Speaking the invisible: Africana women, black identity, and alienation in the works of Nella Larsen and Tsitsi Dangarembga

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ABSTRACT

AFRICANA WOMEN’S STUDIES

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SPEAKING THE INVISIBLE: AFRICANA WOMEN, BLACK IDENTITY, AND ALIENATION IN THE WORKS OF NELLA LARSEN AND TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

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This study examines black identity and alienation Nella Larsen’s and Tsitsi Dangarembga’s Passing and Nervous Conditions. The novels demonstrate the authors’ interpretation of the conditions within their respective societies of the impact of slavery and colonization on Africana women. As a springboard in the development of these issues, Frantz Fanon’s seminal works Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth and the DuBoisian notion of double consciousness were used in analyzing the attitudes and behaviors of the oppressed and oppressor of Africana women.

This study was based on the premise that wherever black people are located, the issues of black identity and alienation surface in Africana women’s literature.
The literary ethnographic method posited by Frederique Van De Poel-Knottnerus and J. David Knottnerus, "Social Life Through Ethnography," was used in the analysis of the selected texts.

The results of the research illustrate that the assimilation process causes the Africana women protagonists to be alienated within the general society as well as their own families and culture. The dissertation demonstrates that assimilating within societies brings forth a sense of alienation that results in a black identity crisis for the characters.
SPEAKING THE INVISIBLE: AFRICANA WOMEN, BLACK IDENTITY, AND ALIENATION IN THE WORKS OF NELLA LARSEN AND TSITSI DANGAREMBGA

A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF CLARK ATLANTA UNIVERSITY
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BY
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### TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</th>
<th>ii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Purpose of the Research</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Underlying Premise of the Research</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Significance of the Research</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization of the Dissertation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Definition of Terms</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. THE COLONIZED/ENSLAVED MIND - DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Interface of Enslavement and Colonization</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Black Identity and Alienation</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notions of Duality and Neo-colonialism</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon Confronting the Problem of Duality</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
W. E. B Du Bois ........................................... 33
Frantz Fanon............................................. 38
Conclusion............................................. 44

3. LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................. 47
Models of Black Identity Formation ............... 59
Africana Women's Voices ............................. 75
Theoretical Framework ............................... 82
Methodology ........................................... 88

4. THE LEGACY OF ENSLAVEMENT AND COLONIZATION
ON AFRICANA WOMEN'S BLACK IDENTITY ........ 93
The Effects of Enslavement ......................... 93
The Effects of Colonization ......................... 103
Passing ................................................. 109
Nervous Conditions .................................. 133

5. SYNTHESIS OF THE NOVELS ................................. 157
Denial and Suppression of Culture ............... 157
Eurocentric Standard of Beauty .................. 166
Adoption of English Speaking .................... 170
Attitude and Behavior as the Enslaver or
Colonizer .............................................. 174

6. CONCLUSION................................................ 181
BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................. 191
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. . . . He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face.¹

The black man has two dimensions. One with his fellows, the other with the white man. A Negro behaves differently with a white man and with another Negro. That this self-division is a direct result of colonialist subjugation is beyond question. . . .²

The thought provoking statements of W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon signal the struggles and experiences of


Africana³ people in dominant societies that relate to them on the basis of their skin color. Du Bois is the first to introduce the dilemma of duality that explains the nature and personality of African Americans in the United States. Du Bois speaks of this peculiar sensation, a double consciousness, that plagues black people in their pursuit to achieve levels of selfhood and self-consciousness. The difficulty arises when the person attempts to assimilate in the United States as an American. The opportunities for blacks are unequal to their white counterparts, regardless of the fact that both groups are Americans. The color of one's skin is the deciding factor in how one is treated in American society. The feeling of inferiority is the result of living in a society that recognizes black people as second-class citizens. Similarly, Frantz Fanon's experiences in Martinique, France, and Algeria compels him to recognize the neurosis or nervous conditions in colonized people outside of the United States.

Frantz Fanon's statement signifies the two dimensions of the black man's struggle, experience, and confusion of being a colonized person in Martinique. The duality occurs from the onset of colonization that has black people

³The term Africana is used to refer to people of color who are located throughout the world. Specifically, the term is used when speaking of African Americans in the United States, Africans on the continent of Africa, or Africans in the Caribbean. Therefore, the terms Africana people and black people are used synonymously in this research.
throughout the African Diaspora confused about identity and their role within mainstream society. The French assimilation policy causes a division of two souls, two ideals, and two thoughts which plague Africana people in Martinique. The policy alienates Africana people within general society as well as their own culture, heritage, and family.

Depending on class position, namely the bourgeoisie, the duty of nonwhite Martinicans is to learn the French language, customs, traditions, and history of the colonizer. Performing these tasks, Martinicans are suppose to become French by the very nature of the assimilation policy. Yet, the social interactions between Martinicans and the metropolitan Frenchmen lead to a crisis that ignites trouble within the human psyche. A sense of rejection and alienation becomes apparent when the bourgeoisie interface with French society in concerted efforts at assimilation. As a result of this process, a duality or a splitting consciousness occurs within the souls of Africana folk in pursuit of their own identity.

The Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research is to examine black identity and alienation using the works of Nella Larsen and Tsitsi Dangarembga. An examination of the texts Passing and Nervous Conditions, is used to demonstrate the authors’
interpretation of the effects of the conditions of enslavement and colonization within their respective societies on Africana women. As a springboard in the development of these issues, Frantz Fanon's seminal works Black Skin, White Masks and The Wretched of the Earth and W. E. B. Du Bois's compelling work, Souls of Black Folk, are used in analyzing the attitudes and behaviors of the victim and victimizer. Therefore, enslavement, colonization, and assimilation form the basis of the discourse surrounding black identity and alienation as they relate to Africana people in the African Diaspora. The stories of Africana women are told through these literary texts demonstrating the notions of double consciousness and a colonized mind.

Underlying Premise of the Research

The underlying premise of this research is that wherever black people are located, the issues of black identity and alienation surface particularly as reflected in Africana women's literature. The works central to this study specifically come from the United States and Africa. This approach provides a cross section of experiences showing the ways in which Africana women assimilate within their respective society. One of the texts under investigation, written by an African-American woman, is Nella Larsen's Passing. The exemplar from the African experience is Tsitsi Dangarembga's novel Nervous Conditions.
These works demonstrate that assimilating within societies bring on a sense of alienation and result in a black identity crisis. Thus, an identity crisis translates into a state of conflict, frustration, pain, and even death. These elements portrayed in the novels establish the crust of the dilemma in Africana women's writings.

Approximately sixty-four years after slavery in the United States, Nella Larsen's *Passing* is published. This historical moment brought on an emergence and watershed of prolific ideas concerning the struggles, plights, and experiences of black people in America during the Harlem Renaissance. In Nella Larsen’s work, *Passing*, the major characters are struggling with their identity. There is a desire to belong to the mainstream culture while simultaneously wanting to be a part of black life and culture.\(^4\) Interestingly, the characters pass for white, whether temporarily or permanently. The protagonists' identities are as ambiguous as the novel’s ending.

On the other hand, from Zimbabwe, the novel of Tsitsi Dangarembga, *Nervous Conditions*, focuses on the post-colonial experience of the main characters. The protagonist leaves the comfort of her cultural society to

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assimilate into an environment that calls for her to suppress her Africaness, that is, to search for a new self.\(^5\)

Given the circumstances of enslavement and colonization, these works tend to reflect the mindset of the women authors and their interpretation of the impact of both of the above on their traditional culture. The general society creates a sense of alienation that manifests itself in a black identity crisis for the main characters.

Therefore, the discussion of the major conditions that affect Africana women in the Diaspora are structured as enslavement and colonization, black identity and alienation, notions of duality and neo-colonialism, and location.

**Significance of the Research**

The problem of black identity and alienation is worth studying because people tend to voice their concerns and struggles in writing. Consequently, many Africana novels of the past and present reflect a dilemma in the lives of black people; however, it is not stated overtly that the characters are suffering from a black identity crisis or a lost sense of self.

This study is significant because the research brings forth black identity and alienation as compelling issues in Africana women's writings thereby providing groundbreaking

literary analysis for the academy. The analysis offers another way of viewing Africana women’s writings.

This research elucidates that the issues confronting the lives of the characters in the texts leave them alienated from society and their own culture resulting in a black identity crisis. More importantly, they take on the attitudes and behavior of the dominant culture by being oppressive to their own race. Additionally, the wedding of ideas from the Humanities and Black Psychology disciplines necessitate the examination of black identity and alienation.

For the study of black people, Black Psychology, as a discipline in the American academy, came into the forefront over 40 years ago by the insightful Herman Canady. As a professor of psychology, Canady recognized the need for a discipline and courses concerned with the psychology of African Americans. Robert V. Guthrie contends that “Black Psychology is an outgrowth of “Third World” philosophies which are not committed to the authenticity of traditional European and American psychology, but are born out of a need promulgated through neglect rather than traditional theoretical stances.”

As a discipline within the American academy, Black Psychology has a unparalleled position. Wade W. Nobles asserts that “its unique status is from the positive

features of basic African philosophy which dictate the values, customs, attitudes, and behavior of Africans in Africa and the New World." Moreover, Nobles contends that "it is more than the "darker" dimension of general psychology." Joseph L. White maintains that it is difficult, if not impossible, to understand the lifestyles of black people using traditional theories developed by white psychologists to explain white people. Moreover, when these traditional theories are applied to the lives of black folks many incorrect, weakness-dominated, and inferiority-orientated conclusions come about.

Therefore, Black Psychology is helpful in understanding the human psyche and cultural mindset of the characters of the selective texts within time, space, and location. The attitude and behavior of the oppressed and the oppressors offer a different perspective in understanding black identity and alienation, especially in novels written by Africana women.

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8Ibid.

Research Questions

This dissertation pursues an answer to the following questions:

1. What social, cultural, political and/or psychological factors contribute to the black identity crisis?
2. In what ways do black people, regardless of regional location, have similar experiences of identity and alienation? and
3. What problems are attributed to black identity crisis and alienation?

Limitations of the Study

Primarily, the study is limited because of the utilization of only two texts in the analysis of black identity and alienation of black women and omits a comparison of issues of black identity and alienation in the writings of Africana men throughout the Diaspora.

Organization of the Dissertation

In order to examine black identity and alienation in the context of the selected texts, Chapter 1 of this dissertation gives the purpose and the reason why this research is selected for study. Chapter 2 provides the factors that constitute a colonized and enslaved mind of Africana people. Moreover, Chapter 2 contains a section on
W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon confronting the problem of duality. This is followed by a review of the literature in Chapter 3. This chapter also comprises the theoretical framework which guides the study and methodology used to examine black identity and alienation within the texts. Chapter 4 analyzes the selected texts. This Chapter reflects an in-depth examination of the texts revealing the protagonists response to the black identity and alienation and the smothering effects that are caused by enslavement and colonization. Chapter 5 synthesizes the novels by revealing the similarities and differences of the response of Africana women protagonists to black identity and alienation. Finally, Chapter 6 gives the concluding statements about the research and recommendations for further study concerning black identity and alienation in the literary works of Africana women throughout the African Diaspora.
Definition of Terms

The following terminology is used throughout the text.

1. African - The indigenous people whose descent and heritage is the continent of Africa.

2. Africana - Refers to people of color who have African blood and are located throughout the world. Essentially, Africana people are black people.


4. African Diaspora - Refers to the regional location of people of African descent and heritage in the United States, the Caribbean, and Africa.

5. Alienation - Feelings of being torn between two cultures without a sense of belonging to either. These feelings result in a sense of not belonging to society or within one’s own culture and family.

6. Assimilation - The process by which a person or a group adopts a culture of another social group to the extent that
they no longer have any characteristics that identifies them or their loyalties to their former culture.

7. **Black Identity** - Self-affirmation within the environment in which one lives as a black American. This also can apply to those individuals who are of African descent on the African continent or throughout the African Diaspora.

8. **Colonialism** - is a relationship of domination between an indigenous (or forcibly imported) majority and a minority of foreign invaders.¹⁰

9. **Color Line** - A means of measuring an individual’s identity and social sense of being strictly by skin pigmentation or racial origin.¹¹ Interracially, the color line connotes institutionalized racism and prejudices that were originated to segregate, oppress, and instill in blacks a sense of inferiority to the dominant race. Intraracially, the color line refers to the self-imposed color prejudices

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and subsequent class divisions that exist within the black race and between blacks of various skin hues.\textsuperscript{12}

10. **Diaspora** - The dispersion of black people throughout the world.

11. **Double Consciousness** - A state of affairs in which an individual is both representative of and immersed in two distinct ways of life.\textsuperscript{13}

12. **Hidden Self** - The lack of knowledge concerning the identity of one's self, that is, the unknown identity.

