, instead, subtle confluences and disjunctions.

The act of passing finds itself challenged in the pages of this study. In the context of this investigation, this performative act can no longer assume a position of strictly racial experience. Instead, the act of racial passing becomes a window of opportunity allowing some characters to mirror the act in terms of constructing supporting performances, and even developing forms of social passing that facilitate the enactment of relationship roles through the suppression of needs and desires. Passing thus becomes a theatrical act appropriated by different characters for a multiplicity of purposes which expand to include social status and relationship role playing. Commonalities among the types of passing appear, however, in the various aspects of the actors' transformation into characters including the tools of make up, costume, speech, and behavior. These tools work for characters who produce racial identity performances by creating the appearance of a white identity while masking the black or Coloured identity. These tools serve a slightly different purpose for characters performing social passing. In such cases these tools mask desires and emotions in order to present the appearance of the socially acceptable role in public and in private relationships. For characters who perform supporting roles, these tools often become props that lend an air of authenticity to the supporting role which subsequently creates the principal role with which it is associated.

Transformation is not the privilege of the characters alone. It reappears in depictions of settings and in the development of space into place. Turning a theatrical follow spot on the complex relationships between performance and setting gives new insight into ways that setting becomes place through the proprioceptive experience of the characters, and subsequently becomes performance space that challenges private/public dichotomies. Designation of private versus public space disintegrates as threshold spaces such as windows and doors complicate the location of performance. Is the performance taking place inside the domestic sphere or outside on the street? The location of the performance depends on the position of the audience and the actor. The relationship is so fluid and symbiotic, however, that roles frequently reverse as audience becomes actor and vice versa. Shifts in performance occur across threshold spaces such as doors and windows changing the space on either side into places of performance or observation. Thresholds also serve to focus the gaze creating tensions between the desire for the gaze exhibited by the performer and the ever present fear that the gaze will unmask or unravel the performance taking place.

Characters struggle through their performances either to fix their identities forever or maintain a kind of fluid, constant movement between roles. This movement back and forth becomes a dialectical tug between fixity and flow. It is the position of this study that arguments of fixity versus flow within the two novels proceed through multiple stages finally coming to rest in a kind of entrapment in the performed role that ultimately disturbs some characters and reassures others. As much as performance accords a kind of freedom for an individual to select a role, once a specific role is adopted through the requisite series of disavowels of location and relationships, it becomes another kind of fixed persona against which to struggle (as Clare does), or in which to find an uneasy rest (as Irene and Helen do).

The possibilities of using a theatrical paradigm to frame a comparative study of *Playing in the Light* and *Passing* have not been exhausted by this study. Only the surface of the question of agency exhibited by settings is touched. Such questions of agency within performativity may offer opportunities for future scholarship particularly when placed against Judith Butler's writing on the issue. Specifically, Butler's work on parody and gender might fruitfully be applied in a study of parody in racial passing performativity. This area affords much room for future speculations as we enter an age when the virtual world expands our concepts of what it means to be located in space. Suddenly space itself has agency over its creation of space in which we gather to perform our roles.

NOTES

[1] Robert Ross, in his text *A Concise History of South Africa*, describes the law's putative purpose, from the perspective of the National Party, to strengthen the division between races by subjecting each person to legal categorization. Ross also reveals the devastating impact on non-white populations as he notes that "[f]amilies could be broken up and relatives assigned to, or making claims to, different racial statuses were divided" (116).

[2] See Claudia Tate's essay "Nella Larsen's *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation" for a skillful analysis of the letter as objective correlative to Clare Kendry.

[3] The reader, as watching audience, will be considered in Chapter III of this study.

[4] Bal, Mieke. *Looking In: The Art of Viewing*. Amsterdam: G&BArts, Int'l, 2001.

[5] Silverman, Kaja.*The Threshold of the Visible World*. London: Routledge, 1996.

[6] Wicomb agrees that characters' proprioceptivity and subjectivity are linked to "the physical settings they occupy" ("Setting" 152). But in her critical work, Wicomb departs from a consideration of the characters' proprioceptivity in order to focus on the role of the writer in this experience. In fact, it is important to note that Wicomb's discussion is framed entirely around the project of linking the author's proprioceptivity to her fictional surroundings. Practically applied, this would mean that she posits that her location as a South African writer living in Scotland somehow directly (or indirectly) influences her ability to create fictional settings in South Africa.

[7] Buntman, Fran Lisa. *Robben Island and Prisoner Resistance to Apartheid*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003. Buntman's text provides a thought-provoking analysis of the function of the prison on Robben Island as simultaneously a carceral system and a site for unity in resistance to apartheid. Scholars who are interested in the long history of the island as location for the banishment of the disempowered including lepers and the chronically or mentally ill, might refer to Simon A. de Villiers' text *Robben Island: Out of Sight, Out of Mind*.

[8] Larsen's 1926 short story "Freedom," originally published in Young's Magazine under Larsen's pseudonym Allen Semi (Larson 278), prefigures the depiction of Clare Kendry's death. "Freedom" ends with the main character's suicide by jumping out of his apartment's "French windows" (18). Larsen's biographer, Thadious M. Davis also speculates briefly on the connections between Larsen's representations of deaths at the site of the window in her fiction and in incidents in Larsen's personal life. As Davis chronicles, Larsen appears to have either fallen or jumped from a window and broken her leg in 1933 around the same time as the "Riding-Graves incident" (407) in which Laura Riding jumped from a window in London. Although these occurrences follow the publication of both of Larsen's works on the topic, there was an earlier incident which might have been the original genesis of the plot device. As Davis mentions, Larsen was attending Tuskegee Unversity when, on November 17, 1915, there occurred the "suicide of a female teacher who jumped from the window of a campus building" (106).

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