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Revealing History: Hall's "Passing" and the Depiction of Black Women in Film

### **Introduction**

Actress, producer and director Rebecca Hall felt a kinship when she first picked up Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing*. Larsen's successful novel was released during the Harlem Renaissance and received acclaim for the way she exposed the nuances of Black life, womanhood in New York City during this time period. It is a story of repression, oppression, surveillance and revenge that is unique in its centering of Black female friendships. In this story main characters and childhood acquaintances Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield run into each other in New York after years of separation, Irene quickly realizes that Clare is "passing" for white. This notion of passing is specific to African-Americans as racial passing was introduced in the post-civil war, slavery period when Black people were violently policed by Jim Crow, they embraced tactics to navigate this system including "passing" as white if one had lighter melanin. Throughout the novel Irene contemplates Clare's "passing privilege" through observing her marriage to a white man, watching her interact with the Black community and eventually suspects Clare of having an affair with her husband. The movie shows scenes that exemplify the racial tensions evident in the 20th century, especially emphasizing respectability politics, the increase in violence toward Black communities and the nuanced ways Black women made sense of their realities.

This text was adapted from a novel into a movie 91 years after its publication and the stories inside of it are still relevant in 2021. Hall felt compelled to develop this text for Netflix because she found out members of her family passed for white out of necessity and safety for decades. This history was hidden from her until she was introduced to Larsen's novel. When she read it she expressed an instant kinship to the author who also struggled with her identity and acceptance from both communities. Both authors have used the text as a form of healing for their own inner child which they both express felt confusion about their identity and where they fit in. Through this analysis I aim to locate distinct scenes in Hall's *Passing* where the lead characters navigate a white supremacist, patriarchal society that deems them invisible. I hope to highlight the ways each character becomes self-defined (Hill-Collins, 1989) and how Hall uses each character to expose the nuances Black womanhood then and now.

In this study I aim to expose the ways in which Black feminist filmmakers like Hall produces an authentic interpretation of Black feminist writer Larsen's *Passing* in a way that explains the nuanced nature of being a Black woman during the Harlem Renaissance period. I hope to show how Hall highlights this somewhat unknown history in the tradition of other Black feminist rhetoricians and filmmakers before her.

RQ: How does this film expose the nuanced realities of Black womanhood then and now?

### **Lit Review**

Black feminist theory; hill-collins "self-definiiton", hooks, maragh, sherrard

Black filmmakers: sherrard, hill-collins "controlling images", miller "Black women filmmakers/love on screen"

### **Black Feminist Theory**

I aim to use Black feminist theory in my analysis of scenes in passing and will pay close attention to if and how the main characters become self-defined. Patricia Hill-Collins describes this as the power to name one's reality which is essential in developing a Black feminist consciousness. This self-definition allows Black women to recognize how their lived experiences relate to how they understand themselves in this world, specifically in America. This realization can lead to frustration, anger, empowerment, enlightenment and enables Black women to reach out to communities that support their self definition. I plan to incorporate hooks' "Talkin' back" as a way to illustrate how the main characters negate their assumed dispositions by challenging authority, in this sense the authority would be white men and white society. The women talk back to authority by passing and by daring to discuss their existence to other Black women (1989).

Maragh's piece "Our Struggles Are Unequal": Black Women's Affective Labor Between Television and Twitter is relevant to the analysis of passing. In this text the author uses digital and affective labor, it emphasizes how Black women use twitter to share their personal stories, connect with a community and inform and educate production companies and the public through their discourse. This piece followed commentary from Black women regarding Oprah Winfrey's network airing a movie called "Light Girls" that explored the nuanced ways lighter skinned Black women have been exploited throughout American history. These Black women interacted with #LightGirls by telling stories and encouraging the production company to include darker skinned women and the abuse they were subjugated to; through this discourse the women are sharing scholarly cultural information and increasing popularity of viewing the show (2016). This can be used to show how darker skinned women are continually exploited, rendered invisible whereas there is a fascination with understanding lighter skinned Black women.