13. **Integration** - A one-way process in which blacks gravitate to white institutions and white communities and adopt white values while implicitly rejecting their own.\textsuperscript{14}

14. **Neo-colonialism** - The economics and political parties by which a great power indirectly maintains or extends its

\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{13}Denise Heinze, *The Dilemma of "Double Consciousness" Toni Morrison's Novels* (Athens, GA.: The University of Georgia Press, 1993), 5.

influence over other areas or people.\textsuperscript{15}

15. \textbf{Oppression} - A situation in which one, or more, identifiable segments of the population in a social system systematically and successfully act over a prolonged period of time to prevent another identifiable segment, or segments, of the population from attaining access to the scarce and valued resources of that system.\textsuperscript{16}

16. \textbf{Passing} - Refers to the act of crossing the socially constructed "color line" that separates white and black Americans, though the term has broad application for other ethnic or racial groups. . . . Moreover, it reflects the social reality of individuals who have permanently or temporary "crossed over" the color line.\textsuperscript{17}

\textsuperscript{15}Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary (1975), s. v. "neo-colonialism."


\textsuperscript{17}Andrews, Foster, and Harris, 560.
CHAPTER 2

THE COLONIZED/ENSLAVED MIND - DOUBLE CONSCIOUSNESS

This chapter explores the basis for the colonized and/or enslaved mind of Africana people in the African Diaspora. The discussion of the major conditions that affect Africana people in the African Diaspora is structured as follows: the interface of enslavement and colonization, black identity and alienation, notions of duality and neo-colonialism, and location.

The Interface of Enslavement and Colonization

The slavery and colonization processes infiltrate the United States, Africa, and various islands in the Caribbean. The importation and enslavement of Africana people establishes a newly created world where stratification is key and determined on the basis of race, class, color, gender, language, and religion among people. Classifying people in categories through a discriminatory process aids in segregating the society.

Against this backdrop and with social constructs in place, the enslaver and/or colonizer is able to maintain control and power over black people or victims. The
enslaved people were marginalized, violated, victimized, oppressed, and were not fully recognized as being human during the enslavement and colonization eras. Paulo Freire asserts that "an act is oppressive only when it prevents people from being more fully human."\(^1\) Slavery and colonization act as a control effort to keep black people as victims, as oppressed beings to be dependent upon and dehumanized at the hand of the oppressor. Yet, as the oppressor dehumanizes and violates the rights of black people, "they themselves also become dehumanized."\(^2\) The oppressor further dehumanizes himself by breeding with the oppressed. Lillian Smith agrees with Freire on the dehumanization of the oppressor when he violates the rights of the female slave through a forced sexual liaison.\(^3\) Smith states further that "they mated with these dark women whom they had dehumanized in their minds, and fathered by them children who, according to their race philosophy, were "without souls"--a strange exotic new kind of creature, whom they made slaves of and sometimes sold on the auction


\(^2\)Ibid., 38.

If the oppressed is labeled a creature, a savage and animalistic, what does that make the oppressor? What can be said for him; he who beds with an animal? The slavery and colonization makes everyone involved a victim. At the end of slavery and colonization, does the oppression continue to linger as the oppressed attempt to assimilate? Are all people allowed to assimilate or are a chosen few selected by the colonizer?

Throughout the African Diaspora, the privilege class is viewed as a gloried position in the dominant society which means the best education, social, political, and economic opportunities. However, the problem arises when the dominant society does not recognize the position regardless of the desire, the “right” skin color or the intermarriage with the dominant culture, when it is permitted. Africana people will not gain acceptance because of the “tinge of African blood.” This is a permanent caste system using blood as the main criterion.

Regardless of time, space, or place, the assimilation process of black people within society is clouded by racism, classism, and sexism. Oftentimes black people are not given the same economic, political, and social opportunities within society because of the color of their skin.

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4Ibid.

5The tinge of African blood is synonymous with the one drop of African blood rule which makes the individual black or Negro.
Therefore, efforts are made to imitate the white counterpart to gain full acceptance within mainstream society. What results is a black identity crisis. Furthermore, Africana people do not gain the general acceptance they desire. Consequently, the dominant societies continue to operate from the legacies of slavery and colonization. The manner in which oppressed people are viewed by the general society is etched in their mindset based on this process. As historical moments, slavery and colonization allow the general society to exert control over black people. When the institutions of slavery and colonization were abolished, and with the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 in the United States and the gaining of independence in Caribbean and African countries, the former enslaver and/or colonizer imposed discrimination polices to keep black people in their "proper place." Black Codes were adopted and designed in the United States to deny black people their basic civil rights. This act was an oppressive, subordinate position and blacks were treated as nonhumans. Therefore, for blacks, assimilation was the mechanism to find their space within their respective societies.

Thus, the assimilation process has an alienating effect on black people within their respective environments. In their efforts to assimilate, black people, consciously and

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unconsciously, identify with their oppressors. On the one hand, the conscious portion of their psyche tends to hate the oppressor because of the violence and unfair treatment he bestows on them. On the other hand, unconsciously, black people tend to want to imitate the oppressor. In other words, black people loathe the oppressors, but, there is a desire to imitate them and assimilate with them in their culture. As a result, a psychological dilemma occurs when the effort to assimilate into mainstream society causes them to suppress their own identity, culture, and heritage. They find themselves not belonging to either group, mainstream culture nor black culture.

**Black Identity and Alienation**

In the process of assimilation and imitation, black people tend to move toward the oppressor or the dominant culture to find a place. They attempt to achieve this by altering their language pattern or speaking the oppressor’s language, adhering to a Eurocentric standard of beauty, becoming individualistic, and maintaining the attitude and behavior of the oppressor as they relate to other black people. Frantz Fanon succinctly states that “the colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people.”

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7 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 1963), 52.
Consequently, black people have the tendency to oppress their own race and alienate themselves from their own.

Moreover, this is the exact cultural mindset of the oppressor in mainstream society. Outside the United States, skin color and education serve as means of perpetuating the problem by upholding discriminatory practices to stratify people on the premise of who is superior or inferior. Inside in the United States, the more education the individual has the better the class position.

The psychological ramifications of this occurrence wreak havoc on the human psyche when it is realized that black people are powerless and not accepted by the culture they attempt to imitate. The marks of oppression such as feelings of aggression, depression, self-hatred, and self-esteem problems begin to surface. The realization is that no matter how hard they attempt to imitate the people of the dominant culture, black people are not accepted and that places tremendous pressure on their consciousness. More importantly, their identity is ambiguous. Unconsciously, the marks of oppression are embedded into their psyche. It causes them to question who they are and how they fit into society. Consequently, a concern with their blackness and nationality is called into question. Painfully, black people go through society with dual personalities and dual identities vacillating between being black and yet adhering to standards of the dominant culture.
Faye Harrison maintains that Africana people, because of their African cultural heritage and racial oppression, have a social experience that is distinguished by a painful duality. Within this context, Africana people are confronted with attaining wholeness in their lives while living out their daily experiences behind the veil of inequality. Furthermore, Harrison asserts that under the guise of double consciousness, Africana people feel intense pain, agony, and alienation that plague their existence.

Similar to African Americans in the United States, black identity crisis and alienation emerge within the community of Africans on the continent of Africa and throughout the African Diaspora. Paul Gilroy maintains that "double consciousness is the problem which points towards the core dynamic of racial oppression as well as the fundamental antinomy of Diaspora blacks." Regardless of the location in the Black Atlantic, Diaspora blacks have a dual consciousness level as a result of colonization and enslavement.

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9 Ibid., 90.

Consequently, as Frantz Fanon argues, a colonized mind results in the transformation of a psychological dependence to a psychological inferiority.\(^{11}\) In this case African people are never accepted because of the social constructs of race, color, and class. Therefore, they attempt to display themselves with "psychological" masks to hide their black skin and the after effects of slavery and colonization. The same analogy is used for African Americans in the United States. The psychological white mask is ever present on their black faces as they live their daily lives in a dominant society that forces them into a subordinate and oppressive position. However, the issue of blood is significant in determining black identity.

The situation of the "tinge of African blood" is experienced by Frantz Fanon. In Martinique, he is taught that he is a Frenchman. His family accepts the French culture, religion, and language as its own. They are fully assimilated into the life as French people. Besides, they are the right color; however, Fanon, as the middle child in the family, is medium brown in skin color. When he travels to Paris, regardless of the perfect French that he speaks or his education, Fanon is considered a black man in French society. Fanon tells of this encounter in his book *Black Skin White Masks*. A young boy shouts, "look, a Negro" and

\(^{11}\)Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 98.
at this instant he becomes an object, a thing in the midst of other objects and things.\textsuperscript{12}

Du Bois' experiences are similar with an encounter of a "tall newcomer" in Great Barrington, Massachusetts. His greeting card is rejected by a young white girl who is his classmate. It is the "tinge of African blood" that makes the girl deny his card. The vestige of Dutch and French bloodlines does not make a difference. Du Bois is black.

**Notions of Duality and Neo-colonialism**

Living black and American or West Indian and French is quite a juggle and struggle. Du Bois and Fanon meet their match in the attempt to balance their two existences, black and American and/or Caribbean and French. The notion of duality is the centerpiece and the dilemma of Africana people. Furthermore, dualism occurs after the colonization period or neo-colonialism, a new form of control.

Hence with the assimilation and association policies of the colonizers, Africana people are actually duped into thinking that they are "English", "French" or "Spanish" because of the language that they speak. Vere Knight notes that the association policy is "based on the notion of equality but also on the conviction of the superiority of

\textsuperscript{12}Fanon, *Black Skin, White Mask*, 109.
French civilization." Moreover, according to Knight the association policy suggested that "there were no cultural differences that education could not overcome and that other cultures were condemned if it came into contact with French culture." What is described as an assimilation policy is actually an act of alienation. Consequently, assimilation is synonymous with alienation.

Frantz Fanon and Aime Cesaire concur that the assimilation policy of the French is nothing more than an alienation policy in which black people are taught to denounce everything about Africa. In an interview with Rene Despestre, Cesaire comments on the politics of assimilation.

We didn't know what Africa was, Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin.

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14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

Actually, the policy creates psychological damage in an unconscious or conscious attempt to take on the identity of the oppressor in the dominant society. With this factor against them, the assimilation process continues to alienate Africana people within mainstream society and cause black people to relinquish their own identity and suppress their culture and heritage. Given the mainstream ideology, some Africana people “pass” into mainstream society to relinquish any association with negativity.

An interesting phenomenon that graces the mainstream system is the issue of “passing.” There are extremely light skin blacks who leave the Negroid caste system and become “white.” This occurs more when there is more of white ancestry blood in the black person through miscegenation. The mulattos and octoroons are the Africana people who are successful in passing for white. Passing for white goes across gender lines. If mulatto women as well as mulatto men could get away with passing, the deed is done. Louis Wirth and Herbert Goldhamer state:

Passing may occur only for segmented areas of life--such as the occupational or recreational --or it may be complete; it may be temporary or permanent; it may be voluntary or involuntary; it may be with knowledge on the part of the passer or without his knowledge;
it may be individual or collective.\textsuperscript{17}

Blacks with white blood hide themselves from the wrath of society by passing to live as the dominant society. Social and economic opportunities are the obvious reasons for mulattos to aggressively pass into white culture. Once blacks pass, they adhere to a Eurocentric culture, their standard of beauty, behavior, and attitude. At the same time, they denounce and alienate themselves from their own culture, traditions, and heritage. More importantly, they do not classify themselves as black any longer. The downside to this escapade is that there are people who can recognize their racial heritage. Therefore, they refuse to intermingle with the black race for the fear of being caught.

Some blacks who are unable to "pass" for white also bond to the Eurocentric standard. They often identify themselves as being of another nationality or race. Myrdal asserts that "some of the darker [Negroes] do also [pass] by pretending to be Filipinos, Spaniards, Italians or Mexicans."\textsuperscript{18} Consequently, one does not have to be a


mulatto to pass and adhere to the attitudes and behavior of the oppressor.

The passer's oppressed attitude and behavior tend to become as the oppressor. They begin to oppress their own people by upholding the same discriminatory practices. Regardless of the skin color of the passer, the oppressive attitude and behavior of the oppressor is ever present.

For example, the film *Lumumba*\(^{19}\) brings to mind how blacks as an oppressed group tend to act out as the oppressor. Joseph Mobutu's, the army's chief of staff, attitude and behavior exemplify the oppressor. He takes violent matters into his own hands by ordering the killing of innocent people in the Congo. More importantly, he acts as an undercover agent for the Belgian government to overthrow the newly independent government and Patrice Lumumba, Congo's first Prime Minister. He orders the arrest of Lumumba, leads a military coup, and finally arranges the death of Lumumba to gain power and control in order to become a successful dictator. Later, Mobutu acquires the name of Mobutu Sese Seko, becomes president, and long-term dictator of Zaire, now the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Mobutu has all of the attributes of the oppressor. He is conceited, individualistic, aggressive, and violent. This similar attitude and behavior are characteristic of many of

the elite intellectuals, or as Fanon uses the term, the native or colonized intellectual, from many African countries and Caribbean islands. A new form of colonialism exists with the native intellectual thinking he is in charge and in control. He is appointed by the former colonial masters to oversee the newly independent country and given the opportunity to an education abroad. Many of the rulers of these countries are educated by colonial governments to essentially learn the ways of the colonizers.

There is not any doubt that education is the gateway to social, economic, and political opportunities for the native intellectuals: the higher the level of the education, the higher one's class status becomes. In the United States as well as in the Caribbean and Africa, education is a valuable asset and tool for social, economic stability, and status. Education is used as a signifier of identity; therefore, to receive any level of education places the individual in a certain class. Given this portrayal, Africana people with the money and education tend to imitate the "white life." According to Abram Kardiner and Lionel Ovesey, this type of behavior is usually seen in the middle to upper class blacks. This group of black people are very status oriented and are very concerned with class status. Psychological interviews were conducted by Kardiner and Ovesey to explore the personality of the Negro. The results show that the middle-to upper-class blacks attach the same value of class
distinction as whites to the following: "occupation; education; family organization; housing, furnishing, and appurtenances of comfort or convenience; relationship to the white world; characteristic recreations and amusements; and skin color." Kardiner and Ovesey assert that the only difference in the distinction is the issue of color. Although skin color may not take on the same connotation as it does for Africana people, the dominant culture does relish in the milky color of their skin that they hold up in the face of Africana people to announce their superiority.

The mark of oppression that society leaves on Africana people gives rise to a dilemma. This causes them to have two ways of life, two thoughts, two cultures, and two ideals that manifest themselves in the form of self-esteem problems, self-hatred, neurosis, and aggression which is concealed in one dark body regardless of their space and place in their respective societies.

Location

Location is an important and significant aspect of the analysis of black identity and alienation. Wherever Africana people are located, the issues of black identity

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21Ibid.
and alienation surface. Enslavement and colonization make the analysis interesting because colonialist ideology manifests into the similar results for the victims whether they are enslaved or colonized. The victims suffer psychological conditions such as depression, anxiety, neurosis, and self-hatred in their quest to identify with mainstream society. Colonialist ideology places the mark of oppression on its victims as a means of control. Consequently, discrimination tactics ensure domination of the masses.

Discriminatory practices form the basis of the ill-treatment of Africana people regardless of location. The tinge of black blood justifies policies that tend to highlight differences among people. Dominant societies, irrespective of location, institute ideologies that center on who is superior and inferior within the cultural environment. Once the policy takes shape, it becomes an open field to debase, denigrate, and subjugate Africana people. It appears that thinking they are a part of the society when actually they are not, Africana people throughout the African Diaspora question their identity.

The issue of identity has been a concern since Africana peoples' efforts of assimilation into the mainstream society. People tend to reflect their life experiences in writing. In the life time of Nella Larsen, identity issues surfaced in Africana people's writing. The cultural
zeitgeist that shapes Nella Larsen's writing during the Harlem Renaissance reflects a literary uprising that focuses on the popular culture during this historical moment. Approximately fifty-five years after the abolishment of slavery, black Americans were attempting to find a space and place for themselves in mainstream American culture. Assimilation was not necessary fulfillment for many African Americans. The color of their skin prevents many black people from participating in the social, economic, and political ideologies of the American society.
W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon Confronting the Problem of Duality

One ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.22

What is all this talk of a black people, of a Negro nationality? I am a Frenchman. I am interested in French culture, French civilization, the French people.... I am personally interested in the future of French, in French values, in the French nation.23

W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon are the towering black scholars, philosophers, and theorists of the twentieth century who comment on the unmerited pain, suffering, and confusion of black people throughout the African Diaspora. In his 1903 seminal work, The Souls of Black Folk, Du Bois eloquently informs the world of a double consciousness that haunts black Americans within their consciousness. The African American is forever feeling the twoness which is imbedded within his or her psyche, that is, being black and American.


23Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, 203.
Similarly, the rumblings of the affects of a double consciousness is felt within the community of Africana people outside the United States. Frantz Fanon is the exemplar who experienced the dualism within his society in Martinique. The primary objective within his class consciousness society is to be both French and white. The problem occurs when he regards himself French as opposed to African and the metropolitan French society does not view him as such.

W. E. B. Du Bois

The year 1868 marks the birth of William Edward Burghardt Du Bois to Alfred and Mary DuBois of Great Barrington, Massachusetts. This city is predominately middle class and had an estimate of twenty-five African American families living in the Berkshires out of a population of five thousand. As a child growing up in the Berkshires, Du Bois seems not to care about the notion of race as he intermingles with white members of the community. Although the color line is manifested and yet not absolutely drawn within the community, race prejudice does not translate into the brutality and violence of Jim Crow as in the southern states. Du Bois notes that the racial angle is

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more clearly defined against the Irish than against him.\textsuperscript{25}

It was not until the exchange of a greeting card with a "tall newcomer", as a teenager in Great Barrington, that brings him to the realization that the stranger rejects his card because of his skin color. In The \textit{Souls of Black Folk}, Du Bois states the incident as such:

\begin{quote}
In a wee wooden schoolhouse, something put it into the boys' and girls' heads to buy gorgeous visiting cards . . . and exchange. The exchange was merry, till one girl, a tall newcomer, refused my card, - refused it peremptorily, with a glance. Then it dawned upon me with a certain suddenness that I was different from the others; or like, mayhap, in heart and life and longing, but shut out from their world by a vast veil.\textsuperscript{26}
\end{quote}

Du Bois reports that the incident takes him by surprise.\textsuperscript{27}

Realizing that he is racially different from most of his classmates, Du Bois overcomes the affects of being different by becoming an overachiever academically. This traumatic experience is a departure point of how Du Bois views himself in the context of race in America. From Du Bois' conscious level, he is a part of the Great Barrington society. Du Bois does not think that the color of his skin is a problem. The tinge of white blood from his French and Dutch

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 14.

\textsuperscript{26}Du Bois, \textit{Souls of Black Folk}, 2.

\textsuperscript{27}Du Bois, \textit{Dusk of Dawn}, 14.
ancestry does not effect a change in the manner which the dominant society views him. Du Bois unconsciously does not see a distinction between himself and his white counterparts. Any distinction between his family and the white families of Great Barrington relates to social and class status. At this point in Du Bois' life, his view is limited to the social realism of the world based on the unique community of Great Barrington and his mulatto background. As Du Bois becomes older, he begins to see the world in a different perspective. At Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee, Du Bois learns to be a Negro. This is Du Bois' first experience being in the South. Jim Crow is an eye opener and a social realism in the South. In this historical moment, Du Bois leaves the white world of Great Barrington and steps into the world of the veil.

In 1885, Du Bois' encounter with the black belt proletariat proves to be a valuable experience. During his three years in the South, he receives first-hand experience of Jim Crow legislation. Du Bois claims he is amazed at "the separation of passengers on the railways; the race separation in the living quarters; and the disdain and even insults in race contact on the street."\textsuperscript{28} The veil widens as his experiences beyond Great Barrington broadens. His encounter with segregation in the South leads him to rethink his situation about being a Negro and American within the

\textsuperscript{28}Ibid., 30.
mainstream cultural society. These experiences in the South serve as the catalyst for many of the works that Du Bois publishes throughout his career such as *The Souls of Black Folk*. Later, Du Bois receives his AB degree from Fisk University in 1888, and attends Harvard University to obtain his BA degree in Philosophy in 1890. He returns the next year, 1891, and receives a Master of Art in History in 1891 at Harvard. A trip overseas broadens Du Bois’ narrow international perspective of race.

While attending the University of Berlin during 1891-1893, Heinrich von Treitschke, one of Du Bois’ professors shouts in class “Mulattos are inferior. . . .” “Their actions show it.”29 Du Bois realizes and envisions the race problem is not only relegated to the United States but is a global problem. When he returns to the United States, he completes and receives his Ph.D. degree in 1895 from Harvard University at the age of twenty-seven years.

By the age of thirty-six years, Du Bois is fully aware of the struggles, experiences, and plight of Africana people throughout the Diaspora. He expresses this in many of his publications such as *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade in U. S. of America 1638-1870* (1895); *The Philadelphia Negro: A Social Study* (1899); *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903); and *The African Roots of the War* (1914).

29Ibid., 99.
In fact, Du Bois begins his 1903 essay by asking, "How does it feel to be a problem?"30 to his gentle reader. This is Du Bois' way of letting the general society know that they recognize black people as a problem. However, this notion is one-sided; Du Bois does not respond to the question because he believes that he nor other black Americans are seen as problems.

From this point, Du Bois' career as a social scientist, philosopher, theorist, and historian helps to shape the social, economic, political, and cultural thoughts concerning black Americans. Du Bois' philosophical and theoretical opinions provide a legacy of an insightful perspective on the concept of race in America. He questions the fact that if black people are Americans, why are they not afforded the same opportunities as their white counterparts. Black people assimilate in the American society, but their skin color stands in the way of their acceptance by the dominant society.

As a result of his interaction with the dominant society, Du Bois suffers from a duality; through his study of the Negro Problem, he sees what it is to black and American in a society that judges on the basis of the skin color. Du Bois sees no resolution to America's dilemma or race relations between blacks and whites. This unreconciled dilemma emerges when Du Bois emigrates to Ghana in 1959,

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where he lived and died in Accra in 1963, at the age of ninety-five. It is the struggling and juggling of two cultural identities that presents the problem, neither of the two identities is accepted.

However, Du Bois states in *The Souls of Black Folk* that the color line would be the problem of the twentieth century. The duality dilemma is not only relegated to African Americans but people of African descent globally. The phenomenon is present in the Martinican society of noted scholar Frantz Fanon. His upbringing in Martinique helps to solidify a European consciousness.

**Frantz Fanon**

Frantz Fanon was born on July 20, 1925, on the island of Martinique in the French Antilles to an upper-middle-class family. Irene L. Gendzier notes that Fanon, "the fourth and youngest of four boys, and the middle child in a total of eight, is the darkest of the family."31 Emmanuel Hanson reports that little is known of Fanon’s father and his mother is described as a mild-mannered woman who considers herself a French citizen.32 Fanon’s family assimilates into the French cultural society of Martinique;

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they are the bourgeoisie and embrace the French language. With this knowledge in hand, this will aid in the understanding of Fanon’s mindset concerning his identity in a society that only acknowledges French culture, language, history, customs, and traditions; such was the island of Martinique.

The island of Martinique consists of a pyramidal class structure that comprises of a small group of whites that are native to the island and from metropolitan France. From this group of the class structure, “a small but prosperous bourgeoisie of nonwhites consisting of mulattos and blacks proper, and at the bottom . . . the bulk of the black population” floods the remaining portion of Martinican society. Since Martinique is an overseas colonial territory of France, the French culture, history, language, customs, and traditions are upheld. Consequently, the French government establishes an assimilation policy that allows people of a certain class position, the bourgeoisie, to acquire the French language, customs, and values through the educational process. Fanon’s class status is upper middle and his upbringing suggests that he acknowledges assimilationist values. Fanon recognizes himself as a French citizen on the island of Martinique as well as in

33Ibid., 16.

34Ibid.
France. In fact, Fanon sees himself as being white rather than black because “the more impeccable one’s French, the higher one’s status.”³⁵ Gendzier asserts that “to know the meaning of whiteness in the Antilles among nonwhites is to understand the full range of identity confusion that was in store for Fanon and for others like him.”³⁶ This is evident in his youth when his mother tells him to “stop acting like a nigger.”³⁷

This class position carries over a prejudicial perspective of the African, the Senegalese. The nonwhite, that is, the bourgeoisie Martinicans’ perspective of Africans is no better than the whites’ view of them. The West Indian looks down upon the African because of the negative colonialist ideology stating that they are lazy and savages. Fanon’s family is white by all standards of Martinican society and maintains this narrow perspective of the African. The winds of change begin to blow onto the island that sparks a new configuration of class status on Martinique.

The situation on Martinique begin to change with the fall of France to the Germans in 1940 and their declaration

³⁵Ibid., 17.

³⁶Gendzier, 11.

of allegiance to the regime in Vichy. When this action occurred, Hansen informs that the United States imposed a blockade on Martinique which made the French governor respond by instituting a military dictatorship on the island. Approximately 5,000 French sailors settled and established their own segregation policies among the indigenous people. The incident created strange bedfellows on Martinique in terms of how they treated and viewed nonwhites. Class was not an issue; rather, it was the skin color that played an integral part of how the French soldiers dealt with the indigenous population. During their occupation, the soldiers were instrumental in establishing segregation policies in their interactions with the people of Martinique. The Vichy Regime "means rape, racism, and rioting" on Martinique.

The assimilationist values in Martinique are very strong and mind altering. Fanon blames the Vichy Regime for the atrocities on the island and not France. Hansen states that Fanon did not associate or link the Vichy administration and the French presence with racism.

38 Hansen, 21.

39 Ibid.

40 Geismar, 24.

41 Hansen, 22.
psychological desire to be both French and white was so strong that he excused France and not the Vichy Regime. Instead, it makes him want to fight for France against the Germans.

In 1943, Fanon, at the age of eighteen, enlists in the French army to defend France during World War II. It is in the French army that Fanon encounters blatant racism. The black soldiers are given poor quality rations and living quarters and are the first to be in the line of fire in battle. At this tender age, Fanon is disillusioned by racist attitudes and behaviors of the white soldiers. More importantly, Fanon realizes that the white society recognizes him as a black man and not a French man. This is a turning point in Fanon’s life. In 1946, Fanon returns to Martinique where he meets Aime Cesaire. Ultimately, Cesaire introduces him to the philosophy of Negritude which is a “turning point in Fanon’s intellectual development.”

In 1947, Fanon goes to France and enrolls in the university to pursue an advanced degree. He enters medical school in 1948 at Lyon University and obtains a degree in psychiatry. While at the university, Fanon reads extensively the works of existential philosophers: Hegel, Marx, Lenin and Sartre. According to Hansen, this is “a

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period of intense reflection, introspection, and self-analysis" for Fanon.

Fanon begins to question the white dominant environment and values in a world that thinks of blacks as nonpersons. This deep contemplation forges Fanon to publish his first book, *Black Skin, White Masks* in 1952. The book is a descriptive analysis of the black bourgeoisie's self-hatred and the realization that they cannot become white.

Later in 1953, Fanon continues to practice psychiatry in Bilda, Algeria in North Africa. He blames the effects of colonization for the neurotic behavior and psychosomatic illness of his patients, French soldiers and Algerians. By this time, Fanon realizes that there is not a resolution to the social illnesses of his patients. He believes that the illnesses are caused by the colonization process. This brutal force is where violence, rape, and inferiority complexes contribute to the psychological conditions on oppressed people. In 1957, Fanon arrives in Tunisia where he works for the FLN (Front de Liberation Nationale) in their struggle for liberation. It is here that Fanon examines the power of decolonization and the resulting colonized mind by writing powerful literature. Fanon's writings concern the affects of colonization and the war on the population in Algeria. He concerns himself with the psychological oppression of colonialism. The only remedy

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43 Hansen, 29.
for this malady is violence, because it destroys all the vestiges of colonialism. Violence fights violence. By 1959, Fanon publishes, *Year Five of the Algerian Revolution* (*L’an V de la revolution algerienne*). By 1960, Fanon’s life takes a devastating turn. He learns that he is suffering from leukemia. Fanon seeks treatment in the Soviet Union that turns out to be unsuccessful. After refusing to continue his treatment for his illness, Fanon immerses himself in his writing. During his illness he completes *The Wretched of the Earth* (*Les damnes de la terre*). By the time Fanon attempts to treat his illness in the United States it is much too late. Frantz Fanon dies in a Washington, D. C. hospital on December 6, 1961.

**Conclusion**

In conclusion, W. E. B. Du Bois and Frantz Fanon share a commonality that manifests a unique understanding of the dilemma of dualism among Africana people throughout the Diaspora. They both have eye-opening experiences when they encounter racism. For Du Bois, the experience of living as a Negro and American is problematic. He suffers from a double consciousness. Du Bois attempts to live in a society that views him on the basis of his color. He reminds Africana people that the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.
The one drop of African blood prohibits black people the opportunities within mainstream America even when they assimilate. The level of acceptance is not total acceptance. A feeling of alienation, not belonging to a society, begins to form in the mind. Therefore, this feeling of alienation leads them to question who they are in society. Du Bois feels this as he makes his move to Ghana to gain full acceptance in an African society.

Fanon’s experience is similar to Du Bois’s encounter by the mere fact that the French assimilation policy causes him to think that he is white and French. As a French man going to fight for the French cause during the War, Fanon gets a rude awakening. There is a racist perspective of the West Indian and the African. The treatment of both groups is remarkably different from the white soldiers because of their skin color; poor rations and living quarters are the mainstay. Equality is never to occur with the white race. Confusion and contradiction are the results of the realization of their limited acceptance by the French.

How can Fanon become white with black skin? The objective is to be white, speak French, embrace the customs, and marry white! Fanon marries a white woman but he hates whites, which cause critics to view his life as a life full of contradictions. He is confused about his own identity. Any contradiction of Frantz Fanon’s life is from a position of double consciousness. He embraces an Eurocentric and
Afrocentric ideology in his life and writings. In his short life, Fanon realize{s that his mind is colonized, and freedom of his mind can only occur through a liberation called violence.
CHAPTER 3

LITERATURE REVIEW

How does it feel to be a problem?¹

The status of “native” is a nervous condition. . . .²

I attach myself to my brothers,
Negroes like myself. To my horror,
they too reject me.³

The literature review addresses the relevant research pertinent to the discussion of whether or not a black identity crisis or alienation exists. The literature suggests that enslavement and colonization, black identity crisis and alienation, notions of duality, neo-colonialism and location are instrumental in establishing conditions and


connections that lead to Africana people's dilemma in the
general culture.

The above statements reflect a dilemma in the black psyche. They cry out about a problem--a psychological nervousness, an alienation, and rejection--that signifies their plight and struggle within mainstream society. The pain of their cry echoes throughout the African Diaspora. Africana people in the African Diaspora make concerted efforts to assimilate into society. There is a longing to belong. The desire has side affects that manifest into aggression, self-hate, neurosis, and alienation. Moreover, there is a tendency to imitate the enslaver or colonizer or both in a desperate attempt to belong. It seems that there is no solution, particularly with roots of slavery and colonization as a past. The dominant culture will never forget the status of black people during that historical moment. This ideology of the dominant culture is not only relegated to the United States but also travels cross-culturally.

Benjamin Brawley, in his work *A Social History of the American Negro*, reviews the psychological neurosis or nervous conditions of slaves during the slavery process. Brawley notes that "women became hysterical and both men and women became insane" on slave ships coming to America. A

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psychological neurosis in African people begins on the slave ships during the middle passage. The harsh conditions that Africans had to endure and withstand took a tremendous toil on their psyche. The hope of returning to their homeland was definitely out of the question. Consequently, suicides, starving and jumping overboard occurs when Africans realize that the return to Africa is not on the agenda of the enslaver. Kardiner and Ovesey maintain that upon the arrival on colonial soil, the psychological effects of being slaves has traumatic affects on the Africans. The complexity of these effects are as follows:

(1) Degradation of self-esteem.
(2) Destruction of cultural forms and forced adoption of foreign culture traits.
(3) Destruction of the family unit, with particular disparagement of the male.
(4) Relative enhancement of the female status, thus making her the central figure in the culture, by virtue of her value to the white male for sexual ends and as mammy to the white children.
(5) The destruction of social cohesion among Negroes by the inability to have their own culture.
(6) The idealization of the white master; but with this ideal was incorporated an object which was at once revered and hated. These became incompatible constituents of the Negro personality.⁵

The cultural mindset of the general society establishes the psychology of slavery that degrades and destroys the African psyche. Additionally, the society is stratified as to who is superior and who is inferior.

Racial stratification becomes more important in the era of slavery. It establishes the ideology that white people are superior to slaves in society. However, this concept carries beyond master and slave status. Kardiner and Ovesey assert that "the slave could get some prestige by belonging to a wealthy or influential household. This, together with the gradations of status between field and domestic slaves, laid the base for status differentiation between Negroes." This distinction provides slaves with a false sense of identification, but, as with anything else, this is a device that continues to control the lives of slaves. Other measures in the stratification process keep slaves in their "proper place" in mainstream society.

To keep slaves in their place, Johnathan H. Turner, Royce Singleton, Jr., and David Musick contend that "...slave codes, were passed stripping blacks of their rights until, by the early 1700s, they were no longer defined as legal person but as chattel property--little more than

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6 Ibid.
"beasts of burden."

Thomas F. Pettigrew agrees with Turner, et al. concluding that the "...American colonies treated the slave as mere property—no different legally from a house, a barn, or an animal." The dominant society develops degrading and controlling images for slave women and men, such as Jezebel and Sambo, and develops ways to debase the Africans in America. This ideology of the general culture views of African slaves has a devastating effect on their minds. The African’s status is that of nonhuman. The constant reminder of their new identity as being chattel surely weights heavily on their minds, particularly, coming from a civilization of people whose cultural, social, political, and economic systems recognize them as humans and with self-esteem and an awareness of self.

Lillian Smith, in her text Killers of the Dream, peels off the layers of the “Southern Tradition” that guides the mainstream society in the South. Throughout the text, Smith reinforces the notion of “Southern Tradition” as a

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lifestyle for whites as well as for blacks. This tradition calls for Negroes to be in their proper place. Their proper place consists of being in the shadows of white society. More importantly, the society views black people as animals, savages begging to be civilized. Specifically, the narrative gives an excellent backdrop to the understanding of this historical moment that leads to the oppressive conditions of black people in the South. This understanding is achieved by Smith reflecting on her life as a young girl growing up in the deep South and the beliefs which her parents particularly her father, instilled in her concerning Negroes. White supremacy was the general rule for the people in the South, where cotton and white folks were king. Oppressing black people was the general rule of this historical moment. Blacks were never to be made to feel that they were part of the general society. Oppressive conditions were a way of life for black people.

Oppression has startling affects on people who experience enslavement and colonization. This condition manifests itself into forms of discrimination. Clearly, when the Civil War ends, the emancipated Negro is the primary concern of mainstream society, especially in the South.

During this historical moment, segregation policies and Jim Crow legislation are part of Southern society's tradition to keep the Negro in his place. The southerners
maintain that the Negro will never be their equal and Jim Crow would remain in place as long as white supremacy rules. Kardiner and Ovesey emphasize that "it is difficult to transform an object heretofore used as a vested interest into an object with whom you enjoy reciprocal emotional interation. The white man has never made this shift in his own adaptation to the Negro."\textsuperscript{10} This is "Southern Tradition", an ideology whites uphold. Jim Crow legislation aids and proves to be an oppressive condition for blacks, who are victims of circumstance and, thus, confined to a permanent caste system. This same mentality is fundamental in the colonialist ideology in relegating blacks to inferior positions outside the United States.

The British policy of "indirect rule" and the French "assimilation policy" are significant and instrumental in understanding the colonialist mentality. These policies aid in the shaping of the colonized mind in the colonization process. The British policy of "indirect rule" creates:

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a clearcut division from the onset, institutionalizing the social distance and the purported difference existing between the colonial overlord and the colonized, both on the administrative and the cultural level. The African was compelled to seek his chance for self-assertion and advancement in the colonial hierarchy not just by simply imitating the English way of life but also
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{10}Kardiner and Ovesey, 49.
by consciously developing his faculties of self-reliance, e.g., by freely adapting imported elements of British culture and civilization and thus bending them to new requirements.\textsuperscript{11}

The French policy of assimilation is slightly different in its structure. Renate Zahar notes that the French policy has

unceasingly inculcated into the colonized mind the idea that he could only escape his underprivileged position by wholly adopting French culture and virtually gave him no opportunity of reinterpreting its form and content according to his own mental outlook.\textsuperscript{12}

In actuality, these two distinct polices never allow the colonized to fully take control of their own destiny within society. Instead, the policies foster a dependency complex on the colonizer. Octave Mannoni speaks of this notion of dependency of the colonized on the colonizer in his work on the study of the Malagasies in \textit{Prospero and Caliban: The Psychology of Colonization}. Mannoni explains that the colonized possesses a dependency complex that causes them to become dependent upon the colonizers. This is called the bonds of dependence. He infers that due to a primitive mentality and inferior complex of the Malagasy, he becomes

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\textsuperscript{12}Ibid.
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dependent upon the European.\textsuperscript{13} Mannoni asserts that if the bonds of dependence are broken, the Malagasy will have feelings of hostility.\textsuperscript{14} Consequently, an inferiority complex emerges in the Malagasy "when the bonds of dependence are in some way threatened."\textsuperscript{15} Colonialism is the culprit for the psychological dependence and inferiority complex of the colonized. Aime Cesaire suggests that Mannoni must be taken seriously because a closer observation of his work reveals that "colonization is based on psychology."\textsuperscript{16} Furthermore, Cesaire asserts that this dependency complex is nothing more than a racist ideology on the part of the colonizer.\textsuperscript{17} He asserts that Mannoni claims that colonized people "suffer from a dependency complex, that they need dependence, that they crave it, ask for it and demand it."\textsuperscript{18} This lends to bonds of dependence.


\textsuperscript{14}Ibid., 44.

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., 40.


\textsuperscript{17}Ibid., 40.

\textsuperscript{18}Ibid.
The process of colonization, according to Cesaire, alters the entire perspective of the civilization. First of all, the colonized is met with a mask of blatant racism in the form of assimilation. Colonization reduces the colonized and colonizer to what Cesaire calls "thingification." Consequently, societies are invaded with false promises thus turning mankind into beings suited for domination and submission. Secondly, history and culture are considered unimportant and without value. Lastly, the colonizer becomes "decivilized;" he is the torturer, full of brutal violence and barbaric. In conclusion, Cesaire's notion of the psychological effects of colonization on the colonizer:

. . . dehumanizes even the most civilized man; that colonial activity, colonial enterprise, colonial conquest, which is based on contempt for the native and justified by that contempt, inevitably tends to change him who undertakes it; that the colonizer, who in order to ease his conscience gets into the habit of seeing the other man as an animal, accustoms himself to treating him like an animal, tends objectively to transform himself into an animal.22

19Ibid., 21.

20Ibid.

21Ibid., 13.

22Ibid., 20.
An analysis of the effects of colonialism shows that, in the process of control, the colonizer willfully imposes psychological problems on colonized people. First, the process makes them feel inferior and dependent. Secondly, colonized people are promoted to a nonhuman status thus, controlled by violence. Lastly, psychosomatic disorders are the illnesses that result from colonized behavior and attitude.

In Toward the African Revolution, Frantz Fanon calls the psychosomatic illness and expatriation the “North African Syndrome.” According to Fanon, “the patient who complains of headaches, ringing in his ears and dizziness, will also have high blood-pressure. But should it happen that along with these symptoms there is no sign of high blood-pressure, nor of brain tumor, in any case nothing positive, the doctor would have to conclude that medical thinking was at fault; . . . .” Fanon and other physicians were unable to identify the problem or their illnesses of the patients. These illnesses were nonexistent. However, the illnesses existed in the minds of their patients. Jock McCulloch contends that Fanon could only explain “a theory of imperialism or a concept of social class as the reason

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why the patients were oppressed”24 and suffered from mental illness.

Frantz Fanon is instrumental in bringing to the forefront psychosomatic disorders of the colonized. Fanon contends that the violent system of colonialism causes mental illness in patients. Furthermore, it dehumanizes the colonized who then think that they are inferior, thus developed a colonized personality. Fanon succinctly states that “the defensive attitudes created by this violent bringing together of the colonized man and the colonial system form themselves into a structure which then reveals the colonized personality.”25 On the matter that colonialism directly relates to oppression, Fanon asserts that

In the period of colonization[,] when it is not contested by armed resistance, . . . the defensive attitudes of the natives give way and they then find themselves crowding the mental hospitals. There is thus during this calm period of successful colonization a regular and important mental pathology which is the direct product of oppression.26

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25 Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 250.

26 Ibid., 250-251.
Models of Black Identity Formation

In discussing the literature on black identity, an understanding of what constitutes black identity is significant and integral to the study of Africana people throughout the African Diaspora. Concepts and models are established by scholars to assess black identity development of Africana people. These scholars emerged during an era that consciously made black people aware of the psychological impact that assimilation has on their psyche. William E. Cross, Jr.'s contribution to black identity development is an exemplar in the awakening of a black consciousness.

William E. Cross, Jr. maintains that the Nigrescence Model is an approach to construct black identity development. The term Nigrescence derives from French meaning "to become black." The model is from the black consciousness movement from 1968-1975 which stresses the idea of a movement from Negro to black conversion. The Nigrescence model is a five-stage process that consists of (a) Pre-encounter, (b) Encounter, (c) Immersion-Emersion,


(d) Internalization, and (e) Internalization-Commitment. 29

An analysis of the various stages of the model gives an in-depth view of identity and alienation. The pre-encounter stage focuses on the individual whose worldview is dominated by a Euro-American perspective. The individual is alienated from his/her own culture and heritage. In the encounter stage, the individual attempts to come to grips with herself/himself. Usually, there is an event that occurs that brings forth a level of consciousness that warrants an understanding of one's blackness. In the Immersion-Emersion stage the individual immerses herself/himself in blackness. Attempts are made, in this stage, to be liberated from whiteness or a Eurocentric worldview. The individual tries to reject vestiges of whiteness during the Encounter stage. Cross asserts that "Fanon's thesis of complete freedom through violent overthrow of one's oppressor comes into the picture at this point..." 30 Furthermore, Cross states that "persons who fixate or stagnate at this point in their development are said to have a "pseudo" black identity because it is based on the hatred and negation of white people rather than on the affirmation of a pro-black


The internalization stage is important because the process can inspire or frustrate the individual as attempts are made to immerse oneself in blackness. It is at this stage in the Nigrescence model that an identity crisis and alienation can occur for the individual. The individual may internalize the process and come out as an individual fully embracing blackness. Or, the individual can continue to be confused about one's blackness and revert back to the pre-encounter stage of the process. This leads to the last stage of the Nigrescence model which is Internalization-Commitment. Here, the internalizing of a new identity is formed.

Thomas A. Parham advances another model of black identity formation that focuses on the concept of recycling. The concept is a modification of the Cross Model. It "seeks to describe how the stages of racial identity are manifested in three phases of life (life adolescence/early adulthood, midlife, and late adulthood)." The term "recycling" is not to be misconstrued with returning back to the beginning stage of the Nigrescence Model, but, a rethinking of what is blackness. The term recycling simply means the reinitiation into the racial identity struggle and resolution process after having gone through the identity process at an

\[^{31}\text{Ibid.}\]

\[^{32}\text{Cross, Jr., Parham, and Helms, 331.}\]
earlier stage in one’s life. In essence, a person could theoretically achieve identity resolution by completing one cycle through the nigrescence process (internalization), and as a result of identity confusion, recycle through the stages again.  

Parham advances that the recycling process does not mean the person reverts back the old identity but a new encounter occurs, which is a recycling or refocus of experience. More importantly, Parham contends that “identity resolution occurs in three ways: stagnation (failure to move beyond one’s initial identity state, stage-wise linear progression (movement from one identity state to another in a sequential, linear fashion), and recycling.”

The last model is the concept of worldview that Janet E. Helm recommends for the development of black identity. Helms uses D. W. Sue’s definition of the worldview which concentrates on people’s “psychological orientation in life and determines how one thinks, behaves, make decisions, and

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33 Ibid., 332.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid., 333.
define[s] events." This involves the psychohistory of black America that stresses four points: (1) slavery in the Americas; (2) effects of the institutionalization of slavery; (3) the post-slavery experience; and (4) nigrescence in the present and future.

An analysis of Helm's concept of worldview presents an historical perspective of black identity formation. First, Helms notes the introduction of slaves in the Americas and the adoption of a new culture that resulted in them becoming African Americans. The effects of the institutionalization of slavery is the second point that focuses on the fact that slavery was successful in the destruction of identity. Consequently, slaves sought out new ways of viewing themselves from a Euro-American perspective. The post-slavery experience is significant because it centers on three world views: "the Garvey Movement and Harlem Renaissance; the effects of the Depression which diluted the gains made toward nigrescence in the 1920s and 30s; and the

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37 Ibid., 334-336.

38 Ibid., 335.
Black Consciousness Movement. “Nigrescence,” in the present and future, focuses on the new identity of the Negro, that is, the individual thinks she has gained acceptance and approval within mainstream society. Helms asserts that “the new Negro,” in effect, rejects blackness from both a cultural and class position.

Helm’s concept of worldview in black identity development fulfills the understanding of Africana people’s struggle with their identity. It gives a better view of how a black identity crisis and alienation are manifested within their human psyche. Moreover, the concept gives rise to the reasons why African people behave, think, and make decisions.

William E. Cross, Jr. explains that the dilemma in black identity crisis begins with Charles Thomas’s concept of negromachy. The concept of negromachy is defined as "that which is ruled by confusion of self-worth and shows dependency upon white society for definition of self." In sum, these models offer a complete development process that aids in black identity formation. The framework for theoretical approaches in establishing black identity is necessary to understand the dilemma of the crisis. Nathan Hare offers an interesting analysis of black

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39 Ibid., 335-336.

people's behavior and attitude as they interface with mainstream society.

In *Black Anglo-Saxons*, Nathan Hare views the imitation of white mannerism by black people as an effort to feel close to the white ideal: as whites do, they do. This behavior has a psychological effect of slavery on African Americans. The idealization of whiteness is strongly prevalent in that it "mimics" white life in every aspect of the social lives of blacks as they strive to be similar to white society. Kardiner and Ovesey argue that the concept of negromachy explains the perception that white is automatically better than that which is African. Blacks mimic the speech pattern of whites and they adhere to an Eurocentric standard of beauty, and pass, if they can, to eradicate any socio-economic discrimination. E. Franklin Frazier contends that the black bourgeoisie creates a world of make-believe to escape the realities of living an American life. These black anglo-saxons give every indication of disowning and despising their racial roots. In this instance, the black bourgeoisie has forsaken its own

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42 Kardiner and Ovesey, 46.

culture, traditions, and heritage to embrace white ideals. Clearly, the "mimics" use white society to define themselves and to obtain self-worth. As an exemplar of the struggle for assimilation, Frantz Fanon's cultural society in Martinique calls for an idealization of whiteness. In the struggle for assimilation, marriage within the white race aids in the process. The object is to whiten the skin color of the family so the stigma of blackness will eventually be erased.

In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon analyzes being black in a white world. He unveils the pain of living in a world that makes a distinction on the basis of skin color. A closer analysis of the book reveals that Fanon is actually writing about himself, that is, his own black identity crisis. Fanon recognizes that his existence is actually nonexistent because of his blackness. Within a white world, he struggles to maintain an existence, to be a man. Instead, the white world denigrates and objectifies his existence. The fact is the one drop of African blood positions Fanon in the community of Africans.

The West Indian in Martinique uses the French language as an indicator of one's near approximation to the French culture and becoming white. To speak the French language in Martinique signifies that the individual is French and white. Fanon states upfront that "the Negro of the Antilles will be proportionately whiter-[ ]that is, he will come
closer to being a real human being—[in direct ratio to his mastery of the French language." In essence, the book parallels Fanon's life.

Significantly, Fanon analyzes the conceptualization of whiteness that is the most desirable for the mulatto woman. To achieve this level of whiteness, the mulatto woman must marry white. If the task is not mastered, the mulatto woman suffers from an inferiority complex. Here, Fanon uses the novel of Mayotte Capecia's, *Je suis Martiniquaise* to demonstrate the pain and inferiority complex of the mulatto woman. According to Fanon, the black man's plight is to prove himself a man. Therefore, the man of color must marry white because it makes him accept himself as well as be accepted, so he thinks. His desire is to become white, just as the mulatto woman. Robert W. July asserts in his analysis of people of color and their association with mainstream society, the following dilemma:

For a time the islander tried to compensate, to become whiter, to prove his identity as a European. A successful marriage was one that involved a spouse of lighter color. Those who could traveled to France to be educated in whiteness, to speak French more perfectly, to return home more thoroughly Europeanized, the envy of their less-fortunate compatriots. It was no use. For the European the islander was a black man, naturally inferior, representing a stage between civilized men and the apes... The black man of the islands, said Fanon, began to despise himself,

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44 Fanon, *Black Skin White Masks*, 18.
to feel the guilt of his depressed existence, an existence defined by those outsiders who observed him.45

In conclusion, the man and woman of color are dependent on the white race to acquire whiteness. The relationship between the people of color and the colonizer, in this instance, is a dependency complex brought on by colonization. Feeling inferior and dependent, Africana people lose sight of themselves in efforts to assimilate in mainstream society. Adhering and adopting standards of a culture that is not one’s own can cause an individual to suffer psychological problems of anxiety and depression, identity and alienation. To add to the madness, the individual is not accepted by the newly adopted culture in spite of the attempt. Furthermore, the individual forsakes his own race in order to belong. Thus, the individual is alienated.

Isolation, self-estrangement, confusion, and loneliness have devastating and damaging effects when black people attempt to assimilate and embrace dual identities within the dominant society. Morton A. Kaplan sums this scenario best when he contends that "alienation occurs when an individual perceives an absence of meaningful relationships between his status, his identifications, his social relationships, his style of life, and his work".46

W. E. B. Du Bois alludes to his alienation within society as simply being "... an outcast and a stranger in mine own house."\(^47\) This statement has tremendous impact for it tells just how the mainstream cultural environment views blacks and their position in society. Besides, Du Bois writes of a compelling and poignant question that confronts white society and black people. The question resonates as "How does it feel to be a problem?"\(^48\) When the question is posed, Du Bois does not respond because he does not see himself as a problem. The no response signals disappointment with how mainstream society views him. This compels him to state in his 1903 text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line."

Du Bois realizes early on that skin color plays an important part in how people are viewed and accepted within the mainstream society in the United States. Used as a method to instill an inferiority complex among black people within the general society, the color line is instrumental in setting the agenda for those individuals who consider "passing" as a way out of a community of oppressed and


\(^{47}\)Du Bois, 2.

\(^{48}\)Ibid., xxxi.
debased black people. Thus, those who pass do so permanently or temporarily, thereby resulting in living within two distinct worlds. Residing between two distinct cultures, causes problems for passers, particularly if they are desperately trying to belong to a place that results in the relinquishing of any vestiges of African culture and heritage. The people who pass experience having two levels of consciousness which wreak havoc within their hearts, minds, and souls. African Americans, specifically, experience a double consciousness as they assimilate into mainstream society.

Du Bois' concept of double consciousness expresses the struggle of living as Negro and American. He describes the dualism as, "this double consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of assuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."49 The imitation and assimilation are done in vain because black people are never really accepted within the main culture. Consequently, the feeling of not being accepted is devastating when Africana people are told that they belong within the main society. Instead, they are actually alienated.

Thomas C. Holt argues that in Du Bois' The Soul of Black Folk, alienation is material, cultural, and

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49 Ibid., 3.
spiritual. Holt asserts that African Americans are alienated in a society that they help build. He explains African Americans' position in society:

Blacks are builders of the economic infrastructure, yet dispossessed of its fruits; creators of one of its truly original native cultures, in story and song, yet culturally demeaned and maligned; faithful adherents to the nation's basic ideals and values, yet shunned, abused and stigmatized as if an alien people. Americans are not given the same opportunities as members of the dominant society. The problem is the skin color. Holt analyzes how various works of Du Bois reveal the struggles of achieving self-hood in an alienating racial environment. Alienation and duality occur cross-culturally when black people live in a world that represents contradictions. African Americans are not the only people who experience an alienating and dual existence.

In the case of Frantz Fanon, the French assimilation policy allows the colonized people to become French citizens. The French maintain that their policy is color-blind and does not discriminate. Renate Zahar succinctly asserts that "although it claimed to be non-racial in its basic assumptions, it offered only


51Ibid.
relatively few people the opportunity of rising from the level of natives to the status of human beings through a process of Europeanization, i.e., complete alienation from their own history and culture." When they travel to metropolitan France, they are immediately acknowledged as black and not French. Actually, Vere Knight argues that the notion of assimilation is misleading because it leads to being alienated. Furthermore, Knight notes that the French use language, education, and culture as major and integral parts in the methods of being assimilated in French society. Specifically, Renate Zahar asserts that Fanon's focus is on the analysis of intellectual alienation because of the psychological effects it has on the colonized who are strongly exposed to colonial ideology.

The concepts of dualism and neo-colonialism are reviewed from the perspective that the assimilation process in mainstream societies causes cultural alienation. The notion of dualism is prevalent in Africana people throughout the African Diaspora. As in the case of Du Bois, his


54 Zahar, 14.
struggle consisted of living as an "American, a Negro"55 in the United States. Furthermore, there is the quest to merge the two selves into one. The task proves difficult because of the color line. Cross-culturally, the plight is similar.

Fanon's struggle begins when he acknowledges that he is a black man of African descent. Prior to this discovery, he recognizes himself as West Indian and French, not African. Hence, Fanon's war experience exposes him to the racist ideology of the French. By the time Fanon writes The Wretched of the Earth, he is fully a revolutionary. Fanon proposes the use of violence as a means of decolonization. Likewise Paulo Freire suggests a methodology for the liberation of colonized people who have been systematically oppressed throughout the world. In the decolonization process, the masses think critically and freely use the problem-posing concept of education.56 Furthermore, Freire does not speak of violence as a means to liberate the colonized, as does Fanon. His tenet is to liberate and raise the colonized's level of consciousness through education. By doing so, the colonized is able to vision herself/himself as a complete human being.

55Du Bois, 3.

Du Bois and Fanon plights and struggles are similar. In their respective societies, racist environments lead them to question their existence. Du Bois is enshrouded with the "veil" and Fanon wears a psychological "white mask" as they encounter society. The veil and the psychological white mask carry the same connotation; they hide the blackness of their skin. The men suffer from two consciousness levels and embrace assimilationist values and ideas. They struggle with alienation and black identity. Du Bois and Fanon offer solutions to change the sociopolitical-economic status of black people. Du Bois proposes education through the talented tenth and Fanon suggests violence/revolution as a means to an end. The difference in their plight is location. However, regardless of the location, Africana people tend to struggle with societal pressures within mainstream culture.

An integral part in the study of black identity and alienation is the influence of location, that is, where people live within the Diaspora. Africana people's identity defines who they are within the context of society. Carole Boyce Davies argues that "it is the convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates[sic] the terms of black women's experience that in turn renegotiates[sic] their identities". 57

Davies explains that many terms are used to identify blacks within various localities. Interestingly, she takes the term black and demonstrates that the meaning of the word varies geographically. Black in the United States includes people of African descent, but, in Great Britain, the term includes not only people of Africa, but Asians and Latinos as well. Essentially, an understanding of black identity reveals that the hegemonic location of the subject must be taken into consideration.

There is a connection of conditions that contribute to a black identity crisis and alienation. The "one drop of African blood" theory caused mainstream society to denigrate, subjugate, and debase Africana people on the basis of their skin color. As a result, psychological neurosis or nervous conditions occur as attempts to assimilate are sought by people of African descent. Working with a premise that Africana women tend to write about their experiences, struggles, and plights within their respective societies, literature offers a means to escape the oppressive conditions and recognize the existence of issues that they hold as women.

**Africana Women's Voices**

The discussion of the literature calls for an analysis on the texts of Nella Larsen and Tsitsi Dangarembga. The

58 Ibid., 6.
interpretation of the novel Passing is seen differently from scholar to scholar. The issues of black identity and alienation are not generally addressed in literary criticism of scholars. The analysis of Passing is interesting because scholars such as Deborah McDowell concentrate on a sexual liaison between the two protagonists, Claire and Irene. She suggests that Larsen’s Passing is a novel of the relationship between two African-American women during the 1920s in New York City. She claims that the women have a lesbian relationship. Moreover, McDowell suggests that Larsen uses the “issues of racial identity and loyalty” as a cover for “the a more dangerous story... Irene’s awakening sexual desire for Claire.”

Joyce Ann Joyce focuses on the black bourgeoisie that is the class of black people portrayed in the storyline in the novel by Nella Larsen. She suggests that the attainment of the “American Dream” is the focal point in the novel which provides its uniqueness. According to Joyce, the “American Dream is a literary and cultural phenomenon that describes the ideals of both black and white Americans.”

The women characters, Irene and Claire, in the story acquire

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class and economic status by marrying a doctor and a wealthy white businessman, respectively. With this attainment there is a high price to pay. This is evident in the manner which Larsen tells the story; that is, the novel's ending is a tragedy.

Claudia Tate maintains that various critics render their interpretation of Larsen's *Passing*. It is frequently cited as a novel that depicts the tragic plight of the mulatto.61 Still, others view it as a novel of racial conflict among the characters seared with elements of jealousy, psychological ambiguity and intrigue.62 Tate asserts that the novel is "treated as a romance of psychological intrigue in which race is more a device to sustain suspense than merely a compelling social issue."63 Furthermore, Tate asserts that race is used as a device to set the story in motion, sustain the suspense, and bring about the story's conclusion.64 Tate concludes that *Passing* is not the conventional tragic mulatto story but a romance.

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62 Ibid.

63 Ibid., 143.

64 Ibid.
centering around Irene Redfield. Viewing the text at face value, the suspected passer is Claire but as Mary Mabel Youman argues "Irene is the one who actually "passes" because she gives up her racial heritage for middle class security." Yet, another interpretation of the novel centers on the possibility that Larsen writes about herself as she interacts within American society.

Jacquelyn Y. McLendon suggests that "Larsen uses her art as a representation of self." She further states that "the alienation, the unhappy marriages, and passing, among other themes she explores in the book, all reflect a world with which Larsen was indeed familiar." McLendon contends that Larsen "moves beyond the literary conventions of the tragic mulatto... to mirror many of her own life experiences."

65Ibid., 146.


68Ibid.

69Ibid., 153.
Hiroko Sato suggests that Nella Larsen’s unconventional lifestyle has much to do with her novel’s subject matter. The most interesting assertion that Sato makes about Larsen’s *Passing* is that she fails to continue the novel’s theme of “the psychology of people who pass.” Sato echoes the same sentiment as Claudia Tate that in the middle of the text the novel turns into a case of a woman’s jealousy.

Literary criticism of the Larsen text considers the issues of a lesbian relationship, black bourgeoisie and the attainment of the American Dream, tragic mulatto, representation of self, and jealousy as themes.

The discourse surrounding the work of Tsitsi Dangarembga is intriguing as well. Carl Plasa asserts that the theme of hunger in the novel is used metaphorically as a reaction to colonialism. The eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, as experienced by Nyasha, is symbolic of the nervous condition she suffers as a function of the crossing of cultures, African and English. Throughout the novel, Nyasha has trouble digesting the Englishness. She is not like the rest of her family, particularly her father Babamukuru. Plasa agrees that “it is far more difficult for Nyasha than for her father to “stomach” to “Englishness” to

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71 Ibid.
which they are exposed alike."72 Additionally, Plasa contends that there are intertextual boundaries between Dangarembga's text and Frantz Fanon's work, *The Wretched of the Earth*.73 The element of hunger brings the two texts into focus on the conditions that are caused by colonial domination.

Sue Thomas asserts that colonial domination is the culprit for the hysteric in the colonized house. According to Thomas, the element of hysteric takes various forms: "anorexia nervosa; angelic housewifely submission, the horizontal violence of naming women witches, the repression of loss which manifests itself in obsessively repeated justifying myths which entrench colonial rule, and "bad nerves" which accompany playing the part of the "good kafir" of the colonizer's imagination."74 Throughout the text, Thomas contends that Dangarembga depicts the hysterical conditions that cause the major characters in the novel to react in a nervous, hysterical manner. These conditions include the affect of the "Englishness" on Nyasha, Maiguru and Babamukuru; the alienation of the Shona language; the


73 Ibid.

seduction of education; and the eating disorder, anorexia nervosa, that affects Nyasha.

Brenda Bosman claims that Dangarembga writes from a feminist perspective on positionality. The concept of positionality, a term developed by Linda Alcoff, is defined as the place or location where meaning is constructed.75 Bosman’s assertion is that Nervous Conditions is a novel of escape as well as entrapment for the females. The novel considers the position of women in societal cultures with Eurocentric overtones; the lack of identity among females, particularly Maiguru; Tambu’s escape from poverty; Nyasha’s entrapment; and Lucia’s freedom as a woman against a patriarchal structure.

Essentially, the review of the literary criticism of the novel suggests that the nervous condition of the native intellectual is caused by colonialism. Whether the condition is an eating disorder or hysteria, a cultural dualism affects the main characters in the text. In an interview with Rosemary George and Helen Scott, Dangarembga admits that people under a colonial situation develop a

Theoretical Framework

Africana people living in mainstream societies throughout the African Diaspora are constantly struggling and coping with who they are and how they are defined by others. They are caught in the midst of two worlds, two cultures, never belonging to either. For the sake of assimilating into mainstream culture, Africana people pay a high price. They run the risk of suppressing their own culture and heritage, passing for white, and imitating the very group who oppresses them.

Hence, several assumptions emerge related to the premise that, wherever black people are located, the issues of black identity and alienation surface particularly in Africana women’s literature. The first assumption is that Africana people’s psyche, whether in the United States, Africa, or areas of the African Diaspora, is damaged due to the effects of enslavement and colonization. The second assumption is that the damaged psyche affects Africana women’s identity when attempts to assimilate fail. The third assumption is that assimilating into mainstream society removes Africana women from their own cultural heritage and family. Assimilation, therefore, results in

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alienation thereby creating a black identity crisis. The fourth assumption is the convergence of enslavement and colonization, assimilation, and alienation are conditions that contribute to a black identity dilemma. Consequently, cultures collide thereby affecting the human psyche.

The effects of the clashing of cultures run deeper than the human psyche can imagine, therefore, an understanding is needed to confront the problem when Africana people attempt to alter the natural order of survival or the black personality traits in the social process.

Joseph A. Baldwin asserts that "one's biogenetic definition forms the basis of one's reality structure, which is reflected in all other basic social commonalties, institutionalized processes, physical artifacts and products, and so forth, that define one's approach to survival."77 In other words, Diasporic blacks cannot alter their biogenetic definition. Surviving in mainstream society, Africana people must define and acclimate themselves to their own African culture and heritage. The natural order is established, thereby creating a smooth transition into African culture. Various concerns come to mind when there is not a smooth transformation and the results prove to be turbulent. What is the culprit that

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fosters this turbulence? What occurs when the survival thrust is altered? The answer to these probing questions entails an understanding of the inner workings of the biogenetic definition.

The approach to survival is defined by natural order, but if this is tampered with by the inclusion of a European cosmology, i.e., culture, a dilemma is created. More importantly, the human psyche involves the ingestion of both a European and an African world. Attempting to be a part of a European world requires the individual to suppress the African heritage and culture. Consequently, the natural order is disturbed causing contrasting cultures that manifest two survival thrusts.

There are fundamental differences between African culture and European culture. Baldwin states that there is a natural relationship between African and European cultures. Both cosmologies have social definitions that include biogenetic commonalties and cultures. The differences constitute contrasting survival thrusts one Africa and one European. Baldwin emphasizes that the African reality structure leans toward "inclusiveness" and the "human-nature relationships" are inseparable, interdependent, and total." Moreover, the structure is "characterized by the basic theme of "man-nature harmony" or

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\(^{78}\text{Ibid.}\)
unity, oneness of being." On the other hand, the European human-nature relationships are "separate, compartmentalized, and independent." Consequently, the emphasis is placed on a structure that bends toward "exclusiveness." These reality structures, according to Baldwin, prove to be "opposite-incompatible" which means that the survival thrust inherent in European cosmology is incompatible with the survival thrust inherent in African cosmology.

Yet, attempts are made by people of African descent to define and identify with the "other" even though that effort tends to marginalize, oppress, and devalue Africana people's existence. This creates a black identity crisis that alienates Africana people further into obscurity within the dominant culture. Moreover, these constructs play an integral part in the formation of socio-economic and socio-political aspects in society by dividing people on the basis of a discrimination process. This anti-social behavior of mainstream society makes it difficult for blacks to assimilate or integrate within the culture and refuses to

79 Ibid.
80 Ibid.
81 Ibid., 135.
82 Ibid., 145.
permit them to share in these factions of society. Consequently, they are caught between the outskirts of two distinct worlds or cultures, not belonging to either.

Given this understanding of a black identity crisis, theoretical frameworks centering on W. E. B. Du Bois's theory of double consciousness and Frantz Fanon's theory of the colonized mind are used to guide the research on the selected works written by Africana women in the Diaspora.

In deconstructing double consciousness, there are three main factors to be considered:

one has to do with problems of self-definition resulting from living within a society pervaded by stereotypes, negative images that all African American people have to confront; a second involves the exclusion of African Americans from mainstream American institutions, creating a way of life that is both “American” and “not-American;” the third focuses on internal conflicts in the individual between what is distinctly “African,” which DuBois identifies as an innate and powerful spiritually, and what is “American.”

Self-definitions that result in further control of the individual's image signal that an identity crisis is occurring. An attempt to debunk negative stereotypes and images can be problematic because individuals begin to wear psychological masks to hide the very thing that keeps them

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from being accepted, that is their black skin. The exclusion of people of African descent from active participation in the dominant culture suggests being alienated from the mainstream society. Moreover, this can occur within the African-American cultural society as well as within a person’s own family. Lastly, African versus American selves signifies that a struggle between self and the relationship to society occurs. In other words, the non-acceptance of the "Africanism" within the self and American society creates the struggle. As Du Bois states, "one ever feels his twoness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warrings ideals in one dark body. . . "84 Overall, this perspective can be applicable to Africans throughout the African Diaspora due to the enslavement and colonization process regardless of location.

Frantz Fanon’s theory of the colonized mind is essentially no different from Du Bois’s theory of double consciousness. This notion focuses on the assimilation and indirect rule policies of the colonizers; psychological dependence and inferiority complex; having a black identity crisis; and relinquishing culture and heritage for the culture, heritage, and lifestyle of the colonizer.

The same factors hold true for the enslavement process in the United States. Slaves in America were

84Du Bois. The Souls of Black Folk, 3.
psychologically dependent upon the enslaver resulting in an inferiority complex within the human psyche. Traditions, customs, heritage, and culture were relinquished for the lifestyle of the former enslaver as the once enslaved move towards assimilation. Regardless of the location, the United States or Africa, Africana women are involved in an assimilation process that gives rise to a double consciousness or a colonized mind. These two conditions result in either a loss in the sense of self or alienation from the group that manifests into a black identity crisis. Regardless of the location, the affects of double consciousness and a colonized mind are the same.

Methodology

Using a literary ethnographic method, this study analyses black identity and alienation within *Passing* and *Nervous Conditions* written by Nella Larsen and Tsitsi Dangarembga. The methodological approach utilized is appropriated from Frederique Van De Poel-Knottnerus' and J. David Knottnerus' essay, "Social Life Through Literature: A Suggested Strategy for Conducting a Literary Ethnography." This methodology provides a strategic and thematic approach for examining the social and psychological conditions of the characters. This methodology proves to be a valuable tool because it provides an indepth investigation of the text as
well as social descriptions by which the characters
identities are revealed.

The six stage procedures consist of the following
guidelines: scope of literary sources, reading and
interpretation of texts, identification of textual theme,
classification of thematic elements, development of
analytical constructs, and classification of contextual
confirmation. 85

Scope of Literary Sources

This stage of the methodology determines the works
under examination. An interest in black identity and
alienation helped to guide the types of works used for the
research. Initially, there were five texts considered for
the investigation of themes black identity and alienation.
These texts were written by Africana women from the United
States, the Caribbean, and Africa. Of the five texts, two
novels were selected, one from the United States and the
other from Africa. The novels represented the themes of
black identity and alienation best.

85 Frederique Van De Poel-Knottnerus and J. David Knottnerus,
"Social Life Through Literature: A Suggested Strategy for Conducting a
Literary Ethnography," Sociological Focus 27, no. 1 (February 1994):
67-80.
Reading and Interpretation of Texts

Since the themes of black identity and alienation are the issues under investigation, the selection of the texts to be used is essential in this process. Various books were read that signaled a black identity crisis and alienation. The span of texts ranged from the United States, Caribbean, and Africa. However, two texts, Passing and Nervous Conditions, best exemplified the themes of black identity and alienation of the main characters. The major protagonists suffer from a lost sense of self when attempts at assimilating fail within their respective environments. As a result, a black identity crisis occurs.

Identification of Textual Themes

While not overtly stated, the features of having an Eurocentric lifestyle and standard of beauty, colonialist attitude and behavior, passing, and suppression of one's own culture and heritage appear in the texts. This aspect of the methodology unfolds the themes under examination that aid in the analysis of the novels.

Classification of Thematic Elements

A scheme was designed to track the elements that occur in the literature that yields a black identity crisis and alienation. For instance, tracking the element of "passing"
allows for the examination of the social and psychological conditions which plague the characters. The classification provides a clear cut method to assist in documenting the features that contribute to a black identity crisis and alienation.

Development of Analytical Constructs

Based on the information collected through the classification process, analytical constructs were developed to aid in the analysis of the two selected texts. Constructs of generalizations of the features provide a more comprehensive understanding of black identity and alienation. For example, the social and psychological conditions of "passing" are constructed differently in the texts of the African-American women than in the work of the Zimbabwean woman writer. Essentially, skin color plays an integral part in the game of "passing" for mulattos in the United States. In Africa, the element of "passing" involves imitating the lifestyle of the colonizer as opposed to skin color in America.

Contextual Confirmation

This procedure allows for reviewing and checking to ensure accuracy and the inclusion of all elements of black identity and alienation within the texts. In this last stage of the procedure, sections of the literature are
reviewed to ensure accuracy of the elements that identify a black identity crisis and alienation within the texts.
CHAPTER 4

THE LEGACY OF ENSLAVEMENT AND COLONIZATION ON AFRICANA WOMEN’S BLACK IDENTITY

This chapter offers Africana women’s response to their blackness within their respective societies that contain vestiges of enslavement and colonization. The literary works of Passing and Nervous Conditions help to demonstrate that the notion of double consciousness is prevalent and significant in the process of understanding black identity. Moreover, the black female protagonists in the novels are experiencing race, class, and gender issues as they interact within their societies. The effects of the legacy of enslavement and colonization are established as a prelude to the assessment of black identity.

The Effects of Enslavement

Societal implications of segregation, assimilation, traditional culture, and alienation impact Africana women’s black identity. Asa Hillard in his assessment of these factors among the lives of black people in general contends that “for nearly four hundred years, the slave trade, colonization, segregation, and racism—highly sophisticated systematic strategies of oppression—have been the massive political and economic forces operating on African people.
These forces have influenced the culture, the socialization processes, and the very consciousness of African people."¹

These influences cause devastating effects on the mental and physical condition of Africana people. The enslavement and colonization of Africana women influence their relationship with their family, the general society, and themselves. Black women’s interaction within mainstream society increases the possibility of suppressing their own heritage, culture, and becoming alienated selves.

The institutions of enslavement and colonization affect Africana women profoundly regardless of their location within African cultural and Western hemispheric realities. The cultural society has renamed, re-identified, and re-instituted practices that relegated Africana women to the role of breeders, mammies, asexual and sexual beings. This labeling of roles gives new meaning to womanhood for Africana women in Africa and in the African Diaspora.

Defining what is womanhood for Africana women is to initially address what is womanhood in the context of enslavement and colonization. Womanhood does not entail just being a mother, loving wife or mistress of a household. Instead, the roles are reversed for Africana women. During slavery, although Africana women gave birth to children, the

nurturing aspect was extremely short-lived because they had to get back to the business of working in the fields. The nursing of their own children was performed by older enslaved Africana women who could no longer tend the fields or was performed by mothers when they returned from their work at night. Enslaved black women functioned often as breeders. The rearing of the master’s children took precedent over the nurturing and rearing of black women’s babies. The separation of mothers and children was extremely difficult when their offsprings were sold like animals to the highest bidder at auctions. The role of enslaved black women as mothers is limited during this era. This is also the case for Africana women’s roles as wives during enslavement and colonization.

The usage of the terms “wife” or “mistress” did not exist as an identifier for enslaved Africana women. These were roles given to the white women of the plantation, the housewives and mothers of the planters. Instead, often enslaved Africana women were considered the planter’s concubine. The “property” status of Africana women gave the master of the plantation the right to abuse them physically and/or sexually without the protection of enslaved black men. From this chattel position, enslaved Africana women had no control over their status in the context of enslavement and colonization. Yet, Africana women still rose from the
bowels and squalor positions of society that the general culture placed them. Clearly, Africana women have supporters such as the abolitionists who recognize their value, valor, power, and struggle.

W. E. B. Du Bois pays tribute to Africana women by acknowledging their significance as well as their tribulations. Du Bois asserts that slavery had a crushing effect on black women. He reafirms that under slavery "there was no legal marriage, no legal family, no legal control over children. To be sure, custom and religion replaced here and there what the law denied, . . . ."2 Consequently, Africana women are identified by whatever standards placed on them by the dominant society. Religion and customs used as foundations to justify the societal proscriptions of Africana women. Africana women began to question these roles as required by society. Society says that they are not mothers, not wives, not human, but chattel. This struggle of endurance has made black women strong and resilient as they face societal pressures.

During the turbulent years of enslavement, black women had to endure negative images and stereotypes that the dominant cultural society established for their womanhood. Angela Davis notes that standards for a new womanhood were created for enslaved women during the enslavement process.

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This new womanhood establishes her new found identity within society. From first observation, Davis found that black women were genderless and that the nineteenth century ideology of womanhood and femininity did not apply to them. They were recognized as profitable labor units to the slaveholders. They were put to work as any male slave on the plantation. Secondly, enslaved Africana women were known as breeders, an identity fitting for cattle and horses. Thirdly, as a profitable labor unit, the fruit of her womb was recognized as chattel as well. Motherhood is never recognized for enslaved women during enslavement. The economic system of the plantation environment did not allow for this type of bonding between enslaved mothers and their children. Instead, the fear of losing her offspring cements a heavy heart. Lastly, the name Jezebel is given to Africana enslaved women for their alleged sexual skill and activity. The sexual life of black enslaved women is monitored by the mistress of the plantation because she knows that enslaved women are objects of her husband’s eyes. Sexual encounters between them proved more than just a lustful affair.

Late night escapades of the white planters result in a love tryst between them and enslaved women. Miscegenation is not out of the ordinary during this era. The product of

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this union yields an individual that would eventually straddle between two worlds, two cultures, two ideals and beliefs. Based on the skin color, the individual is most likely to adhere to the lifestyle of the white race. If the individual's skin color is white enough to pass, social and economic opportunities are achieved and a new world opens up to her. Therefore, skin color affects the outcome of a mulatto child. To escape harsh treatment and poverty, Africana women begin to pass for white. After the Civil War, unfair practices surfaced to keep the races separated. Light skinned mulattos took advantage of being able to pass because laws begin to take shape that segregated the races. This form of separation establishes a socially constructed segregated society that produces "superior" and "inferior" groups of people. The deciding factor goes back to skin color as the dominant determiner of race. Segregation raises its ugly head to benefit a select group of people to acquire unlimited power.

Diana Kendall asserts that another name for segregation is "inequalitarian pluralism." 4 This element "exists when specific ethnic groups are set apart from the dominant groups and denied equal access to power and privilege." 5

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5 Ibid.
Society endorses and dictates the splitting among the races. Segregation was the mainstay of the dominant society. As far as the separation of the races is concerned, segregation by law or de jure segregation sanctions the physical and social separation of the races, that is, the separation of African Americans from Caucasians. Consequently, miscegenation and marriage between the two races are outlawed. Kendall maintains that "Jim Crow laws legalized the separation of the races in public accommodations in the Southern United States after the Civil War." More importantly, segregation provides a method of prohibiting African Americans' involvement in the cultural mainstream. Segregation bans the mingling and mixing socially and physically of races, especially blacks and whites. Segregation places Africana people in an insider/outsider position with society. Under these circumstances, the assimilation process for African Americans becomes a constant struggle and difficult task to achieve.

With segregation pulling Africana people in various directions on what they can and cannot do within society, assimilation does not provide a definite solution to the monstrosity that segregation creates. Regardless of the adoption of the language, values, suppression of culture and heritage, customs, dress, and religion, the African Americans are not received as a member of the dominant

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6 Ibid., 260.
group. Therefore, "Anglo-conformity"\(^7\) does not provide the mechanism to join or fit into the mainstream society. Here, the individual segregates oneself from one’s blackness to maintain a position in society. The color line is the vehicle that prohibits the association among races in de jure segregation.

W. E. B. Du Bois echoes the reactions and sentiments of mainstream society by stating that the "problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line."\(^8\)

Africana people are viewed as a major problem within the social fabric of the general society. The legacy of enslavement enshrouds and penetrates the mindset of the cultural mainstream. The negative images and stereotypes of Africana people lingers along with the racist ideology that Africana people are socially, physically, and mentally interior to the Caucasian race, for that matter any other ethnic group.

Given this backdrop of negativity, Africana people, especially women, attempt to debunk the racist ideology that relegates and subjugates them to the lowest position within mainstream society. To prove their existence and become a part of the general society, Africana women find it necessary to pursue assimilation within the society. This

\(^7\)Ibid., 259.

process of “assimilation occurs at levels that include the cultural, structural, biological, and psychological stages.”

The cultural assimilation or acculturation affords Africana women the chance to become a part of mainstream by adopting and conforming to an Eurocentric model of existence. This lifestyle can be seen in the activism of black women in the organization and service of black women’s clubs at the turn of the twentieth century. Although racial uplift was on the women’s agenda, debunking stereotypical roles and images were major concerns needed to prove that black women could be like white women. The most important and significant assertion with respect to cultural assimilation is the fact that the suppression of the ethnic groups’ heritage and culture is necessary in order for them to take on the culture of white people. For Africana women who could take advantage of cultural assimilation by becoming any other ethnic group other any their own, the deed of passing is done. Consequently, a serious problem occurs. A black identity crisis is imminent.

When Jim Crow laws were lifted, Africana women who could be integrated into the dominant group in order to gain acceptance in social and economic settings. Kendall maintains that structural assimilation or integration begins

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9Kendall, 258.
in "large impersonal settings such as schools and workplaces and only later (if at all) results in close friendships and intermarriage." Also acceptance is gained through the act of passing; therefore, the culture and heritage of the individual is no longer a concern or exists in her mind. She adopts the customs, tradition, language, and culture of the dominant group. She can never go back home. If she does, the passer lives in constant fear and runs the risk of having the charade exposed. She lives in fear of being seen by old friends and acquaintances. These are the people who can reveal her real identity.

Thus, fear creates a psychological neurosis that wreaks havoc on the passer's psyche. The passer fears the unknown when having children because they are playing Russian roulette. If the child is dark at birth, the passer's secret is revealed. Fear is so powerful that the passer alienates herself from her heritage and culture in order to keep her new identity safe.

As in the novel Passing, biological assimilation occurs when the protagonist marries into the Caucasian race. The passing victim's goal is to gain social and economic acceptance. Yet, there is a struggle between wanting to belong to the white race and actually being a member of the black race. The victims belong to neither race because the identity of the individual is altered by the act of passing.

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10Ibid., 259.
This leaves the individual psychologically alienated in both races.

Hence, alienation surfaces when the individuals think they are a part of the mainstream society and then are rejected in spite of assimilation efforts. The general society does not envision the Africana woman as part of the society. She always has an outsider/insider status. Also, she is placed at the margin, never to be drawn into the center.

**The Effects of Colonization**

A framework is established of how segregation, assimilation, and alienation impact black identity. Moving across the African Diaspora, these same elements affect Africana women regardless of their location. The colonizers', by decree, set out to segregate themselves from the indigenous population depending on location. Segregation policies took on the form of apartheid as in the case of South Africa. In many cases, urban areas were established along the coastal regions where the colonizers excluded themselves from the indigenous people. Venturing into the hinterland did not prove to be beneficial for the colonizer because of perceived dangers and inaccessibility. The urban centers became the areas of development while the rural areas remained stagnate. A division between the colonizer and the colonized significantly changed the cultural landscape.
Colonized African women were viewed the same as enslaved black women in America. They were both subjected to an Eurocentric ideology of womanhood. Africana women are seen as sexual beings based upon the European's initial gaze upon them. In Africa, this identity is prevalent as in America. Colonized black women as well as enslaved women were not able to live up to the standard of womanhood that is relegated to their white counterpart. Yet, there are differences. The African woman is not recognized as chattel or property of the colonizer. Her children are not taken from her and sold into slavery. Her job is not as a breeder in Africa. They are often relegated to the house, caring for the children, tending to the gardens and the elderly. A clear division of labor is established between men and women. The division extended into gender issues particularly where education is a major focus. Gender stratification is necessary in the process of selecting who will be privileged to receive the colonialist education.

Men and boys receive formal education before women and girls. School fees are obtained for boys and if there were any money left, it is given for the girls. Many African fathers feel that educating girls only benefit their husband's family. Fathers are very reluctant when educating girls. Since men and boys are expected to provide for their families, education is the mechanism that allows them to interact and assimilate easily within mainstream society.
Without education, the task of achieving economic success, social and the desired class status is impossible. Assimilation is necessary in obtaining the insider perspective within the dominant culture.

The assimilation process provides an inroad into an Eurocentric lifestyle. The assimilated adopts the language, religion, traditions, and culture of the colonizer. Since skin color is not the major issue in Africa as it is in the French Caribbean and the United States, other methods of stratification are used in determining who is to be assimilated, such as education and language.

During colonization, the colonizer selects the individuals to receive the education necessary to lead the indigenous people and country to civilization in an Eurocentric political system. What is not discussed with the newly assimilated people is that their skin color will prevent them from being fully assimilated into the colonizer’s world. They will never become French or English because of their Africanism. But, the assimilated people are made to believe that they are French or English because their duty is to speak the colonizer’s language. This proves to be a contradiction to colonizer’s assimilation and association policies. Rejection causes them to question their own identity within the cultural society. Assimilation has individuals suppressing their traditional culture, language, and spirituality to survive within a culture that
does not accept them. Moreover, assimilation has an alienating effect on the people attempting to belong or having an insider view of the main society.

Since assimilation suppresses traditions, culture, customs, and language, the selected African does not belong anywhere. African people who fall prey to this "wizardry" do not fit into their own cultural society. To become "English," the assimilated has to think, to speak, and to forget indigenous ways of living and life. The result leads to alienation within their own culture as well as the general society. For example in Zenele A Letter for My Daughter by J. Nozipo Maraire, the character Mukoma Byron, who is back from London, England, changes his name to Byron Makon, refuses to speak Shona, speaks with an exaggerated British accent, forgets the traditions and customs of his culture when he returns to his village. For him to become British, Byron's African personality is altered to fit into English society. His African community insisted that Byron "had forsaken his homeland, claimed English citizenship, and did not concern himself with the affairs of the colonies."11 This behavior is typical when alienation occurs. Therefore, within African people's own culture, alienation occurs when they claim they can no longer speak their indigenous language, traditions are not held sacred, customs are

violated, and their habits reflect the colonizer. They remain in a standoff mode among their relatives and friends reflecting a superior attitude. To their chagrin, their skin color establishes a caste that does not allow them to become like the colonizer. The color line separates the indigenous from the colonizer.

Similar to African Americans, the Africans on the continent live in two worlds, two cultures, having two thoughts, and ideals. The assimilation causes this twoness, this double consciousness and alienation. But, when individuals adopt culture, language, and traditions to achieve economic and social opportunities, they straddle the fence to live in two worlds, as African and English or French. Their African consciousness level is suppressed so far into their subconscious mind that they are inclined to suffer from nervous conditions and a black identity crisis that penetrates the core substance of their existence.

The questioning of who they are in mainstream society is of most importance in determining black identity. In the struggling of levels of consciousness, a confusion occurs. A decision has to be made. Acceptance in the general society is the goal. If black women suppress their traditions and culture to adopt the European ways of living and culture, the social, class status, and economic opportunities of society are theirs at a high price. Africana women lose
their black identity in the process by mimicking Eurocentric attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs.

Frantz Fanon spoke of the atrocities that colonization caused black people, especially women of color. In Fanon's discussion of the woman of color and the white man, Fanon reveals that this Africana woman is not whole unless she is married to a white man. With this union, she is considered a part of society. Fanon uses the work of Mayotte Capecia *Je suis Martiniquaise* to discuss the conceptualization of whiteness that affects the women of color. The object is to marry white to improve her conditions that will eventually be passed on to the family. Clearly, these Africana women are searching for economic, social and class status to escape a marginal existence.
The examination of black identity and alienation begins with the 1929 novel of Nella Larsen entitled *Passing*. Larsen tells the story of the social world of two bourgeois Africana women who belong to the same social class. The unique aspect of the novel deals with the context of passing temporarily and permanently within mainstream society to achieve social, class status, and economic opportunities. The two black women have a sense of belonging in a society that regards blacks as second class citizens. Larsen weaves an interesting and intriguing psychological tale of passing.

The story unfolds when Irene Redfield gets a letter from a long lost friend, Claire Kendry Bellew, who wants to visit while she is in New York City. Irene ponders over the letter that establishes unforgettable moments in Claire’s life. A chance meeting at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago sets the stage for dealing with the question of passing. Both women are passing. This accidental meeting enacts the black identity crisis that pulls on both protagonists until one of them meets her untimely demise. A general longing to return to the black social scene is the overt goal of Claire Bellew. Further investigation reveals an unconscious attempt to return to her African roots to obtain a sense of belonging.

The novel exposes the inner strife Irene feels as she imitates the Eurocentric lifestyle of the black bourgeoisie
in the 1920s. Irene is married to a doctor who is suffering from the racist society in spite of his upper-middle-class lifestyle. It is very possible that Brian’s skin color plays an important part in how he is treated in the mainstream society. He does not have the “luxury” of being light skinned as his wife, Irene. Their union is portrayed as a sexless marriage; they sleep in two separate bedrooms. Brian wants to uproot his family to Brazil to become better accepted within a culture. Irene selfishly does not want to move from the United States because she has the luxury to pass temporarily as a means of escape.

The hypocritical lifestyle of Irene begins to wreak havoc on her conscious. In this maddening state, she imagines that Claire and Brian are having an affair. A liaison of this type has serious consequences on her marriage and would jeopardize her social status and economic security. In a panic state Irene refuses to allow Claire to destroy her marriage. At any cost, Claire must be stopped.

A society dance given by Felise Freeland which Irene, Brian, and Claire attend provides the backdrop for the climax and ambiguous ending of the novel. Claire’s husband, Jack Bellew, who is white, confronts her at the party and insults her by saying, “so you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!”

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The demise of Claire Kendry Bellew is extremely obscure. Immediately following the confrontation with Jack, Claire falls to her death from an open window. Whether the death is murder or suicide is not easily discerned. The ending is as ambiguous as the black identities of Irene Redfield and Claire Kendry Bellew.

The examination of Passing begins with a character sketch of Irene Redfield. Her personality reveals a bourgeoisie black woman who is concerned with her social, class, and economic status. She passes for a white woman on a temporary basis when she feels the need to be accepted by the general society, attend places that prevent blacks from entering, and to maintain a facade at the home of a friend who passes permanently. Evidence of this type of passing is seen at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago and at the home of Claire Kendry Bellew. Irene is an upper-middle-class social climber. Her position in society allows her to have a black maid, Zulene, to care for her children, and to perform household chores. She directs the actions of Zulene to perform the household chores. She loves being married to a doctor because it gives her, to a certain degree, access to economic and social freedom. Irene attends bridge parties, teas, and charity engagements. Her daily thoughts are centered on what she will wear at bridge parties. Just as her white counterparts, Irene enjoys the privileged life of never having to work outside of the home. Her job is to
ensure a comfortable home environment for her family. On the other hand, Brian is the breadwinner of the family and supplies the financial security and support. Brian makes sure that Irene and the boys are provided with the necessities of life, plus more. During the time period of the novel, this lifestyle is considered Eurocentric by the mere fact that the man is the breadwinner of the family and the wife is the homemaker; therefore, the gender roles are clear in terms of responsibility. But, this is not the norm for an average black family of this era. Africana women and men work outside of the home. Often, women are the breadwinner of the family due to underemployment and unemployment of black men. Irene’s identity to an untrained eye is confusing because she does not fit the mold of a black woman. Her racial heritage and makeup are not discussed in the novel, but it is understood that her appearance allows her to venture into white only settings.

Irene’s appearance illustrates a clear picture of a mulatto woman. Larsen furnishes a descriptive detail in the novel that paints Irene with an olive complexion and dark loosely curled hair. Easily, Irene is depicted as the exotic “other.” As the heat of the day beats upon Irene’s body, she is extremely affected by the weather. A cool, dry place would be the setting to escape from the Chicago heat. Irene’s delicate body swoons under the disgusting August heat. To her rescue, a taxi driver sees her and
places her in his cab. By his action and response, the
driver thinks mistakenly that Irene is a white woman, or
anybody other than a black woman. He suggests that the
Drayton would give her relief from the heat. Larsen shares
Irene's thoughts on how she is perceived by the general
society by recanting "they always took her for an Italian, a
Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gypsy. Never, when she was alone,
had they even remotely seem to suspect that she was a
Negro." On the other hand, it is undetermined whether
Irene's husband and family know that she passes for white
occasionally. If they were to discover that Irene passes,
the event would be devastating. Yet, at this moment, Irene
passes for white but fears she will be recognized and
ejected from the hotel. This is a normal reaction to
passing. The fear of being recognized is a crucial point to
be considered by the passer. However, Irene feels that it
"was the idea of being ejected from any place, even in the
polite and tactful way in which the Drayton would probably
do it, that disturbed her." These thoughts enter her mind
because of a "white" woman's stare across the room. The
gazing woman is actually Claire Kendry Bellew. This
scenario embarks on a construct of a racial identity other
than being African American.

13Ibid., 150.

14Ibid.
Being a lady of leisure, Irene is able to attend and be a member and social chairperson of several charity organizations such as the Negro Welfare League. This is her way of giving back to her people. Her philanthropic endeavors are noble and necessary for people in her class status. From a social standpoint, Irene is only connected to her community, heritage, and culture through her charitable acts. This is the only occasion when she is remotely attached to the race of people. Actually, she is personally alienated from her own black people. Her alienation from her cultural roots stems from her class position. For instance, Irene refuses to allow Brian to talk to their son about the race problem in America. