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Guilty of Association:
*Bond Fallacies as Seen in Nella Larsen's Passing
and the World in Which We Live*

by Justin Katz

Thadious Davis chose to open her introduction of the Penguin edition of *Passing*, by Nella Larsen, with a description of the infamous Plessy v. Ferguson case in which the Supreme Court ratified a Louisiana law calling for racial segregation, specifically on railroad cars. As Davis describes the case, Homer A. Plessy and his attorneys argued that his seven-eighths Caucasian heritage “dominated [his] physical appearance,”¹ hoping to prove, firstly, that for all intents and purposes Plessy should not be considered “black”² and, from there, that distinctions based on “race” were, as Davis says, “artificial.”

While she seems to have related the basic facts of the case correctly, more or less, she has made some errors in her presentation and interpretation of the data that I find to have serious implicational ramifications that correlate directly with three analytical fallacies often found in socially or politically charged criticism. Davis’ basic presumption seems to be that the Supreme Court’s decision was reached through a fundamental lack of “discernable logic”³ (vii), when, in fact, it was inordinately “logical,” merely based on a different set of beliefs about the breadth of the case. The majority, spoken for by Justice Brown, saw the case as a question of the “constitutionality of an act of the general assembly of the state of Louisiana.”⁴ In this context, the plaintiff’s claim was measured against the Constitutional Amendments that he alleged the law to contradict and the ability of the legal system to change the way in which people think (as

well as the government's right to make the attempt). Granted, the Court did not question the Amendments or personal beliefs themselves, but, ostensibly anyway, did not find the specifics of the case to call for such undefined measures. Davis interprets this intransigent adherence to technicality as having "made a mockery of equality, as Justice John Marshall Harlan, the lone dissenter, made clear in his minority opinion." (viii). On the count of inequity, I've no inclination to disagree. My concern stems from what seems to me to be a blatant failure to understand the multiple implications of the case (and in this concern I'm using Davis only as a singular example of what, to my experience, is a common error in judgment). Davis goes on to claim that this "landmark decision would, moreover, become a justification for the linkage of race to visible difference." (viii). Though I will not contest the fact that the ruling may have, later, been *misused* in this manner, the statement of the case itself is just the opposite. Plessy argued that his skin was "white," so he should be afforded the privileges that apply to that "race," for lack of a better term. The court responded that his heritage, not his physical appearance, defined his "race." An inquest regarding the reasons that the Plessy v. Ferguson decision had the impact that it did is a separate (although very useful) discussion than the implications of the case itself. The use of this case as justification for actions entirely contradictory to its actual statement is evidence enough that we must be wary of interpreting legal documents by distorting facts in such a way as to give them a significance that is contrary to the meaning that they have of themselves.⁵

Through an examination of the ways in which a specific type of literary criticism attempts to read a specific work, it is possible to discern fallacies with far less specific implications that often contribute to the inversion of statements or simple failure to understand statements that deal with emotional, and therefore crucial, issues. For example, while what I call the Affiliative Fallacy may seem to represent, in light of the topic of this paper, an inverted

racism when compared to Henry Louis Gates' definition that "'racism' exists when one generalizes about the attributes of an individual (and treats him or her accordingly)" (403); I define the Affiliative Fallacy as the belief that perceived similarities in any physicality, life experience, or political or social views give a reader a peculiar insight not only into that aspect of a writer's work, but into the inner workings of that author's entire artistic creation.⁶

A relatively "pure" example of a second misconception can be found, appropriately, in an examination of *Passing* performed by Neil Sullivan. "Although many critics," begins Sullivan, "have accused Nella Larsen of using race as a pretext for examining other issues, *Passing* (1929), her second novel, is profoundly concerned with racial identity."⁷ This leads into what I call the Associative Fallacy, a belief that all aspects of a person's philosophy must be fairly easy to reconcile under a single heading which is either dominated by one of those aspects or separate from but incidental to all; and all people who might share the heading must be in agreement about the belief and about their methods of utilizing that belief. The relevance of this assumption, with which Sullivan *begins*, stems from the inference that, while Sullivan may be correct in suggesting that "[f]or Larsen... 'race' is inextricable from the collateral issues — including class, gender, sexuality, and rivalry — that bear upon the formation of identity" (373), her language suggests that the idea that Larsen *could* have been using "race" as a literary tool seems foolish to her. I believe that this statement is evidence of the Associative Fallacy because Sullivan appears to see Larsen as relating all of these other aspects of "identity" under the heading of "race," and, since Sullivan bases all that comes after on this assumption,⁸ it is likely that she feels as if she shares some of Larsen's views, and under the same heading, so Larsen cannot be putting "race" in a subservient position to one of the other categories because Sullivan would not.

While the Associative Fallacy can be seen as a subset of the last fallacy that I will define, the Assumptive Fallacy, I believe that there are distinctions that call for their separation. This final fallacy, perhaps the “big brother” in the family of the Bond Fallacies, as I call them, is the belief that if the perceived reality of the reader *could have been* that of the writer, then the writer *must have been* addressing that reality under the same rules and in the same way in any given work.⁹ I contend that the combined effects of these Bond Fallacies may lead critics to misinterpret, almost to the point of not interpreting at all, Nella Larsen’s *Passing*, and that this misinterpretation is exacerbated by the fact that concepts that lead to a tendency to misjudge (or misread) blatantly are those with which Larsen was playing.

I realize that I must address, with this topic, a suggestion made by Gates that the search for racial markers, so to speak, in literature written by people of the same culture is a valid critical inquiry. I am not disputing this point in the slightest: I am suggesting that not only must any rules unearthed thereby be treated in the same manner as all critical tools (as applicable in some, but not all, cases, for instance), but the discovery and use of them must not be limited to Black critics or literature. I do not believe that Gates is wrong in suggesting that “we must turn to the black tradition itself to develop theories of criticism indigenous to our literatures” (13), or, as he goes on to say, that “we must use [standard critical] theories and methods insofar as they are relevant to the study of our own literatures” (14). I disagree only with his unqualified usage of “we” and “our literatures,” and the lack of mention that all texts from that literature may not necessarily contain any of the markers of this “tradition.” Even more subtle than, although definitely related to, the similarities between the suggestion that “[w]e must determine how critical methods can effectively disclose the traces of ethnic differences in literature” (Gates 15) and the pre-1970 Louisiana law that declared that a person is to be considered “Negro” if there is any “trace” of that heritage in his/her lineage, is an implication that these rules of understanding

do NOT already exist (or did not in 1985 — I am only pointing out the absence of an unbroken underlying or instinctual chain), but by suggesting that “we” must investigate “our literatures,” Gates cannot escape the question: are you implying that a better understanding of these texts would not be of equal interest to everybody? The flaw here is that one must assume that if the Bacian literary language must be (re)discovered, then it really doesn’t matter *who* does the investigating and the resultant critical tools would simply be added to the universal repertoire. For true equality and communication, the act of discovering these methods must be considered in the same manner as *any* differences in literature. Gates makes a pass at separating the “black critic” from the “critic of black literature,” observing, correctly, that “[t]heories of criticism are text-specific: the New Critics tended to explicate the metaphysical poets, the structuralists certain forms of narrative, and deconstructionists found their ideal field of texts among the Romantics” (406). The problem here, one that relates directly to the Bond Fallacies, is that metaphysical poets were not New Critics nor was the opposite necessarily the case. In short, I can’t help but feel that much of his argument consists of overstatements in which Gates does not truly believe because, although he is quick to point out that he is nonpartisan enough to use the phrase “critic of black literature,” he did not think to change “our literature” to “black literature.” I point this out to show that, while Gates attempts to draw a distinction between his assertion that, by definition, criticism of Bacian literature must concentrate predominantly on literature by Bacian authors and the insinuation that Bacian critics must be the ones to discover these differences, he undermines his own assertion. Again, he might argue that I am presupposing that there is absolutely no relationship between the Bacian author of the past and the Bacian critic of the present in my criticism of his unwillingness to attempt to be detached; but even were this true (which it is not: I am merely contesting the supremacy and singularity that this particular trait is often bequeathed in modern society in comparison to others that people might have in common),

the fact is not negated that he has, on the one hand, claimed to be “well known in [his] profession for encouraging students and critics of all ethnic and cultural groups to write about black literature” (405) and, on the other, hinted that he, himself, has some unique link to this very literature that goes beyond the ability to read and write about it. There is a difference between critical movements, which consist of critics who agree, essentially, on the way in which a work should be read, coinciding with literary movements, which consist of writers who agree, in some way, on the manner in which a work should be written, and critics who assume a connection to writers, almost to the point of possession, based on characteristics, or even ideals, that are unrelated specifically to the art of literature.

In many ways, my argument is closely related to one of the mottoes of “*Race, Writing, and Difference*,” edited by Gates, which can be said to revolve around the idea that “race” is an empty term. “[The] decision to bracket ‘race’ was designed to call attention to the fact that ‘races,’ put simply, do not exist, and that to claim that they do, for whatever misguided reason, is to stand on dangerous ground” (403). I happen to agree with this statement, though I would add that “misguided reasons” dribble from disparate sources. However, the elimination of a term that is misguidedly used to combine, to varying degrees, physical attributes, heritage, and culture leaves these attributes unrelated and (as they should be) merely parts of what make up an individual human being.¹⁰ The task that I put to those who would follow Gates’ advice (as presented in the previous paragraph) is to be very specific about which “traces” they seek in order to connect works of literature. The idea that writers of similar physical attributes should be categorized in the same group is too ridiculous to argue against. Heritage, while it certainly links people who are relatively close in time and geography to the area or group from which the heritage takes its name, becomes a questionable category as generations pass (for example, a modern female author named LaBestiole,¹¹ merely because she bears the name of a family that

emigrated from France three-hundred years ago, would not, on that basis alone, have an innate connection to Flaubert). Culture is even more of a gray term than heritage because culture is not a quality with which one is born. We learn culture. Therefore, as it is a quality that is unrelated to either heritage or skin color (terminologically), we would be unable to categorize authors by culture through any other means than that they exhibit the signs of that culture. Gates is suggesting that the markers of Baccian culture should be looked for; but I am suggesting that these markers, while it would be ignorant to suggest that they would not be found predominantly in works by writers who are “black” and/or of African descent, will not be found in every author of either group, and may be found in the works of people of any tincture or heritage.

Once the Bond Fallacies have been accepted, at least to the extent that we are willing to test them, it is a relatively simple matter to examine the ways in which they hinder Davis’ reading of the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case and then of *Passing*. Most glaringly, Davis just plain forgets or ignores facts and statements. This can be seen in the fact that she decides to mention Justice Harlan only as the “lone dissenter.” The important fact that this circumvents is that Harlan can be seen as a racist in his own right. In his dissenting opinion, he wrote, “[t]he white race deems itself to be the dominant race in this country. And so it is, in prestige, in achievements, in education, in wealth, and in power. So, I doubt not, it will continue to be for all time, if it remains true to its great heritage, and holds fast to the principles of constitutional liberty” (*Plessy*). To my mind, this statement is far worse than any made by the majority. Harlan does make a statement about the unfairness of laws that segregate the country, but underlying that statement is a belief that when the excuse of segregation is removed from the dispute Caucasians will only prove more definitively that they are superior. The problem that this tidbit presents to Davis is that, in order for her to assimilate this specific case into her reading of *Passing*, there must be, partially through the Affiliative Fallacy, shared ideals and

virtues between Larsen, her characters, Homer Plessy, and, possibly, Davis herself. Furthermore, she *must* see the Supreme Court majority as exhibiting absolutely NO logic *or* good intentions because they rejected Plessy's suit and, as an Associative Fallacy for contrast, Harlan as all good because he supported one, very specific, aspect of Plessy's beliefs. I've called Harlan's brand of racism more detrimental than that presented by Justice Brown because the former bases his assumptions on an inherent inferiority of people of African heritage, whereas the latter, while adhering to an outward manifestation of racism, is *not* assuming this inferiority and actually makes a decision with the ultimate reconciliation of the two peoples in view:

“If the two races are to meet upon terms of social equality, it must be the result of natural affinities, a mutual appreciation of each other's merits, and a voluntary consent of individuals.... Legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts, or to abolish distinctions based upon physical differences, and the attempt to do so can only result in accentuating the difficulties of the present situation” (Plessy).¹²

Davis could not have come to the conclusion that I've just described for the very reason that I insist that she should have: because her reading of *Passing* relies on a distinct philosophical difference between Homer Plessy and the Supreme Court. Davis needs this distinction so that the two main characters of *Passing*, Irene and Clare (both multi-heritaged and light-skinned), may be seen as sharing certain cultural and philosophical attributes with Plessy, who is of mixed heritage and “white” of skin, and *all* philosophically conflicting with the Supreme court (minus, of course, Harlan).

Throughout Davis' introduction to *Passing*, this folly manifests itself specifically and thematically, but I will refer to several instances only. Davis suggests, at one point, that “[w]ere it not for the view of Clare's body that Larsen gives us at the end, one might be tempted to read her disappearance out the window not as death but as an escape into a new life” (xxx). This

suggestion leads into the conclusion that Larsen intended to narrow the field of possible readings while undermining the reader's ability to make concrete conclusions within what remains, the logic of which is objectionable only because Larsen gives us no such view of the body. We are told that Clare is dead, but we see neither body nor ambulance, nor is the body's location insinuated. Elsewhere, in an attempt to compare *Passing* to earlier or Caucasian written novels of similar subject matter, Davis observes that Larsen "allowed for more than two options for passers" by creating Baccian middle-class characters who "have become like whites in their work, class position, culture, education, socialization, and so forth" (xxii), with which she then contrasts the "problem with novels of passing by [Larsen's] contemporary white authors" for whom "[t]o remain black... is to be a maid, washerwoman, or menial laborer of some sort, and not have access to white-collar jobs or higher education." Davis has simultaneously lauded Larsen over earlier writers because she presents Baccian characters as "like whites" and above "white authors" of her own era because they were unable to present Baccian characters as retaining their "blackness" without being limited to the "work, class position, culture, education, socialization, and so forth" that make them "black." Non sequiturs such as this one and those evident in Davis' reading of *Plessy v. Ferguson* point to a chronic inability to think critically about these issues: she falls into the traps of the Bond Fallacies repeatedly by failing to see where those with whom she is either in agreement or disagreement in one area conflict or concur in others, and by judging logic and common sense by a decision's appearance when measured against today's standards. While it is not inappropriate to use an introductory essay to do no more than point out interesting possible readings of the work that it introduces, Davis presents some possible readings as incorrect yet does not come to any conclusions about why Larsen allowed for all of the possible readings that might, possibly, be correct. Toward the end of her essay, Davis concludes that "[t]he contested interpretations of the ending of *Passing*... and the

questions surrounding the dropped final paragraph... cloud and destabilize any but the most open reading of the conclusion and what happened when Clare goes out the window” (Davis xxxi), leaving me, at least, with the impression that, while she wants to deny certain readings on the basis of facts that don’t really exist (the missing “view” of Clare’s dead body), she also wants to deny that she can be proven wrong because her “open reading” falls into the category that is not closed off by Larsen. As I’ve said, an incomplete conclusion is not inappropriate to an introduction, but Davis *does* come to a complete conclusion: that the book is designed to leave the reader with an incomplete conclusion within an enclosed spectrum and no more!

Davis’ reading of *Passing* accords with the incongruities of her presentation of Plessy v. Ferguson partly because in both cases she appears to think that satisfactory reconciliation of facts is not requisite since the facts must be *implicitly* linked on the basis of their subject matter. Ultimately, however, what Davis fails to see is that Homer Plessy represents an entity entirely unknown in the world of *Passing*: a person arguing that judgment of “race” becomes judgment of skin color and thus separation is silly. To Larsen, skin becomes absolutely irrelevant because she sees “race” as separate from skin color but “racial” ties and separations as silly just the same (the added “ties” making all the difference).

To switch critics, I agree with Sullivan that Larsen is “profoundly concerned with racial identity” (373), so I’ll use it as my platform. While a minor character, Gertrude, is often dismissed as another example of women who “disguise their African American identities” (Sullivan 375), or as a representative of another degree of passing (Davis xiii), use of her in the novel revolves around the defining characteristic of her personality: she’s obsequious. At first this quality is seen in her “intense concentration” on Irene¹³ and in the fact that she does not, at first, originate a conversation about anything. While she does claim to have feared that her first child would be dark skinned, she seems to be more concerned with being able to say, “[t]hey

don't know like we do" (Larsen 36) — "we" being the signifier of privileged membership to some group. Upon Bellew's entrance Gertrude glances at Irene as if trying to sense her reaction, and laughs "with dutiful eagerness" when expecting an explanation of Bellew's racial slur that will ease the tension (39). At the end of the chapter, she claims to have been "[f]or a minute... so mad [she] could have slapped him" (44) only after she's had ample opportunity to observe Irene's anger. Since Gertrude is "one always ready to oblige" (40), the reader can obviously not, in the absence of a trustworthy omniscient narrator (if there is such a thing), take her at her word. Gertrude's relevance to the story must be gleaned from the facts that we know about her, not what she says. Her husband owns a butcher shop on Chicago's South Side, which would not indicate a diminished desirability were it not for Irene's proximate consideration of Gertrude's lack of sophistication, so she didn't pass to "marry up" as Irene believes Clare to have done; and her husband, in-laws, and friends all know that she has African heritage. Hence, she is passing (as in pretending to be other than what she is) even less than Irene. In fact, for all we know, the only instance of Gertrude passing is while in the presence of Bellew.

It is unarguable that Bellew portrays, within the book, the ridiculousness of homogenizing a group of people under certain assumptions. He bases these assumptions not even on first-hand experience, but on the fact that he "know[s] people who've known them, better than they know their black selves. And [he] read[s] in the papers about them" (41). In a way, this reflection of the opinions of people that he knows is reminiscent of Gertrude's desire to agree with those around her. However, the Bond Fallacy reading of John Bellew, that he is *only* "the white racist signification embodied" (Sullivan 376), refuses to accept the fact that Larsen might have been trying to create a *character* rather than a *caricature*. Everything about him does not necessarily hinge on his racism (Associative Fallacy), and his perception of racism need not be the conscious social statement that it is considered to be today (Assumptive Fallacy). At the

very least, the question must be raised: is he truly *just* a symbol of racism's ugly presence, or is he like Gertrude in that he speaks only the common thought?¹⁴

The irony, of course, is that no matter why Bellew considers himself a racist, he is unknowingly married to a woman who has African ancestry. I believe Clare to be the representation of the term "Negro" as it has been used in literature. Clare is the oppressed, albeit in an unexpected way. From the very start, Larsen treats Clare as a racial stereotype through her letter to Irene. Her "scrawl" is "almost illegible"; the letter itself seems "out of place and alien" compared to the "ordinary and clearly directed letters" that Irene has been reading; "there was, too, something mysterious and slightly furtive about it" (Larsen 9). If the letter as a "racial" description seems to be a stretch, consider Clare's pre-passing life: an effectual slave to her father, she appears to let loose "an outpouring of pent-up fury" rather than grief when he is killed and she is emancipated (10). She then lives with her aunts who force her to deny her ancestry while treating her as an indentured servant (26). Her early biography is nearly an encapsulated version of African American history!¹⁵ Furthermore, consider the extent to which Clare is made a sexual symbol. Irene refers to her as "Catlike" (10) at the beginning of several pages of ambiguity during which the reader cannot be sure whether the unspeakable thing that Clare has done was pass or become a prostitute. The episode culminates with Irene responding to Clare's confession that she is married with "a sharp intake of breath, but whether it was relief or chagrin that she felt, she herself could not have told" (23). Proof contrary to one possibility of the ambiguity relieves Irene of the anxiety (and distaste) commensurate with it, but forces her to consider the implications of the reality of Clare's passing. Even beyond this ambiguity between prostitution and passing, it can hardly be denied that Clare is presented as a sexual object. After Clare's death, Irene laments not the loss of a friend (for whom, some have suggested, she had a sexual attraction), but the loss of a pretty face and "the whole torturing loveliness that had been

Clare Kendry” (111). The equation of the those of African heritage with sex is well enough documented that I need not enter into the debate here (indeed, there really isn’t much to debate). Sander Gilman even suggests a particular emphasis on the topic before and during the time when Larsen wrote *Passing* by suggesting that “[t]he role of the black as the icon of sexuality... permeates the entire liberal discussion of the black during the early twentieth century.”¹⁶ Sullivan skirts the issue when she says that “Clare becomes Irene’s vicarious connection to the white world” (375), using this conclusion to both contradict those who suggest that “race” is used as a tool to get at lesbianism and to root Irene in Baccian-ness by making this an example of her own brand of passing (because of the Bond Fallacies, Sullivan would have been unable to reconcile Irene’s Caucasian qualities with the fact that she does, on occasion, pass). The piece that Sullivan is missing is the sexual-symbolic use of those with African heritage as sexual surrogates made clear by Gilman: “The blacks’ identity is as surrogate genitals, often but not always of the other sex” (120). The most compelling evidence that Clare is presented as the oppressed Negro is the fact that the central conflict revolves around Clare’s attempt to “pass” back into a Baccian world (which, even Sullivan must concede, would have to be the case when Clare associate’s with Irene’s circle if conversely it is Clare who opens a door to the “white world” for Irene).

During her discussion of Irene, Sullivan does come to an *interesting* conclusion about Larsen’s use of the third person in a novel that doesn’t offer much more information than can be afforded by a first person narrative. She suggests that “[t]he first person would be inappropriate for Irene’s story because the I as an empowered, integrated subject position eludes Irene. She always defines herself in relation to the desire of the Other, and thus an unmediated representation of her voice would be incongruent with her essential lack” (377); but, having come up with this nifty solution to shed some light on “I” being Irene’s final spoken word in the

book (Larsen 114), Sullivan does not consider alternatives.¹⁷ In my opinion, the third person acts in large part both to undermine Irene's beliefs and to lessen the urge to question her. In other words, while Irene's words and thoughts cannot be fully trusted as factual because they are related as if through a mediator, it also becomes less obvious that thoughts are not facts because the descriptive, factual voice is the same as the conceptual voice. Once we are willing to accept that the opinions expressed within the text must be considered to be suspect, we can look at the facts about Irene. Irene is never, within the text itself, hindered by race except in her own mind. I don't mean this in reference to her feeling as if she is obligated to bear Bellew's racism at their first meeting (which, after all, is a hindrance within the realm of "her mind"), but in reference to her mobility both in New York and in Chicago. In Chicago she may be worried about being ejected from the Drayton, but she is not. In New York she frequents, with impunity, the very same shopping district as Bellew (this made even more poignant by the fact that the dark-skinned Felise accompanies her on at least one particular venture and even stays behind to shop without her, undermining any belief that Irene provides some kind of visual justification for her presence). Of course, we are not shown or told about the many times that Irene *may* have been ejected from restaurants or the treatment that she and Felise *might* have received during shopping expeditions, but the fact that Larsen does not so much as mention the first or give us any reason to even consider the second (they are nothing other than cheerful while shopping) indicates that any suppositions along these lines would be based on that which Irene or the reader presume to know without reference to the world of the book itself. Certainly, this is one area in which a reader's cultural or physical similarity might provide an extra insight into the common experiences of a group. However, Larsen's conspicuous extraction of any evidence whatsoever, made more conspicuous by the phrasing of these sections, suggests that the conclusion is unjustified in the case of Irene. Irene, whose heritage is not more specified than as mixed,

represents the oppressor and, by contextual inference, the Caucasian. It is Irene who introduces the issue of “race” (Larsen 16). It is Irene who thinks of her “black” housemaid, Zulena, as “a small mahogany-colored creature” (54). Of all the characters, Irene is the most concerned with control and security: the status quo, keeping that which she’s obtained. “Irene didn’t like changes, particularly changes that affected the smooth routine of her household” (Larsen 58). She even uses her sons as living manacles to keep her husband Brian.¹⁸ “He wouldn’t [leave her], she knew. He was fond of her... And there were the boys” (61). She wants Brian to be happy, but it is “only in her own way and by some plan of hers for him that she truly desire[s] him to be so” (61). When she’s afraid that she’ll lose him to Clare, she realizes, “[t]he boys! She ha[s] a surge of relief” (93). Brian couldn’t leave his children. Of course, at first she must face the new implication of this hold that she has over him, that it makes her, “to him, only the mother of his sons” (93); but, like the true oppressor, she eventually realizes that it is *he* who is insignificant, only “her husband and the father of her sons” (107). The contrast to Clare’s feeling entrapped by her daughter, Margery, leads to an important equation: Irene is similar in many ways to Bellew. In reference to her dark-skinned husband, Irene nearly quotes Bellew verbatim when she thinks that “[she knows] him as well as he [knows] himself, or better.” (58). Moreover, through Bellew, she is very much like Gertrude, making the issue one of perceived group affiliation in terms other than “race.” She continually makes the “as she — as they all — had suspected” stumble (22, for one). An argument could be made that Irene’s final “I” is followed by a fainting spell because she has cut herself off from the “we” that, for her, represented Bacians.¹⁹ In line with her “whiteness” is Irene’s inability, at first, to spot Clare as one of African heritage despite her continuous claims that it is Caucasians who cannot tell. Predominant, however, is the fact that Irene just does not understand passing. She was not the daughter of the town drunk as Clare was, and so was a member of the group of which Clare did

not feel a part. Irene has no economic or social experiences to justify passing and cannot imagine any other reason to do it, or to do anything. More telling still, Irene is obsessed with making herself lighter. Sullivan refers with great magnitude to the time that Irene spends before her bedroom mirror (designing a scenario in which Irene ends up talking to herself when it seems as if she is talking to Clare. She even suggests that Irene “reaches out to the [mirror] image” [Sullivan 378], when, in fact, she is reaching out for Clare’s “two hands” [Larsen 65]: having turned around at some point without Larsen feeling as if she must state it, unless we are to picture her jamming her fingers against the glass.). There is no reason to concentrate on the powdering done only with the aid of her mirror: she worries about her powder streaking while under Clare’s glare at the Drayton and continues to mention it throughout the novel.

Sullivan provides an example of the problems that the Bond Fallacies, taken all together, can cause. For her, Irene cannot be a symbol of the oppressor. For Davis, it would have been unconscionable to think that Irene was, in fact, more akin to the Supreme Court than to Plessy (as she presents them). The reasoning becoming, in brief, that Larsen had African heritage and, since that must have been the most important contributor to her artistic work, couldn’t have seen herself as an oppressor, so could not have created a character with similar physical attributes and heritage who was.²⁰ Sullivan forgives Irene her folly by suggesting that she was overcome by Bellew’s insidious beliefs. “Unconsciously, she is mimicking the behavior of the white racist, willing Clare’s disappearance through a refusal to recognize” (Sullivan 380). As if she doesn’t think that she has absolved Irene sufficiently, Sullivan adds later, “[t]hat she is apparently implicated in Clare’s death does not free [Irene] from its ramifications. Indeed that complicity only reveals the extent to which she has been infected by white ideology” (383). Sullivan apparently realizes that she cannot claim definitively that Irene did not push Clare, but says that if the ending is read in that way, then “that action is merely a conditioned response to the white

voice of authority pronouncing ‘nigger,’ which, in accordance with the Plessy v. Ferguson decision, entails an act of expulsion or exclusion” (383). What Sullivan has done is symptomatic of the way in which the Bond Fallacies convolute the views of the reader to such an extent that she/he, in order to achieve an end, not only fails to achieve that end, but exacerbates the very ambiguities that she/he is trying to relieve. Because Sullivan refuses to entertain the idea that Larsen had created a character who was real enough to make unforced mistakes, she ends up imagining a character who is so weak that a near stranger speaking a racial slur forces her to murder.

I must confess to believing something that Sullivan all but insults as ridiculous at the beginning of her paper. *Passing* is not about “race”, at least not in the straightforward “I have a cause” way in which Sullivan reads the novel. I believe that I give Larsen much more credit than Sullivan does. I believe that Larsen anticipated readings such Sullivan’s and developed her ideas in such a way that readers who first choose that route will end up with such convoluted interpretations that they will have to retrace their steps and, at the very least, give some thought to the way in which they are reading (perhaps she didn’t anticipate the present state of critical affairs). *Passing* is about perceptions. Clare is the most visibly “white” and the consummate passer, yet cares surprisingly little about the “races” of other people: she is more concerned about economics in the beginning and friendship in the end.²¹ Irene is the most self-centered, controlling, and manipulative character in the book. Sullivan takes passages out of context when the context makes all the difference, and this choice on Sullivan’s part is very telling. She opens her paper with a quote from *Passing* in which Irene “wished, for the first time in her life, that she had not been born a Negro” (Larsen 98). Taken on its own, the sentiment seems to present the terribleness of being a member of an oppressed people. Putting the sentence back in context, however, we see that Irene is expressing this sentiment against her “race” because it is the only

thing that keeps her from concentrating on herself. She does not lament her affiliation because people hold her back with prejudice, but because it makes her feel obligated to help Clare Kendry. In another place, Sullivan does not so much remove a sentiment from its context as present only a portion of the sentiment. In a discussion about Irene's shaky "I" Sullivan quotes, "[Irene] was aware that, to her, security was the most important and desired thing in life... She wanted only to be tranquil." By ending the passage here, Sullivan cuts out the entire point of the paragraph (Sullivan 377). What follows is: "Only, unmolested, to be allowed to direct for their own best good, the lives of her sons and her husband" (Larsen 107). Sullivan, I can only opine, is either unwilling to address this issue or believes that manipulating people "for their own best good" is a noble activity.

While I concede that the end of *Passing* was meant to be somewhat ambiguous, I refuse to accept the idea that ambiguity allows an ignorance of those facts that are presented. Sullivan is wrong. Bellew does scream out "Nig!" when his wife falls to her death, but it does not represent the final bowing of Irene to "the bellows of white authority" (Sullivan 383). Bellew's "Nig" has become a pet-name for his wife (derived from a racial slur, yes, but as a private joke). Here's the fallacy again: Bellew is not *just* a symbol of "white authority," he is also a confused man watching his wife slip through a sixth story window of a New York apartment building full of strangers. When she falls, Bellew issues a sound "not quite human, like a beast in agony" (Larsen 111). He is not, as Sullivan states, issuing some final command of "subconscious" power that the word "nigger" gives Caucasians over Baciens (383). He reverts to a state of mind incapable of pretense. Sullivan stops short of explaining Bellew's physical disappearance. Perhaps it was too problematic within the schemata that she was following. She does, however, recall Bellew's haughty claim, "No niggers in this family. Never have been and never will be" (Larsen 40), suggesting that "Clare's death fulfills the law" (Sullivan 383). It didn't. If Sullivan

had remembered the couple's daughter, she may have found evidence for her thesis by explaining Bellew's disappearance; but Sullivan is trying to prove that Bellew used his mysterious power over Irene to force her to act on his order to kill, and the existence of Margery complicates matters.

I realize that there is an aversion to my type of reading, perhaps because it removes the platform from the party, so to speak. But this aversion is the cause of incomplete and disjointed readings that attempt to prove a point by avoiding facts that might lead to the conclusion that connecting their sets of varied theses (i.e. — the “race/skin argument” with the “perceived similarity” one that I believe Larsen to be making) would give “social critics” a much better argument for *the very same thing*. People find it difficult, when fighting for the “cause” of a group, to contemplate whether or not the distinctions that allow them to fight for one group against another are, themselves, silly, or even the thing to be fought against. You may have noticed that I have offered very little specific evidence of the Affiliative Fallacy. This is due to the fact that it deals specifically with the critic's (or reader's) perceptions of both him/herself and the writer that, without an “I, like the author” statement, must be assumed or sensed. I can envision an argument being made against my reading that would rely on the very things that I have defined as the Bond Fallacies: I am, by definition, some Other, and so cannot possibly “know like they know,” while they cannot possibly disagree with each other, because, even in the event that they don't agree on a specific point, they will believe themselves to be arguing for the same “cause” and read each other as arguing the *same argument*. This type of reading through group association is what I'm arguing against. I am dealing, here, with *perceived* relationships. Therefore, it will be impossible for an adversary to argue against my points on the basis of “who I am,” because the question is really whether or not I *feel* as if I am part of some group to which Larsen belongs. Likewise, ignorance of the possible classifications of those with

whom I am in contention is forgivable because it would be incorrect of me to presume that “who they are” suggests either a perceived similarity or difference to Larsen. I believe that, inasmuch as my argument follows logical or argumentative standards (neither of which will I grapple with here), a basic analytical grammar, if you will, it is completely valid. Even more: perhaps I have an advantage in that I enter the debate as an analyst of Nella Larsen’s novel *Passing* who feels kinship only as a fellow reader and writer of fiction, whereas many critics, such as Davis and Sullivan, appear to believe that they share some innate bond, and so some innate “cause” and sense of “cause” with each other and with Larsen. Consequently, they set out to find evidence for *their own* arguments rather than Larsen’s. The simple fact is that their argument clouds their ability to see that Larsen is playing with the very social doctrines that make their arguments (and those that they argue against) possible. Collaterally, it is not enough to pass the verdict of “lacking discernable logic”: an *analyst* must find the logic and, if there truly is none to be found, where that logic might have gone awry, especially an analyst of literature, and more especially one who is predominantly concerned with social inquiries. Is it difficult to believe that Larsen removes her epigraph from the context of Countée Cullen’s poem “Heritage” for much the same reason that Sullivan removes her opening epigraph from its context? The irony may be that readers expect the passage to reflect only the irony of the original poem, but in reality it might have been meant to be ironic by being ingenuous in sentiment as a clue to the contrast between Irene’s ideology and that which we might expect her to have based on her heritage.

I am not necessarily claiming to know the absolute Truth about *Passing*, but merely that my reading raises issues that it would be impossible, perhaps unconscionable, for a reader who falls prey to one or more of the three Bond Fallacies to consider. It seems to me that a tremendous number of mistakes are made and forgiven in the interest of unifying one group as if in opposition to another. To my mind, a better argument would be that both groups are

equivalent in their successes and their failings. Perhaps I am wrong, but it seems to me that until we, all of us, are willing to share parts of individual cultures and stop calling them “ours” so that we may call them “*Ours*,” there will never be anything resembling harmony. Did I say “anything”? Let me amend that and add “on a large scale,” because it does exist in small doses. So, when you feel that you’re ready for the leap, feel free to pass not over, but right up onto the median. Nella and I will be waiting.

¹ Thadious Davis, “Introduction,” *Passing*, Nella Larsen (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), vii.

² Since it is important to the linguistic clarity of my argument that I be able, as much as is possible, to use terms that distinguish between culture, heritage, and skin pigmentation, I will use “white” and “black” usually in reference to the hues that they respectively are intended to describe (the first letters being lowercase to further deny them as representative of an entire people or even an entire person). Furthermore, I’ve opted to avoid the phrase “African American” because I find that it becomes either too complicated or over-simplified when dealing with people of assorted heritage (the subject matter of *Passing*); and due to the fact that it is an attempt to refer to culture, heritage, and skin pigmentation in terms of geography and, by implication, nationality: exactly the area in which I believe a nation’s citizens to *need* consideration of themselves to be as a unified group! Throughout this paper I will attempt to be as specific as possible when referring to heritage. To refer to the relevant culture, I will use “Bacian” (Black American Culture) as a temporary term (temporary because I’ve no expectation that it will become widely accepted or used). To quote Henry Louis Gates, Jr., “how can the black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?” (Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. “*Race, Writing, and Difference* [Chicago and London. The University of Chicago Press, 1986], 12). In answer, I suggest that we must use a term, or invent an entirely new one if none extant are acceptable, that does not refer implicitly to any characteristic other than culture (this suggestion made with the supreme hope that there will be a day in which “racial,” as opposed to descriptive, terms will not be needed). To wit, how can a subject nation posit a national identity when even nationality must be diversely identified? I will not, however, go so far as to re-term passages drawn from texts that use a different system.

³ I have preserved, here, Davis’ spelling.

⁴ Plessy v. Ferguson, “U.S. Supreme Court, Plessy v. Ferguson, 153 U.S. 537 (1896) No. 210.”

(<http://laws.findlaw.com/US/163/537.html>). Due to the fact that web-pages are not numbered by page, I will refer to this text, henceforth, parenthetically with the word “Plessy.”

⁵ I realize that this conclusion may not sit easily with many people. It is important, however, to remember that there are differences between the interpretational liberties involved in art and in law. What I am examining here is the way in which a literary critic attempts to use misinterpretations of facts to give the fictional lives within *Passing* a “real life” precedent. While it might make for an interesting dialogue to compare the ways in which the *interpretations* of Plessy v. Ferguson relate to Larsen’s *interpretation* of the world in which she lived (as seen through her characters), that is not the end to which it appears that Davis has designed her discussion of the case (although it is exactly what I’m attempting).

⁶ For example, I have been told that I am one-quarter Jewish (although Semitic might be a better term as I have, if anything, mild Christian tendencies), yet would not claim more knowledge than a contemporary American Buddhist about Michael Gold’s *Jews Without Money* (to pick a random example) simply on the basis of this dubious relation.

⁷ Neil Sullivan, “Nella Larsen’s ‘Passing’ and the fading subject,” *African American Review* (32:3 [Fall 1998]: 373[14]), 373.

⁸ The fact that her very first statement is that “many critics” are wrong, coupled with her failure to address any of their arguments specifically or prove this point through any textual evidence (as opposed to arguably suspect biographical inference), shows that Sullivan must, to some extent, be relying on Larsen’s preeminent concern with “race” being somehow implicit, thus making other *readings* dismissible as frivolous “accusations” that need not be entertained.

⁹ These definitions seem, at least to me, to be statements of the obvious inasmuch as I’ve defined them as extreme cases (by using terms such as “must”). What I am hoping to gain by defining them as fallacies is a placing of ingenuous concepts within a critical realm to allow for their application in instances that are not so obvious. I will admit that there **must** be instances, such as an understanding of specific jargon or a “private language” between people of a literary (or social) movement, in which membership in some group *does* privilege one’s reading or, if only by coincidence, a critic and an author do share certain views and utilize the same methods to promote those views.

¹⁰ I leave mental capacity, emotional disposition, and several other qualities that have been, at one time or another, included in the term “race” out of this discussion because I believe that there has been sufficient proof to discard them. I do, however, wish to point out that these *are* categories that may be used in the description of an individual person.

¹¹ Please note that this is a fictional author.

¹² Whether or not I believe this (or the Supreme Court did) is immaterial to an analysis of what was explicitly said.

¹³ Nella Larsen, *Passing* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997), 35.

¹⁴ Not to go so far as to imply that this cannot be seen as part of real racism.

¹⁵ I break my terminological belief here because I think “African American” fits in this instance.

¹⁶ Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology: Stereotypes of Sexuality, Race, and Madness* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1985), 120.

¹⁷ Which I find strange, considering that Sullivan shows a penchant for citing, unnecessarily, Faulkner’s *Absalom, Absalom!*, a book that, if it can be confidently said to be about anything, is a questioning of first person narrative (Sullivan 383 and 384).

¹⁸ It is also an interesting coincidence that Brian and Brian and Clare’s son, Brian Junior, share only physical attributes: in personality, Ted, the other brother, is said to be more like his father.

¹⁹ One explanation for Bellew’s disappearance after Clare’s death is that Irene symbolically subsumed him.

²⁰ Note that “culture” is absent from this comment.

²¹ The suggestion that she sleeps with Irene’s husband is arguably an unjustified paranoid suspicion on Irene’s part.