In Sherrard's book *Portraits of a Negro Woman* there are several chapters that are relevant to this analysis including "The Iconography of the Mulatta" where she traces the historical placement of light-skinned Black women in American history. The chapter emphasizes how during the Harlem Renaissance there was an obsession with the practice of passing and Black people being classified as "mulatta." This mixed-race figure was used in visual and literary art as a form of representation and respectability. Sherrard highlights that for some Black women passing enabled them a sense of agency and freedom "from the enforced respectability and domesticity of the race woman." These women are most likely to be represented as "irresistibly attractive and unsettling" as they cross gender, social and class boundaries that historically limit Black women's opportunities (2007).

Hooks book "Black Looks: Race and Representation" she discusses the multiple avenues race and representation intersect in the media. She emphasizes the need to foster self-love in the black community and how positioning loving one's blackness can be seen as political resistance that "transforms our ways of looking and being, and thus creates the conditions necessary for us to move against the forces of domination and death and reclaim black life." In a different chapter in this book she discusses the film industry in the United States reinforces a system of knowledge and power that maintains white supremacy. She argues that for one to engage in any form of media viewing in the US one will engage in viewing the representation of a black person. Hooks goes on to talk about how scholarly critical interrogation of black looks was concerned with issues of race by emphasizing the racial domination of blacks

by whites and rarely concerned gender. These aspects of viewership are emphasized when creating and viewing Black feminist films like *Passing*.

### **Black filmmaking**

In Patricia Hill-Collins seminal work “Black Feminist Thought” she discusses the ways in which the white patriarchal society has rendered Black women to specific tropes throughout American history. These tropes work to reinforce negative depictions of Black women that render them invisible, objects or always at the service of other people. Collins calls these tropes “controlling images” which include the illustration of the mammy, matriarch and jezebel which have been updated throughout US history to reflect the attitudes of those in power. These representations of Black women have been proliferated in the media as a tactic used to justify racial inequality and the devaluation of Black women as a group. These depictions seep into every aspect of Black womanhood and can be located in the media produced in reference to them (1990).

Sherrard’s book has a chapter titled “A Plea for Color: Nella Larsen’s Textual Tableaux” which directly addressed Larsen and her literature which revolved around the life of mixed race women in the United States. Sherrard asserts that Larsen finds ways in her work to “present the mulatta heroine as a psychologically complex, independent woman” while also highlighting the tension of being fetishized in both White and Black elite circles. Sherrard emphasizes how Larsen gives a modern interpretation of the mulatta woman that is independent yet still tied to sexualized notions of her existence both externally and internally. She goes on to give a deep analysis of the two main characters in *Passing* delving into the psyche of Irene and her “unexplainable” attraction to Clare, her childhood friend who is passing. Irene’s descriptions of Clare render her to the mulatta stereotype as a jezebel or temptress which exposes the classism and colorism located in African-American communities. The author emphasizes the ways in which the novel is written to exemplify the observational nature Black women use to make sense of their lives and emphasizes how Irene’s desire and disdain for her childhood friend reflects larger cultural issues of financial and social acceptance. This chapter follows Larsen’s literary work as well as Motley’s paintings and points to the instances where the representation of mixed race women was evident (2007).

In Miller’s book “Black Women Filmmakers and Black Love on Screen” the author explores the ways in which Black love and relationships are shown in Hollywood films. Miller focuses on the essence and power of the white male gaze in relation to historical “controlling images” that have come to represent Black people, specifically Black women. Miller emphasizes the need for a Black feminist perspective and diversity within the Hollywood film industry because the public craves this content. She highlights how representations of Black people in Hollywood tend to be negative and stereotypical due to the lack of diversity in casting and behind the scenes. In Chapter 4 “Black Love and Black Feminism” Miller highlights movies like *Love & Basketball* to emphasize the nuanced nature of Black womanhood, relationships and career where the Black women in these situations were able to challenge patriarchal standards within their relationships. She calls for Black feminist filmmaking to “should empower Black women and challenge negative images, especially as it relates to depictions of families and romantic relationships” (2007).

### **Method**

I plan to use a qualitative textual analysis of the discourse used in the movie *Passing* in order to examine the ways the main characters employ their own versions of Black feminist thought in their daily lives. Through this analysis I’ll be able to locate the nuanced ways the two

main characters talk to each other and to themselves about the tension of being a Black woman in America during the Harlem renaissance. As I examine this language I hope to employ Black feminist theory into my interpretation as it is relevant to this topic because of the main characters, the story, the original book/author and the director.

While examining the scenes I will use semiotics as a form of analysis in order to decode the use of music, lighting and other non-discursive actions made by the characters as a way to expose the intricacies of their relationship to each other and their communities. This will help me to investigate the intentions of the director and the characters while recreating this infamous novel for *Netflix*.

I'll watch the movie 3 times and go back to specific scene where I feel Black womanhood is discussed, negotiated and challenged.

### **Analysis - Black and white nature of film**

I will examine 3 scenes from the Netflix movie *Passing* in order to demonstrate the ways in which race, class, and gender are interpreted, expressed and navigated by Black women during the Harlem Renaissance.

#### **Introduction scene:**

The first scene in which the audience is introduced to main characters Irene and Clare is integral to the success of this story. As Sherrard pointed out Irene is a “chic, modern race woman” (2007) who fits the standards of respectability with her impeccable dress, hair and ability to acquire a table at a nice New York City restaurant in the dead heat of summer yet she isn't able to pass when she is in a store buying toys for her children. Irene walks around town on her own, exercising a form of agency that many Black women were not afforded during this time period (Hill-Collins, 1990). As she sits and waits for her waiter she takes in the environment, an endlessly white, open air restaurant. It's quiet except for the flirtatious and familiar laughter she overhears coming from a table of two individuals in front of her. She averts her eyes as a white man gets up from the table where the laughter came from displaying how respectability and Jim Crow era laws were socially implemented in the North. Irene finally meets the gaze of the woman with the familiar laugh and they look at each other until the woman gets up to talk to her:

Irene: (looks around anxiously)

Clare: Pardon me, ma'am I think I know you.

Irene: You must be mistaken—

Clare: No, of course I know you Rene, you look just the same— do they still call you Rene?

Irene: Yes, though no one's called me that for a long time

Clare: Don't you know me?

Irene: I can't seem to place..

Clare: (giggles)

Irene: Clare?

Clare: That's right. Now don't run away! You simply must stay and talk. Fancy meeting you here I'm too lucky.

Irene: It's awfully surprising yes.. you've changed so much..

Clare: Since I've been here I was hoping to run into someone, preferably you though— and now you're here (reaches out and touches hand)

Irene: (pulls hand back)

Clare: I wager you haven't given me a thought. So, tell me, I want to know everything— married, children? (lights cigarette)

This exchange shows how in this setting Irene, a Black woman who does not pass has to adhere to the social contracts that render her inferior in the same room as Clare. Clare highlights the ways in that Sherrard explains that the “mulatta” woman is independent, free from respectability and is able to invoke agency over her life, this is illustrated when Clare walks over to Irene, starts the conversation and when she lights her cigarette. The moment when Irene pulls her hand back invokes a homoerotic tension that is evident throughout the film which illustrates Irene's desire and hate of Clare.

In the following exchange Irene discovers that Clare's husband was the white man whom she averted her eyes from earlier. Clare expresses interest in coming back “home” to Harlem while inquiring about Irene's life.

Irene: Clare.. Does he?

Clare: No. (she giggles) lets go to my suite to so we can talk properly.

After this Clare brings Irene back to her suite where she changes clothes and explains how she's been reconnecting with people from the neighborhood as well as children.

Irene: Mine are dark.

Clare: Oh but I thought your husband...

Irene: Well, he couldn't exactly pass if that's what you're thinking.

Clare: Well! (laughs and looks at Irene up and down) Would you? (turns around for Irene to unzip her dress)

This scene points to the unspoken language between the two regarding Clare's passing and whether or not Irene passes as well. Clare positions passing as a social strategy and tactic used to trick white people and navigate both Black and White communities and is confused by Irene's choice to marry a dark-skinned Black man.

Clare: She goes as white (in reference to her daughter). So you never thought to?

Irene: What?

Clare: I'm asking if you've ever thought of passing Rene.

Irene: Why should I? For convenience maybe but.. I mean I just have everything I've ever wanted except maybe more money.

Both women are capable of passing yet Irene feels she has “everything” this speaks to Mills' understanding of Black love and Black feminist filmmaking that emphasizes the need for these films to challenge notions of femininity that pressure women to balance work, life, love, etc. Sherrard talks about how Larsen's characterization of Irene is a reflection of the anxieties Black women in this era experienced when it came to fitting into the bourgeoisie Black middle-class in Harlem in the 1920s (2007, 2018).

Later in the scene Clare discusses her upbringing and how she doesn't have trouble passing due to her adoption from her white aunts. Clare goes on to order food and alcohol while they wait for her husband to come back.

John enters: Nig?

Clare: John dear! I ran into an old, old friend of mine from school. Irene Westover, Irene this is my husband.

John: Pleasure to meet you Ms. Westover—

Irene: Actually it's Mrs. Redfield.

Clare: Of course, I– didn't even think to ask

John: Sorry if I've interrupted. Could you get me a drink honey?

Clare: You hear what John called me Rene? Go ahead tell her! (laughs)

John: It's silly. When we were first married this woman she was as white as a lily but as the years go by she seems to be getting darker and darker. If you don't look out you may wake up one morning and find out you're a nigger. (laughs)

Clare: (looks at Irene suggestively and laughs while sitting on husband's lap)

Irene: (laughs loudly) That's good. That's.. That's good..

Clare: After all these years what would it matter if I was 1 or 2 percent colored?

John: You can turn as Black as you please as far as I'm concerned I know you're not colored.

After this scene Irene asks John if he dislikes negroes and he replies that he hates them but not as much as Clare. This entire scene is important to the movie because it shows how ignorant John is to his wife and Irene's ethnicity and it shows how uncomfortable and dangerous it can be for Black women during this time period. Clare and Irene's interaction while John is sitting there points to the ways in which Black women have a shared consciousness that transcends common understanding as these characters have grown up together and are likely knowledgeable about the dangers of not passing. Their knowing looks, the use of laughter and silence are discursive ways Black women then and now use in order to communicate it signify to each other the hidden meanings in the conversation (Hill-Collins, 1990). Also the instances where John calls Clare "Nig," orders her to get him a drink and jokes about hating Black people shows the ways that Clare is still rendered to the "mammy" controlling image by her own husband as she is expected to take care of her white child and her husband much like her Black ancestors were forced to do on white plantations. Clare joking about his "nickname" also highlights the ways in which she has internalized her own racism as a way to survive, this cannot be conducive to a psychologically sound person. Irene leaves the apartment after questioning whether John has met any negroes and he replies discussing reading about them "terrible mess, robbing, killing– it's sad really."

John speaks to negative tropes about African-Americans that have been used for centuries to criminalize and devalue their lives. Irene is visibly taken aback by her friend's lifestyle and walks home to Harlem to a soundtrack of jazz that is repetitive throughout the movie.

### **Harlem Party scene:**

Clare calls Irene after not hearing from her when she wrote a letter describing her "wild desire" to explore her Blackness. She drops by unexpectedly as Clare is on the phone with Hugh, a famous white writer who is enthralled by the sprawling Black community, he and Irene are members of the Negro Welfare League. Clare expressed sadness with the fact that Irene didn't write her back and Irene mentioned it is risky for them to be in contact considering Clare's passing.

Clare: I don't blame you for being angry. You acted beautifully that day really beautifully. Thank you.

Irene: I don't want thanks!

This scene shows how respectability works in these contexts, Irene was thanked by Clare for performing in a way that kept her identity hidden. They forgive each other when Clare describes her jealousy to be happy like Irene. Clare expressed interest in attending the party

and is inquisitive regarding the nature of Hugh attending a Negro Welfare League party. Irene replies in reference to why Hugh would bother going to this type of party with “the same reason you’re here. To see Negroes. To enjoy themselves, to get material, to gaze on the great and near-great as they gaze on the Negroes.”

Clare insists on coming and Irene counters with questions of safety. While at the dance Irene, her husband and Clare attend together. The atmosphere is the picture of Harlem in the Roaring 20’s, swinging jazz music, suits, flapper dresses and Black people everywhere. Clare shares her alcohol with Hugh and makes his acquaintance through this gesture. As she dances, Hugh questions Irene:

Hugh: What I’m trying to find out is the history and status of of the blonde beauty out of fairytale that you’ve brought along.

Irene: Clare? She’s a girl from Chicago I used to know. She’s very excited I know you!

Hugh: Good of her, I’m sure.

Irene: (giggles and watches on)

This shows the fascination with mixed race women from both the African-American and white communities. Clare is right off the bat recognized for her physical attributes and attractiveness which places her in the tradition of stereotypical representations of “mulatta” women in America. In the following scene still at the party, Hugh and Irene watch Clare as she dances and Hugh recounts the ways in which some women find darker skinned Black men the epitome of attractiveness and desire.

Hugh: Blanca and Co. are always raving on about the good looks of some Negro, especially an unusually dark one— like Ralph Hazleton there. Dozens have declared him fantastically handsome. What do you think? Is he? (Clare begins dancing with Ralph)

Irene: No. And I don’t think anyone else would either. It’s just plain exoticism. An interest in what’s different. A kind of emotional excitement.. Something you feel in the presence of something strange and even perhaps a bit repugnant to you. (Irene watches happily as Clare dances with Ralph)

Hugh: and there you have it.

This scene was important for me to highlight because of the notions of respectability, tokenism and fetishism that arise in it. Irene deconstructs the idea that Ralph Hazelton is “fantastically handsome” by pointing to stereotypes and tropes about Black people rooted in slavery. This notion that he is handsome due to his “exotic nature” can be equated to discourse surrounding stereotypes about Black people being hypersexualized and “always ready.” Irene agrees with Hugh’s assertion yet I can’t help but wonder if she is agreeing out of respectability to his viewpoint— he and his wife are the only white people in attendance and to disrespect them could be damaging to the League’s efforts. Also while Irene spoke about Hazelton, she watched Clare intently almost in a desirous manner— it almost seemed like she was explaining her own fascination with Clare as she is an exotic beauty that brings her an uncomfortable emotional excitement.

Irene goes on to hint to Hugh that “things aren’t always as they seem” in reference to Clare whom he called “A Princess from Chicago.” After a closer examination Hugh realizes she is passing and quips

Hugh: "I'll be damned, tell me can you always tell the difference? Irene: Now you are really sounding ignorant.

Irene: Now you are really sounding ignorant (eye roll)

Hugh: No i mean it. Feelings of kinship or something like that?

Irene: Hugh stop talking like you're writing a piece for the National Geographic. I can tell as same as you. I suppose sometimes there is a thing that can't be registered..

Hugh: Yes, I understand what you mean. Lots of people pass all the time.

Irene: it's easy for a Negro to pass as white i'm not sure if it would be so simple for a white person to pass as colored.

Hugh: I never thought about that.

Irene: Why should you?

Hugh: sometimes I think you could.

Irene: Yes.

This scene shows Irene and Hughs interesting relationship which is unique for the time period. In it they discuss Clare's passing and Hugh makes a series of ignorant but inquisitive comments on the nature of it. I felt this scene is important because it highlights the ways the the African-American and White communities are fascinated with mixed raced women. Although Clare serves as an educational resource to Hugh she goes on to question why she doesn't choose to pass but reiterates that "we are all passing for something." Here she highlights the aspects of Black womanhood during this time period, as she is still held to a strict version of respectability politics while engaging in her community she is reminded through Clare's presence that she could be taking advantage of her own "passing privilege" (Sherrard, 2007). This scene's integral to the progression of the movie as the environment marks the first time Clare has interacted with the Black community since she left. She is accepted and gawked at by both White and Black spectators who see her as an anomaly in both communities. This is when the tension between Irene and Clare begins as after this she attends multiple parties with Irene and her husband, Irene begins to get jealous of the attention Clare receives.

### **Black Elite Party, John Knows:**

In the final scene of the film, much has occurred as Irene, her husband and Clare become a group that attends Harlem parties together on a regular basis. Irene begins to feel a disconnect between her and her husband and begins to blame Clare, suspecting they may be having an affair. She goes into a depression and begins self-medicating while dissociating from her daily life. Her husband is able to get her to attend a friends party together in a high-rise and much to Irene's chagrin he invites Clare. As they ascend the stairs, Irene slowly walks behind Clare and her jovial husband. Irene asks if Clare has ever considered what would happen if John "found out"? Clare responds that she'd come to live in Harlem with Irene.

While at the party she is alone and clearly annoyed, a friend tries to cheer her up but she can't stop watching her friend fit so seamlessly into this community. Everyone is fascinated by her looks, her stories, her presence and Irene can't seem to negotiate her feelings about Clare's seemingly easy integration into the Black middle class. This party is exemplary of the hierarchical Black middle class located in Harlem at this time period, as Sherrard highlights in her book the ways in which Larsen felt unwelcome in both the white and Black communities due to issues of class— specifically educational status. Irene's friend has a footman and a butler which is unusual but not atypical of those living in Harlem in the 1920s (2007). Irene watches as

Clare talks with Ralph Hazelton and goes to a window to smoke a cigarette.

Irene: (opens window, stares outside)

Clare: (watches Irene)

Irene: (smokes anxiously putting ashes in snow)

Man: Don't stand there it's cold. Come talk to me.

John: (knocks on door) I know where I am, let me in! (Irene grabs mans arm for protection)

Footman: What apartment are you looking for?

John: My wife is in there!

Footman: No, sir, she's not here. I guarantee...

John: I'm not wrong. Get out of my way!

Clare: Ralph where's my drink (walks over to Irene, they gaze at each other for a long time)

John: You don't get to tell me what to do! Any of you people (in reference to Redfield)

John: (to Clare) YOU LIAR!

Felise (host): Careful you're the only white man here. (Clare stares)

John: You dirty, liar. (he lunges for her, Irene tries to cover Clarew we hear a crash in the snow)

John: (stares in disbelief)

[Everyone rushes downstairs, Irene stares shocked]

This is the pivotal moment of this film and novel as John, Clare's ignorant White husband puts context clues together and realizes that she is indeed African-American. It's still unclear how Clare fell from the balcony, if she was pushed by either John or Irene yet the white police and Black bystanders insist that her death was the result of her own "misadventure."

John's comments of "you liar" "you're a dirty liar" are indicative of responses to passing in the Black community as well as the LGBTQ+ community. Too often when one "finds out" that someone is passing there is an increase in violence resulting from this exposure. His comments also illustrate how negative tropes about Black people being dirty, diseased and immoral are rooted in slavery and the justification of institutional racism (2007, 1990).

Felise's comment that John was the "only white man here" was interesting to me as it shows how racial respectability can be enacted by Black people. Multiple people tell him to calm down and if he were a Black man he surely would've been described as an "angry Black man" yet because of his race his anger is allowed, justified and carefully policed. He ignores comments and tries to physically violate Clare only to regret his actions when she is found dead below the building in the snow. He is not held accountable and it's insinuated that Irene had something to do with Clare's "fall." For a moment I believed Irene would be blamed for her death, considering she tried to shield her from John and was the last one to go downstairs to see if she was alive. Instead both communities agree Clare was a product of her own "misadventure" which places the onus of her life, actions, directly on her and her ability to pass and navigate both communities. She is blamed for her own death and this illustrates that at the end of the day she is still considered a Black woman whose lives are historically devalued, ignored and violated on a daily basis.

Discussion

Clare and Irene's story is an interesting one as it is made clear that both women have the potential to pass for white yet only one (Clare) takes on the burden and freedom of doing so. The movie was filmed in black and white which speaks to the artistic nature of the director but also brings the audience back to the time of 1920s filmmaking when films were not in color. This

lighting made it difficult for the audience to comprehend whether or not Clare was white and this added a layer of inquisition that was answered when the childhood friends meet in the restaurant.

Rebecca Halls' use of signifying' (hooks) when Irene and Clare spoke to each other was indicative of Black feminist thought and shows how in different context (Black community) they are able to use this discursive language as a way to connect to one another. Also, the use of minimal music other than swing bands during parties or the same repetitive jazz score helped to highlight the observational nature of this work as we are experiencing this from Irene's vantage point, the moments of silence or long pauses speak to her reconciling with aspects of her Blackness in real time. I found that both characters exemplified respectable images of Black womanhood at this time: lighter skinned, well-dressed, middle class, well-kept hair, involved in community, adhering to heteronormative constructs of relationships, etc. As Hugh noted to Irene, "sometime I think you could too" she very much could pass but the intrigue and reflection of what her life could have been is at the core of her repression and jealousy toward Clare (Maragh, 2016).

The main characters use of dialogue along with directorial stylistic choices make this an integral movie as it speaks to the ways in which Black women become "self-defined" in a white supremacist patriarchal society. Although her tactic was not successful Clare is very aware of herself and her position in this society and uses it as a way to free herself from the constraints of a perceived standard of white womanhood. Hall is able to capture the nuanced ways women of mixed raced backgrounds were able and still navigate spaces where they feel they don't necessarily "fit in." Irene's character illustrates the dilemma behind passing and being a proud "race woman" as she struggles throughout the movie to come to terms with the violent reality that Black people faced at this time including violent terroristic tactics like lynching. Through her confusion she is able to reflect and project her own desires onto Clare and becomes disillusioned by the life she's chosen. Stories like this highlight the ways that Black women were able to survive during times of increased violence and danger as well as the psychological consequences of surviving this world that is not kind to them whether they pass or not.

### **Conclusion**

*Passing* received a 90% from Rotten Tomatoes and continues to be talked about in the press as it has relevant conversation pieces for today and relates directly to Director Rebecca Hall's life. Through producing this Black feminist film she was able to trace her own family history where many of her relatives passed out of need for survival. I feel its important to Black feminist filmmakers to create films based on Black feminist novels like Larsen's as they are able to incorporate their own life experiences as well as research the ways that Larsen's arguments, storytelling are relevant to today's issues facing Black women in America.

There isn't much scholarly work on Black feminist filmmaking or filmmakers and it's imperative as we approach the 100th anniversary of the publication of this novel that we incorporate this scholarship into media studies. Calls to diversity Hollywood have been non stop especially during the #OscarsSoWhite campaign in 2015 and directors like Hall are answering this call by employing Black actors, actresses, writers and production companies. She theorizes Black feminism as she explores this story and retells it in a modern medium that invokes an image with the text which makes the reading all the more rich.

### **Reflection**

If I had more time to complete this assignment I would've paid more attention to their semiotic aspects of this movie. The lighting, clothing, music, set, etc. I feel there is a lot of symbolism located in each scene and it was very hard to focus on just a few scenes in order to give an accurate reading for my analysis.

I also would've paid more attention to moments when Irene and her husband had tension as they argued about whether or not to tell their children about the lynchings taking place in America. She felt it was too dangerous of a topic to expose to children yet her husband felt that as two young boys there wasn't a distinct age to introduce them to this topic.

I wish there were more literature in relation to Black feminist filmmaking, I found it very difficult to find literature for my literature review but the pieces I did find were full of rich information that expounded on the pieces I'd found. I tried to use my own life experience as a Black feminist avid movie-goer to examine this piece in the most authentic way possible while tying it to Black feminist theorists like hooks and Hill-Collins.

In the future I hope to do a deeper analysis of this movie as the Director has a unique relationship to it that should be explored. I also think there could be individual readings of each characters use of Black feminist theory that could be an interesting place of scholarship that highlights representation, media and Black women. Also, if I had more time I would love to trace Black feminist filmmaking from Lorraine Hansberry "A Raisin in the Sun" to Ava Duvernay's most recent movies.

#### **Two additional peer reviewed articles that informed my research:**

- "Clapping Back: Black Female Film Directors Reclaiming the Gaze in the Mainstream Film Industry" Amoah, S. (2018). *Clapping Back: Black Female Film Directors Reclaiming the Gaze in the Mainstream Film Industry*. University of Sussex.
- "Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History." Callahan, V. (2010). *Reclaiming the Archive: Feminism and Film History*. Detroit: Wayne State University Press.

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