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135TH STREET BRANCH: LIBRARIANSHIP AND THE PASSING FICTIONS OF

REGINA

ANDERSON ANDREWS AND NELLA LARSEN

by

Caitlin S. Matheis

A THESIS

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135TH STREET BRANCH: LIBRARIANSHIP AND THE PASSING FICTIONS OF
REGINA

ANDERSON ANDREWS AND NELLA LARSEN

Caitlin Matheis, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2022

Advisor: Matt Cohen

In this thesis, I examine how two writer-librarians that worked in the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in the 1920's, Regina Anderson Andrews and Nella Larsen, grappled in their fiction writing with questions of classification, information, and knowledge that encompassed their daily work in the library. I begin by contextualizing the branch within the Harlem Renaissance and Arturo A. Schomburg's call for the preservation of Black history and literature at a time when the field of librarianship was being professionalized by implementing library schools and classification standards. I then provide readings of Andrews's one-act play *The Man Who Passed* and Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* within this historical framework and in the context of their careers in librarianship.

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Fig. 1: Children's Reading Room, 135th Street Branch, 1926. *The New York Public*

Library Digital Collections

I. Introduction

The original Harlem Branch of the New York Public System sits at the corner of 135th Street at Malcolm X Boulevard. Built in the early 20th century, the library was open to Black and White patrons, but it wasn't until the 1920's that the library began to flourish into a cultural monument of the Harlem Renaissance. Black writers, when either visiting or relocating to Harlem or the New York City area, found the library an essential place to visit. Infamous writers like Langston Hughes and Jessie Redmon Fauset regularly visited the library to check out books, visit art exhibits, attend lectures, or spend an evening watching a play written, directed, and performed by the Krigwa players, which would later develop into the Harlem Experimental Theater. Writers met in groups to discuss writing, and to workshop and read each other's writing. Librarians visited schools to talk to students, promote the library, and increase patronage. Parents would take their children to the library and end up checking out materials, increasing the library's circulation and visitation rates. The library was one of the first in the country to have an integrated staff, with White and Black staff members working alongside each other.

It was also one of the first libraries to intentionally develop a collection of books and archives specifically dedicated to Black history and literature. This collection, begun because of Arthur Schomburg's voluntary donation of his collection, eventually became known as the Schomburg Collection. The collection is still a renowned and respected archive; the 135th Street Library is now a research library dedicated entirely to the growing collection and known as the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. The Center preserves a wide range of primary materials, from the Harlem Neighborhood Association Records from 1941-1978, to the Maya Angelou and Gwendolyn Bennett

papers. Many of the records of Nella Larsen and Regina Anderson Andrews—the writer-librarians discussed in this thesis—are also held at the research library.

As we will see in Andrew's one-act play *The Man Who Passed* and Larsen's *Passing*, the theoretical questions that ground the field of librarianship as well as the practices that librarians use to manage materials and interact with patrons within the library are echoed in some of the most central themes of these works. Libraries are a space for reading. Library records can reveal to a certain extent the readership practices of patrons; records of circulation statistics and purchases for the library's catalog can reveal readership patterns in what librarians perceived their patrons would like to read or what librarians believed they should be reading—but only if those records were maintained. Of course, if those records had not been maintained, libraries may not have realized the weight of the decisions that they made about the materials that the library would hold. Libraries and research centers are also spaces where archival materials and records are kept, destroyed, preserved, managed, and described. The role of the archivist and librarian, then, is one situated at the nexus of readership, authorship, the literary marketplace, archival theory, tensions within systems of categorization and classification, and the expectations of employment and a workplace. What results is a power dynamic between spheres of readers, writers, libraries, and archival spaces in which the behavior and the creation within each of these spheres are critically affected by the behavior and creation within the other spaces; libraries, readers, and writers are inextricably linked. Larsen's and Andrews's fictional works are thus influenced by their roles as Black women librarians at the 135th Street Branch during the Harlem Renaissance and at a key moment when there were attempts to professionalize the field of librarianship.

Jean-Christophe Cloutier reveals in his monograph *Shadow Archives: The Lifecycles of African American Literature* the ways that archival work interacts with the literary marketplace throughout the twentieth century. Cloutier argues that an "archival sensibility" is written into works of African American literature. Even at a time when prices of authorial manuscripts and archival materials were generally rising, American racism destabilized the preservation of Black-authored documents, causing delays in their preservation, documentation, and accessibility. Because of this, Cloutier begins by examining each of the texts he analyzes for its "archival function": How did the authors see their texts as archives themselves? How do the authors' own record-keeping and archiving practices inform the composition of these texts? Cloutier does this by showing that though archives have lifecycles, they are never dead—and because of the White supremacy embedded in the history, finances, and practices of university archives and archiving, there is an archival delay in stories and histories that may be found in the archive. Cloutier's monograph focuses on male, canonical authors like Claude McKay and Richard Wright.

However, the interlude of *Shadow Archives* focuses on the work of Ann Petry. In the book's introduction, Cloutier states that Petry's chapter "departs from the tone and structure of the other chapters to expose the kind of prelabor that the longer, interpretive scholarship necessitates...this 'interlude' chronicles the difficulties of locating and working with the papers of a fiercely private author who actively destroyed much of her archive" (13). Cloutier argues that Petry's destruction of her own archive "stands as a representative example of the many reasons why the papers of Black female authors are so few in number and remain neglected even by the repositories that own them" (Ibid).

Like Petry, Larsen and Andrews both wrote under different pseudonyms, in addition to their legal names, throughout various points in their careers and Larsen held a particularly private life.

In her book *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals* Saidiya Hartman applies the method of critical fabulation that she introduces in her article "Venus in Two Acts" to Black intimate life in New York City and Philadelphia in the late 19th to the early 20th century. The piece uses storytelling as a way to "speculate, listen intently, reading between the lines, attend to the disorder and mess of the archive, to honor silence" in the archive while remaining "mindful not to do damage" while using the method of critical fabulation (Hartman 34). Hartman's work asks readers to re-imagine what the archive doesn't immediately appear to hold, and to ask why it doesn't, affirming that even if there is no explicit record of the lives of the people that she writes about, those lives are still worth remembering.

II. Public Librarianship in the Early Twentieth Century

Many American public libraries were segregated at the same time when librarianship was being professionalized and Andrews and Larsen were writing *The Man Who Passed* and *Passing*. As Cheryl Knott shows in her book *Not Free, Not For All: Public Libraries in the Age of Jim Crow*, Southern libraries during the early 20th century were segregated, and segregation influenced every part of a library's operations—not just the physical space of the building itself. In her article, "Libraries and the Color Line: DuBois and the Matter of Representation," Rhonda Evans argues that libraries have

always played a key role in the struggle for African American freedom. W.E.B. Du Bois specifically, participated in efforts to fight for Black women's promotions in the New York Public Library System. The N.Y.P.L., "unlike many public library systems at the time...did not have an official policy excluding African Americans from library buildings or denying them library services. However, despite not having a documented policy against access by Black New Yorkers, it was perceived that Black people were not welcome in many library branches" (Evans 12). Evans' research proves that official policy does not always mean that the policy was practiced.

Knott also notes that even if libraries were technically supposed to be desegregated that it wasn't always the case. For example, in a 1925 survey conducted and published by the American Library Association, the Saint Paul Public Library System in Minnesota claimed to be integrated—not just with respect to who could visit the libraries, but who could staff the libraries—and yet of all of the employees who were working at any given library in the system, there were only one or two African American staff members, and they were not allowed to serve the public directly (Knott 8-9). In a similar way, even though the N.Y.P.L. was supposed to be integrated, the 135th Street Branch in Harlem was considered the branch of the library for African Americans—whether you were working in the library or if you were visiting the library. Even if libraries were, on record, supposed to be equal and desegregated, there were ways that segregation and racism could be enforced in different areas of the library, indicating that who defines "integrated" was crucial to how integration was proposed and enforced in different libraries. The move from no library access for African Americans, to segregated libraries, to an integrated staff whose African American members were not allowed to serve the

public or fill leadership roles allows same kind of power to function in different ways under the guise of integration.

Public libraries were, theoretically, building collections around the communities that they served. Andrew Carnegie's library fund supported the construction of libraries throughout the United States—having a say in the architecture, maintenance, and collection fund for each of these libraries. Carnegie's secretary James Bertram would review proposals before they were approved for funding. While Bertram often had to "challenge his southern correspondents, who tended to give him optimistic projections of overall growth rather than actual population figures for blacks and whites," the role he played in whether or not segregated libraries were built, as well as whether or not communities had access to libraries and literacy, was crucial (Knott 75). The writers of these proposals and Bertram's readings of the proposals were, in addition, surely affected by their Whiteness and by their own ideas about literacy and who was reading, what they were reading, and how often they would or would not use the library. Whether or not these libraries were ultimately accepted for funding or were built also largely depended on a library's budget and the funding they were able to receive from outside sources to not only keep up with the maintenance of the building, to organize the collection, and maintain the collection itself. The fact that "public librarians tended to shape local collections according to standards of taste and appropriateness that evolved over time" meant that local collections were built towards the standards that the person doing that building perceived as necessary for that collection in a particular place at a particular time. Because this role was often given to head librarians or higher-ranking administrative positions in libraries, collections were often built by White librarians who

might have only had a grasp on what white patrons visiting the library might have wanted to read.

Scholars like Arturo A. Schomburg, however, built private collections of works on Black history, literature, and research that informed collection building at libraries like the 135th Street Branch. In his 1925 piece "The Negro Digs Up His Past," Schomburg writes that "history has become less a matter of argument and more a matter of record. There is a definite desire and determination to have a history, well-documented, widely known at least within the race circles, and administered as a stimulating and inspiring tradition for the coming generations" (326). Schomburg contradicts the persistent belief that history only exists if there is a physical record of it and makes clear that not having a physical record does not mean that there is no history. His article asserts that "the Negro has been throughout the centuries of controversy an active collaborator, and often a pioneer, in the struggle for his own freedom and advancement" and that by collecting and documenting Black work by private collectors, intellectual societies, libraries, and activist organizations will allow for a history in which this collaboration and pioneering is remembered and continues to be documented (327). "The Negro Digs Up His Past" and Schomburg's scholarship and collection practices greatly influenced the work completed by Black scholars both within the 135th Street Branch and in libraries and private collections across the country. Schomburg's argument makes critical the work of Larsen and Andrews in libraries—one of the sites of record of literature and history—because their work actively participates in documenting Black social, cultural, and historical contributions.

Andrews and Larsen were working together in the 135th Street Branch at a time when librarianship was being professionalized; Larsen was the first Black woman to enroll in the New York Public Library's library school and Andrews was the first Black woman to enroll in the Columbia University library school. The Dewey Decimal System was created by Melvil Dewey early 50 years earlier in 1876, and library training schools were first implemented in New York in the 1910's, approximately 10 years before Andrews and Larsen started their library careers at N.Y.P.L. The 135th Street Branch library's head librarian Ernestine Rose's efforts to listen to her patrons, to understand their cultural, literary, and historical interests, and to focus on developing the library as a community center for the Harlem neighborhood were certainly ahead of her time. Her investment in creating a collection of Black literature and in integrating the staff by hiring Black and White employees was progressive, and influenced libraries throughout the United States. During Rose's employment at the library, she encountered many of the key figures of what has become known as the Harlem Renaissance, but she also hired several renowned writers as librarians and volunteers. Andrews and Larsen were particularly influenced by their work at the 135th Street Library. While working under Ernestine Rose's supervision, the two women recognized the racism embedded within the New York Public Library system, as well as in institutionalized libraries like public libraries or university-based libraries throughout the country. Both authors reflect on these realizations in their passing fictions—Nella Larsen in her novel *Passing* and Regina Anderson Andrews in her one act play *The Man Who Passed*.

Ernestine Rose began her twenty-two-year career as an N.Y.P.L. head librarian at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library in 1920 after returning from

Germany, where she served as a hospital librarian during World War I (Jenkins 216, 218). Before going to Germany, she first attended Wesleyan University and then the New York State Library School in Albany before moving to New York City to work at the Public Library's Seward Park Branch in the Lower East Side neighborhood (217). The Lower East Side was a largely Russian and Jewish immigrant neighborhood; the administration of the public library system hoped that her successful, progressive, and community-oriented work at the Seward Park Branch would continue at the Harlem Street Branch (218). Her appointment at the Harlem Library certainly proved this hope correct: the library flourished under her leadership and became the cultural center of the neighborhood, allowing theater and writing groups to meet at the library and art exhibits to be displayed. But she was also one of the first librarians to integrate her library staff and volunteers. She hired staff and volunteers who would eventually become writers both acclaimed and avant garde, like Jessie Redmon Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, Nella Larsen and Regina Anderson Andrews, and was also one of the first librarians publicly to encourage other cities and libraries to integrate.

Rose spoke out in support of the integration of libraries and for including Black texts in libraries while also trying to make the libraries she worked in more community-oriented by learning about the cultures that resided in the sections of New York City she was working in. Requiring her fellow staff members to learn about these communities and to understand what kinds of books and services were wanted by the library's patrons, Rose applied the same strategies at the Harlem Library she had at the Seward Park Library, creating a successful cultural center of the Harlem Renaissance. Not surprisingly, her efforts at the 135th Street Branch were often questioned and criticized by

White librarians. Rose, responding to the question of "the Negro Problem" in libraries, asked the American Library Association, in her 1923 address to the conference attendees: "Instead of considering the Negro problem shall we not treat the Negroes as individuals, with the opportunities and restrictions only which surround all individuals?" ("A Librarian in Harlem" 207) Rose believed that one of the first steps to developing and creating more culturally aware libraries was simply to treat everyone like human beings by recognizing and understanding their culture by integrating relevant text into a library's collection. In her 1921 *Library Journal* article, "Serving New York's Black City," Rose explains, after noting that the community that a library serves is one of the greatest challenges to a library's development and success, that "the chief difficulty" at the 135th Street Branch "has been, and will remain," not in the Harlem community itself, "but in the barrier of a separate life with distinct beliefs and aims which separates all colored people from all whites at the present time" (109). She believed that integration of libraries benefitted both Blacks and Whites because it allowed for Black and White people to interact with each other. Rose suggests that integration humanizes Black people for Whites. Despite this, she also thought that if there were designated "colored" libraries and libraries that were exclusively for White people, segregation would only be encouraged in libraries. She explained in her 1923 speech to the ALA, "A Librarian in Harlem" (later published in the Harlem-run *Opportunity: Journal of Negro Life* magazine), that the integration of her staff had a significant impact on two women brought into the library as what Rose calls an "experiment station for racial readjustment" (207). Both women brought in for this "experiment" were White and female, one from the American South and one from the North. Both women were apparently learning not just about libraries,

but about culture and humanity itself. Rose reports that the girl from the American South was

learning that educated and refined colored girls are made of the same stuff as white, and that they may live and work together. But it is in its effect upon the Northern white girl that the library is performing its most valuable experiments. The average white person in the North does not know the Negro at all. His ideas are preconceived and colored by sentimentality. He sees colored people still as ex-slaves, pitiful objects grateful for his helping hand. When he learns that they are intelligent, struggling, resentful, and aggressive participants in the industrial and social battle of life, his sensibilities are shocked and his illusions destroyed. (Ibid)

Of course, the irony in this statement about her White, Northern colleague, is that Rose, born, raised, and at the time the article was published, living in the northern United States, was unable to recognize her own preconceived notions of African Americans, despite being more progressive than many of her White contemporaries. As much as Rose spoke out in favor of integration of libraries and established the 135th Street Library as one of the most progressive of its time, it is important to note the racial preconceptions that ultimately informed her speeches, writing, and management of the branch, and how these affected the community she served. As Barbara Hochman points out in her essay "Investing in Literature: Ernestine Rose and the Harlem Branch Public Library of the 1920s," while Rose was certainly "a heroic figure ahead of her time" she "was also emphatically of her time" (102). Evans affirms that even though Rose spoke out in favor

of integration and "did employ the first Black librarians within the New York Public library system, equal treatment, especially in terms of promotion and pay, became significant concerns of the Black librarians during this period of the library's history" (Evans 11-12). While she may have promoted integration, there were still limits to the changes she was willing to make in the library.

While Ernestine Rose was a relatively progressive librarian for her time, the 135th Street Branch Library thrived primarily because of the patrons and their vision for the library, the contents and genres of information that it would record. Librarians', staff members', and patrons' work within the library brought theatre groups, art shows, writing groups, speakers, and other community-based programs that documented Black history to the library. For example, after hours, the basement of the 135th Street Branch was used for the Krigwa players, a little theatre group started by Du Bois and Andrews. Du Bois served as the chairman of the group and Andrews and her husband also served on the board of the theatre group until a disagreement between Rose and Du Bois caused the theatre group to leave their meeting space at the library (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 61). While the details of the disagreement are unknown, Andrews was eventually given permission by Rose to start her own group, the Harlem Experimental Theatre, that met and performed plays in the basement of the 135th Street Branch. That Andrews was able to start a little theatre group so quickly after the Krigwa players left the branch raises questions about the ways that Rose used her power as head librarian; because another theatre group began so shortly after the Krigwa players left, it doesn't seem that what bothered Rose was that the group met in the library. Instead, Rose's stepping into organizations that community members ran and participated in at the

library, even if she wasn't an active member of those programs, raises questions about the extent to which she controlled both *what* happened in the library and *how* it happened. What creative groups, activities, and exhibitions did Rose *not* allow to happen in the library? How did Rose's power as head librarian affect how the plays were performed and the storylines of the play? Did Rose have to approve the plays before either theatre group put them on, and did the storylines have to align with her beliefs and vision for the library? Did the Krigwa player's founding principles that "the plays of a real Negro theatre must be: 1. *About us...*2. *By us...*3. *For us*" and "4. *Near us*" conflict with Rose's ideas about the kinds of performances happening within the 135th Street Branch ("Krigwa Players Little Negro Theatre" 134)? How did the content and intended audiences of the plays affect the relationship between Rose and the members of the theatre groups? Did Rose actually live up to her progressive reputation as a community-centered librarian and to the beliefs expressed in her speeches and writing if she was constantly trying to control the information and art being created within the library—and if she was unwilling to promote her Black assistants to librarian and managerial roles?

III. Regina Anderson Andrews, *The Man Who Passed*

Regina Anderson Andrews worked at the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library under Ernestine Rose's supervision. Her writing was influenced by that experience. Andrews began her career as a librarian in Ohio, where she was a student, working as an assistant librarian at Wilberforce University; she then continued building her resume as a junior clerk in the Chicago Public Library ("Breaking the Color Barrier" 410). After high school, Andrews attended Wilberforce University where she served as a

library assistant. Wilberforce, however, had strict rules for its students. Whitmire suggests that Andrews "almost certainly chafed under the rules," leading her to withdraw from the university and beginning a continued, critical resistance to the rules and parameters within certain institutions like universities and libraries (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 27).

Andrews then moved to New York City from Illinois. Ethelene Whitmire suggests that Andrews's "experiences in Normal no doubt...contributed to how Regina came to view herself in nonracialized terms. She reported only fond memories about Normal, Illinois. Although her family was one of the few African Americans in the town, "she did not recall any racial incidents while she was living there" (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 22). In addition, the Chicago Public Library System hired more African American workers than the New York Public Library System, despite having a smaller African American population (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 32). In her interview for her first position at the New York Public Library, the administration told her that from their perspective, she was not American because she was not White (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 31). Because of this, Andrews was immediately sent to work in the 135th Street Branch without being considered for a position in any other section of the city.

After moving to New York City from Chicago, Andrews briefly worked at Womrath Rental Library before beginning a decades-long successful career for the New York Public Library System (Ibid). After initially applying to work at the branch's main library on 42nd Street, she was assigned in April 1923 to work at the 135th Street Branch because the library staff viewed her as "colored," to her "surprise and disappointment" (Anderson

395). Andrews had simply written that her race was "American" on her application. But she was hired at the Harlem Library as circulation librarian. Andrews also helped Rose recruit volunteers for the branch (Ibid). While working at the library Andrews played a significant role in encouraging the growth of theater in the Harlem Renaissance. At the 135th Street Library, she formed the Krigwa Players, a theater group that performed plays written and directed by the members of the Harlem community in the basement of the library in the evenings with Rose and W.E.B. Du Bois. Du Bois eventually left the theater group, but Kevin Mattson noted in his article "The Struggle for an Urban Democratic Public Harlem: in the 1920s" that Du Bois's writings about the group proved that "Harlem's growing civic and public culture anchored intellectuals in a community and encouraged their participation" (301). The theater group performed two of Andrews's plays, *The Underground Railroad* and *Climbing Jacob's Ladder*, in which Andrews herself acted. The Krigwa players she later developed into the Harlem Experimental Theater as Andrews left the 135th Branch and began her career at the Washington Street Branch.

In 1938, Andrews was promoted to the head librarian of the Washington Street Branch, becoming the New York Public Library system's first Black head librarian. This well-earned promotion and pay raise did not come without conflict before leaving the Harlem Library, however. Andrews had been working in the New York Public Library system for several years when she worked with DuBois to be given the promotion and pay raise that she felt she had long deserved (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 87-90). DuBois frequently went to the N.Y.P.L. Administration on behalf of Andrews. Her relationship with Ernestine Rose deteriorated as Andrews

"believed that she was neither being paid a wage that recognized her contributions nor being afforded the opportunities for promotion she deserved." In one of his initial letters to Franklin Hopper, the Chief of the Circulation Department at N.Y.P.L. at the time, and Ernestine Rose, DuBois mentioned that there was a lack of employment of African Americans at the branch (*Regina Anderson Andrews: Harlem Renaissance Librarian* 87).

According to a memorandum about a meeting with Franklin Hopper, the Chief of Circulation at the time that Andrews was working at various locations throughout the N.Y.P.L, Du Bois writes that "before being appointed to Third Grade however X. must have recommendation from two librarians, at least, and each must be willing to receive X. as First Assistant" ("Memorandum on an Interview with Mr. Hopper December 23rd, 1929 at 10:00 A.M." 1). However, while Andrews was able to receive a letter of recommendation from her former supervisor at the 115th Street branch, she struggled to obtain one from Ernestine Rose—though she did eventually receive one. While Rose apparently didn't want Andrews in the position of "First Assistant" at the branch, Rose did approve of Andrews in the position of a "Second First Assistant," a position which appears to have been specifically created for Andrews at the 135th Street Branch; it was not the title of a position commonly held in the N.Y.P.L. But Rose also made it clear that she could not guarantee that Andrews would receive the promotion.

Du Bois also reminds Hopper and Rose during this meeting of the racism embedded in the library system and explains how it has impacted their resistance to promoting Andrews. In Du Bois's memorandum from his December 1929 meeting with Franklin Hopper and Ernestine Rose, he writes:

I reminded H. of color prejudice; of our natural fear that it had crept in in this case and of the difficulty which we are always under of suspecting prejudice when it was not present or of letting it become entrenched when it was present. That in the latter case, there was nothing for us to do but fight.

H. assured me of the following situation:

No color prejudice had ever been expressed by the Board of Trustees; that they knew there were colored persons in the system and that the number had varied but, on the whole, increased. That when the name of X. went before the Board, there was never any color designation.

There was prejudice in communities and in the staff of local libraries. It existed, with regard to colored people; with regard to Jews; with regard to Italians and others. It was difficult to cope with but it was growing less, except possibly in the case of the Jews.

I reminded him that such a situation, while natural, must not be left adrift. It needed to be active, although tactful, attack. ("Memorandum on an Interview with Mr. Hopper December 23rd, 1929 at 10:00 A.M." 2)

Du Bois goes on to write that Hopper said that Andrews would eventually be promoted once she was considered eligible. The lackadaisical approach to Andrews' promotion and resistance to creating a solid plan for promoting Andrews by Hopper and the other N.Y.P.L. Board of Trustees members proves Du Bois's argument about their prejudice within the system; a "tactful" plan would require Hopper and the Board of Trustees to promote Andrews in a timely and respectful manner.

This meeting was just the beginning of the correspondence between Du Bois, Andrews, Rose, and Hopper regarding Andrews's promotion. Du Bois corresponds with both Rose and Hopper on the first of March 1930. Du Bois seems to replying to a claim that Rose may have made in her letter to him when he writes that:

It seems to me, to say the least, that vacancies in those libraries should be made available for qualified colored girls. Of course, this, however, is only the beginning. The whole system by which colored girls are kept for appointment in other libraries should be swept away. I do not agree with you that you have been 'conscious of the libraries need of adequately prepared colored assistants.' I think, on the contrary, that you and the library authorities have made no real effort to get such assistance and that their appearance has been of embarrassment to you. ("W. E. B. Du Bois to Ernestine Rose, 01 March 1930" 1)

Context within the letter makes it seem as if Rose might have said in her previous letter to Du Bois that she believed she had been making deliberate efforts to integrating the 135th Street Branch's staff. But as Du Bois points out in his response, more progress needed to be made at the library. In scholarship on the N.Y.P.L. and the 135th Street Branch, Rose is often depicted as ahead of her time in her hiring practices; Du Bois's letter questions the effects and the intentions of her actions.

DuBois makes the case for Andrews's promotion at greater length when he writes to Franklin Hopper, the Chief of the Circulation Department for the New York Public Library:

I am aware of the fact that much excellent work has been done to develop the library center in Harlem, but the one weak point has been the fact that colored girls have not been sought after for appointment, and the few who have been appointed, have been a problem because while apparently there are forty-two branches where white assistants may get their experience and promotion, there are only two or three where colored girls will be tolerated.

Mrs. Andrews has been in the system since 1925 and has been in line for the position which she is now seeking since 1926. While she has been waiting for a chance to qualify, several others who had the chance to qualify after she was ready, have received steady promotion. I am not making this fight simply for Mrs. Andrews or any one person. I am fight for the principle that race prejudice ought not to appear to the present extent in the appointment and advancement of library assistants in New York public library. ("W. E. B. Du Bois to Franklin F. Hopper, 01 March 1930" 2)

Du Bois makes clear that this lack of promotion and recognition of Black librarians and assistants is not peculiar to the case of Andrews and the 135th Street Branch, but is pervasive throughout the N.Y.P.L. as a system.

Despite the success of Andrews's and Du Bois's efforts for her promotion at the library, Regina Anderson Andrews's experience in the library and frustration with the racism, rules, and standards within the library and with its classifications are evident in her play *The Man Who Passed: A Play in One Act*. *The Man Who Passed* was not

performed or even published in her lifetime. Two manuscripts of the play are with the papers she donated to the Schomburg Center do not have a date or year that marks when the play was written. The first manuscript in the folder is originally typed as being written by "Henry Simons" but is crossed out and signed twice in pencil and ink as being written by Regina M. Andrews (R. M. Andrews). The second manuscript in the folder is typed as being authored by "Henry Simons" (Simons). Like Clare Kendry in Nella Larsen's *Passing*, Regina Anderson Andrews's character Fred Carrington is conflicted, caught between the two worlds he lives in because of his decision to pass as White. At the start of the play, Fred feels confident and secure in his decision to live in New York City as White-passing. His only frustration is that he has to secretly travel to Harlem to have his childhood friend Van cut his hair. Upon discreetly entering Van's barbershop, Fred says to Van: "I have to trail you all the way to Harlem to have the kinks taken out of my hair. I know you don't agree with what I'm doing, Van, but you've certainly been a pal to help me out all of these years" (R. A. Andrews 47). The tensions between a Black friend and a White-passing friend as a result of the classification systems Fred and Van exist within has evidently affected their friendship. But Van is still willing to help Fred even if the only time that they see each other is so Van can cut his hair. Like Clare Kendry, this is a risk that he takes; he is married to a White woman and is employed by a White man named Fitzgerald, and will lose everything he has built throughout most of his life if exposed. As a result, he goes to extreme measures to ensure this security. Having already said goodbye to his father without ever planning to see him again, Fred does not even want to hear stories about the family that raised him or his childhood friends. When Van tries to inform him of something, Fred interrupts, saying that he "hasn't heard anything"

about people he once knew, "and doesn't want to hear anything about the colored brother" because he "went on the other side fifteen years ago and [he's] there to stay" (48). Though he is willing to risk returning to Harlem to get his hair cut so that he is less likely to be discovered as passing, he rejects Van's invitations to return to the community he left.

Fred does have a revelation at one moment in the play. Sitting with his friends in the barbershop, he notices boys clog dancing in the street, with a group of people watching and humming the song "Charleston, Charleston" and cheering for the dancers. When the music passes by the slim windows of the basement barbershop, "*Fred slowly goes to the window, his eyes brighten and a smile breaks over his face. He jumps up on a chair, and begins to hum and clap, keeping time with the music. He has forgotten his companions...as his body begins to sway*" (52). Fred steps back, nearly exasperated with joy, once the dancers move on to a different street, clearly feeling a sense of joy that he has not experienced in a long time. Despite this connection to the community that he experiences, he still denies that passing is "a lonesome business" when his friend questions him after the dancing scene (53). At the end of the play, the men acquire a local newspaper from a sales boy. When Fred reads the newspaper, he sees his father's obituary and also reads that his mother passed away nearly three weeks before his father. The obituary reads that Fred "could not be located" to be informed of his father's passing and to attend the funeral (55). Fred is clearly devastated when he realizes the heartbreaking consequences of his choice to pass and never return to Harlem, so his friends ask him if he will return home to see the only surviving member of his immediate family, his sister. Fred replies, in the final moments of the play: "Well—I...No, the black sheep could not be—located. I'll go downtown now. Thanks—old timers—so-long" (Ibid). Even though

Fred sees that he lost his chance to reconnect with his parents and is devastated that a significant amount of time went by before he even knew they had passed away because he did not want to know any information about his family, friends or Harlem, he still chooses to return back to downtown. Even though his friends constantly welcome him back and suggest that he return to Harlem throughout the play, he still feels like the metaphorical "black sheep," a White-passing Black man and an exiled outsider from his family and the Harlem community.

These scenes in *The Man Who Passed* contemplate the tensions of working in a library and how information is accessed and categorized within the library and its community. The phrase "could not be—located" from the play is mirrored in the language used to describe a resource that could not be found when searching the library. The search for information and books within libraries is a nuanced one, informed by assumptions about what information is or isn't recorded or preserved, how it has or hasn't been classified, how and where to find it, and the amount of effort and care put into finding it.

IV. Nella Larsen, *Passing*

Ernestine Rose hired Larsen as a library staff member in 1921 as part of her efforts to integrate the Harlem Library employees. Following her departure from her nursing career, Larsen joined the staff at the 135th Street Library, where she eventually worked alongside Regina Anderson Andrews and other notable female writers of the Harlem Renaissance, including Jesse Redmon Fauset and Gwendolyn Bennett. Larsen was initially hired as a library assistant at the branch, and the head librarian encouraged

her to apply to the N.Y.P.L. Library School in 1922, writing her a letter of recommendation. After graduating from the librarian training program in 1923, Larsen was promoted to the position of head librarian in the Children's section at the Harlem Branch, where she continued organizing the children's story hour, creating reading lists, suggesting books to teachers at the local Harlem schools, providing after-school activities, and working with other librarians at the branch on organizing community-wide programs and events held at the library (Anderson 394). Larsen eventually resigned from the library in 1926 to focus on writing her novels, though she occasionally returned to work part-time before she returned to her career in nursing in the 1930s.

Nella Larsen's career at the 135th Street Branch in the 1920s and her experience of applying to and attending the New York Public Library's Library School allowed her to continue questioning the meaning and structure of the library as a government-funded cultural institution. Working at the library put her in the center of the development of Harlem's flourishing of literature, culture, art and theater: many of the most notable writers of the Harlem Renaissance—including W.E.B. Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Countee Cullen—frequented the library and met with writing and theater groups there. Larsen "found herself comfortably at home in her new setting and enjoyed the ever-increasing activities at the library and contacts with the young writers who were congregating there" (Anderson 395). The library began regularly hosting exhibits of African American art, which Larsen played a major role in organizing and promoting. While she recognized that libraries could be centers of cultural and artistic endeavor, as well as a location to combat social justice issues, enrolling in the Library School allowed her to understand more deeply the classification systems behind library operations.

Larsen's library school application itself, as Barbara Hochman demonstrates in her critical analysis of it, shows that Larsen not only understood the demographics of the administration that would be reading her application and judging her eligibility for the program, but also had an understanding of the N.Y.P.L. as a government- and donor-funded library system run by White people. There is no doubt that Larsen was well read in various genres of nonfiction and literature, but when asked on the application to list several books she had recently read, her careful selection of almost entirely White-authored texts—the only text included by a non-White author was W.E.B. DuBois's recently released *Darkwater: Voices from Within the Veil*—shows that she believed she needed strategically to select books that gave off the impression that she was not only well read, but also that she read books that upheld the beliefs of the (likely all White) readers of Larsen's application. The books Larsen chose to include on the list were "partly governed by her short-term professional goals and assumptions about her readers" ("Filling in the Blanks" 1178). Her understanding of this is also evident in her neglect to include the apparently necessary information that her father was Black when the application asked for the "Nationality of Father" ("Filling in the Blanks" 1174). Larsen did include that her father was "Danish West Indian," but it is evident from the scans of the archived application that are presented in Hochman's article that the handwriting that wrote "Negro" underneath Larsen's answer—Danish West Indian—does not match the handwriting on the rest of the application (Ibid). Larsen was born to a Black father and a White mother; her decision not to include her father's race on the application reveals that she understood that if she wrote that her father was Black, the decision of whether to accept her into or reject her from the program would be determined by the answer she

was prompted to include. But not explicitly stating her father's race also implies that she, rightfully, believes that her application shouldn't be rejected because of the color of her father's skin or her own: her acceptance or rejection to the program should have been based on her skills and ability to succeed in the coursework itself and the perspective that she could bring to the profession.

Larsen was the first Black person to be accepted into, and then enroll in, the New York Public Library's School. This is certainly a significant accomplishment—Rose, who provided Larsen with a written recommendation for the school, mentions it in the 1923 American Library Association address mentioned earlier. Many of Larsen's suspicions collected from her experience at the Harlem Library about the institution of the library itself were confirmed during her time in the school. For example, Larsen took classes that helped her further understand library classification systems, with several textbooks written by Melvil Dewey required for the program (Roffman 756). While there is no guarantee that Larsen read these textbooks cover to cover, she surely at least encountered them in the approximately two years she was enrolled in the program. For example, Larsen could recognize that the Dewey Decimal classification system that the 135th Street Library and many other branches throughout New York City and the country used to organize their books within the library, and still use today, was flawed, racist, and insufficient for the general reading interests of the patrons of the Harlem Library. The classification system's number "326," for example, to classify books on slavery and emancipation, was the only identifier used to specify African American literature and history. Classifying African American literature solely through the lens of enslavement

and oppression only upholds racism and White supremacy within the library and therefore in the people and country as a whole.

While Larsen does not explicitly critique the Dewey Decimal System or "326" in her writing, she does question classification systems, knowledge, and information as a result of her experience learning about library classification systems through her employment at the Harlem Branch and through her extensive training at the Library School. As Karin Roffman suggests in her article "Nella Larsen, Librarian at 135th Street," Larsen's librarian work helps explain her novels as idiosyncratic efforts to invent a different system for conversing about gender and race than the one she saw popularized and instantiated through libraries and other cultural institutions—even those attempting to remake their own images as the 135th Library was doing in the 1920s (753). Roffman focuses her literary analysis on Larsen's novel *Quicksand*, claiming that the novel's main character Helga, who applies for a job at a library in Chicago and is not offered a position because of the color of her skin, "rejects all systems of knowledge as flawed" and "seeks entirely other ways to learn—outside of libraries, schools, and any other systematized forms of knowledge production," exemplifying Larsen's own rejection of institutional knowledge and classification systems (Roffman 763).

Though the operation of institutions and the production of institutionalized knowledge is, evidently, literally explored through Helga's employment in a school and attempted employment in a library, the influence of Larsen's library work is evident in her novel *Passing* as well, though more abstractly. However, the plot of *Passing*—and especially the novel's final chapter—results in an arguably much darker commentary on institutional knowledge. As Roffman suggests with *Quicksand*, Larsen's second novel "is

an aesthetic meditation on how social problems become institutionalized through the very structures that seem also to have the greatest potential to help solve them" (Roffman 754). In *Passing*, Larsen wants to question knowledge and classification by breaking down the binaries and systems that classify race and gender and finding new ways of critically writing, reading, and thinking about these concepts through the storylines of the novel's main characters: Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield.

The final scene of *Passing* culminates the novel's problematics in a single, fatal moment. Clare Kendry finds herself forced to face the dilemmas she has been experiencing throughout the novel—at least, the dilemmas according to Irene's thoughts communicated through the focalization of the narrative. Clare is forced to address how the intersection of gender, race, motherhood, and passing work and conflict within her own life. While *Quicksand's* Helga "rejects all systems of knowledge as flawed" and explores identity outside of established institutions, Clare and Irene find themselves caught within these same systems (Roffman 763). Yet Clare and Irene's ability to pass forces them to react differently within them. The first time Clare visits Irene Redfield at her home in New York City, several years after they randomly and unintentionally reunite in Chicago, Irene says to her: "I'm beginning to believe...that no one is ever completely happy, safe, or free" (Larsen 196). Of course, one of the biggest risks that Clare regularly takes as a White passing Black woman is going to Harlem and socializing with Black people. Her White husband, John Bellew, does not know that she frequently spends time in Harlem, nor does he know that Clare is White passing.

Going by herself and lying to her husband to be able to move openly and freely in the Black community that she lost when she left her Chicago neighborhood as a teenager

and when she chose to continue passing as White, while also being able to keep her marriage, her home, and her role as a mother to her daughter, is the closest Clare can come to having the ideal life that she appears to want. During Clare and Irene's first New York City conversation, Clare initially replies to Irene's ominous comment about the impossibility of happiness or safety that she isn't afraid to take risks, especially if it'll get her what she wants. But when Irene reminds her of the consequences of living exactly as she wants without considering the effects it might have on the life of Clare's daughter Margery, Clare states that "being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world" (Larsen 197). As much as she wants to—and should be able to—exist in the world as she chooses, Clare is conflicted—even if she is typically unafraid of going to any lengths to get what she wants. The moment Clare notices John Bellew walking angrily through the front door of the Freeland's Harlem apartment in the final chapter of *Passing*, it is likely that she is speculating about—or at least recalling—her conversation with Irene about motherhood and living according to her own rules, outside of the institutions—marriage, race, class, gender, social status, motherhood—that govern the choices she makes about her life and that affect the ways society views and treats her because of racial and gender classifications. Bellew finds out that Clare has been passing for the entirety of their marriage, and despite seeming calm throughout the scene, Clare is forced to make a heavy decision about how she wants to handle the situation the moment she comes face-to-face with Bellew. But "one moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone," falling out of the open window before saying anything—if indeed she had wanted to—to Bellew (Larsen 239).

Clare's death makes it easy to believe that readers are watching her experience inner turmoil, but Irene is also forced to confront the questions she has been asking herself throughout the novel, specifically about her conflict about Clare herself. How should the apparent tension between the self and sisterhood be navigated in situations where an awareness of the forces and pressures of multiple cultural institutions are converging? How do social constructions of race affect this tension?

While *Passing* ends without the reader ever knowing exactly what caused Clare to fall through the Freeland's window to her death, there is reason to speculate that Irene pushes Clare out of the window because, as Bellew enters the apartment and the women notice him, Irene runs "across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm" moments before Clare falls out of the window (Ibid). Right when she places her hand on Clare's arm, Irene realizes that "she couldn't have Clare cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free" (Ibid). Moreover, the narrator writes, of Irene's first thought after Clare passes through the window, that "Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost" (Ibid). Despite this, the series of events is still ambiguous. Irene, though she cannot reverse time and tell Clare that she and Felise ran into Bellew while shopping, must also make a decision about the best thing to do in the situation as Clare's friend—as a fellow woman—given that she has been revealed to her White husband. Irene's own constructions of identity, gender, race, selfhood, and sisterhood are subject to classification, and the conflict that comes from those forms of classification and forms of identification provides a series of choices about how Irene may choose to act in the moments before Clare's death. Does Clare willingly jump out of the window? Does Irene push her out of the window? Does Bellew push her and Irene, failing, attempt to protect

Clare? If we assume for a moment that Irene did push Clare out of the window, could it not have been because she did not want her friend to exist in a world where she could not at least try to live as ideally as she can? If Irene pushed Clare, it could have been a sacrifice—protecting Clare from facing the consequences of passing or the wrath of Bellew—or a malicious act.

Regardless, the implications of the scene's ambiguity are worth examining. On the one hand, Clare's death could grimly mean that Larsen saw no solution to her goal of finding new ways to talk about race and gender and therefore no way to escape the classification systems and management of information and knowledge that surrounded her in her profession. Knowing that Larsen abandoned her library career, and eventually writing as well, suggests that this is possible. But the purposefully ambiguous ending allowed Larsen and the readers of *Passing* to explore many possibilities of the tensions caused by these institutions through the series of possible explanations for Clare's fall. Leaving the ending of *Passing* up for interpretation, Larsen may be suggesting that she has not yet exactly found a solution to her goal of forming a new way of writing about race and gender. In leaving the ending up for interpretation, Larsen asks her readers to explore the possibilities of those solutions, of valuing imagination by what is made possible through the ending of the novel. How will we, as readers, classify the acts of Clare and Irene? Harder still, perhaps—how might we *not* do so?

Before Larsen transferred to the Children's Room at the 135th Street Branch, she was an assistant in the Children's Room at the Seward Park Branch where demand was high, supply was low, and books were quickly worn down. Her job at Seward Park was the first library position she held following her graduation from the N.Y.P.L. Library

School. In her work as a Children's Room Assistant, Larsen was responsible for writing biweekly book reports that were discussed in meetings with other assistants in the library system (Hutchinson 155-157). The growing popularity of children's rooms in libraries coincided with the burgeoning Harlem Renaissance; in fact, many "of the same publishers who supported the blossoming of African American literature" supported the publishing of children's literature as well (Hutchinson 158). This photo of the Children's Room in the 135th Street Branch (*Figure 1*) suggests that the demand for library space was, as at Seward Park, high—or at least, that the staff of the branch wanted the demand to appear high. *Figure 1* was taken in 1926, the last year that Larsen would have worked at the 135th Street Branch. Part of Larsen's responsibilities in the Children's Rooms at Seward Park and the 135th Street Branch would have been to recommend books to her patrons. Being a children's librarian means navigating what texts are considered "appropriate" for a particular age group.



Figure 1: Children's Reading Room, 135th Street Branch, 1926. Courtesy of the New York Public Library Digital Collections.

Larsen's experience selecting the texts that became available in the library and making recommendations to individual patrons resonates in *Passing* in Irene and Brian's conversations about the kinds of information they reveal to their sons—particularly when it comes to information about what it means to be a Black man in America. For example, in Part III of *Passing*, the *Finale*, Brian discusses a lynching he read about in the newspaper while eating dinner with his family. When Ted asks Brian "why is it that they only lynch colored people," Irene finds it "really inexcusable for [Brian] to bring up a thing like that at dinner" because "there'll be time enough for them to learn about such horrible things when they're older." She "want[s] their childhood to be happy and as free

from the knowledge of such things as it can possibly be." Irene, here, is trying to preserve her sons' experience of innocence. Brian counters that if their family is to continue living in America as Irene wishes them to, their sons "'better find out what sort of thing they're up against as soon as possible. The earlier they learn it, the better prepared they'll be'" (Larsen 231). A similar conflict shapes debates about children's access to literature more generally. Irene also wants to preserve her sons' innocence through her concerns about what they have learned about sex and sexuality. Near the beginning of the novel, Irene suggests to Brian that they send Junior, their 11-year-old son, to a different school because of the sex jokes he is apparently hearing from the other children at school. Irene says that Junior has "picked up some queer ideas about things—some things—from the older boys." Irene lacks control of the information that is being passed to her sons outside of their home—and she does not like it. (Larsen 189). On the other hand, Brian thinks that trying to stop Junior from hearing these jokes about sex would be "'to make a molly-coddle out of him'" and makes it clear that he "'won't have it'" (Larsen 189). The tensions between Irene and Brian about the kinds of information that is passed down to their sons, how it is passed down to them, who is telling them information, when the information is told to them, and the space—the public or the private—in which it is told to them parallels the tensions that librarians face when making decisions about the collection, how they recommend texts to people, and why they recommend texts or certain information. These are tensions about the control over the spread of information and the interpretation of that information that Larsen likely faced every day in her career in children's librarianship. The ambiguity throughout *Passing* and especially in the final scene of the novel keys into the ultimate impossibility

of that control over information and interpretation: just because, as a librarian, you have some control over the catalog and how it is recommended (or in Larsen's case, read aloud in the children's room) does not mean that you have control over what people do with that information once they have it. This control then, is ultimately an illusion. The text of *Passing* shows that even if the power within which libraries and librarians operate is an illusion, that illusion has very real consequences.

V. Conclusion

For Regina Anderson Andrews and Nella Larsen, the questions that are at the center of the field of librarianship—conflicts over classification, identity, knowledge, reading, the literary marketplace, and readership—manifest in their fictions, *The Man Who Passed* and *Passing*. Through their respective characters and plotlines, Larsen and Andrews show how the questions of power, race, racism, and knowledge have effects and consequences on their lives. Libraries give access to knowledge, and construct what counts as knowledge at the same time; social categories give order, but come with constraints and costs. American racism profoundly shapes knowledge, categories, and consequences, these writer-librarians show in their careers and in their fictions.

But Larsen and Andrews also worked towards responding to Schomburg's argument about exploring the Black past in both their daily library duties and in their writing. By writing the questions that centered their daily work into their fiction, they employed what Cloutier calls "archival sensibility." Their work in the library and their roles in documenting, preserving, recording, and cataloguing Black history and literature within the 135th Street Branch were a response to the violence, deprivation, and racism

within libraries, the N.Y.P.L., and archives. Larsen and Andrews saw and addressed the importance of Schomburg's claim and of his efforts in their roles as writers and librarians each day.

Andrews's and Larsen's fictions are necessarily entrenched in the exchange of power within and outside of the operations of a library. Because this exchange of power, as well as racism within libraries and government institutions, had an effect on their fiction writing, we might ask what effects these texts have once they are placed on the shelves of the library. What happens to them once they are catalogued and classified? How does the way that a patron engages with the library change after reading texts that reveal the challenges of information classification and sharing within a library? Andrews and Larsen ask their readers to think critically about the ways that information affects the information that they engage with in and out of the library.

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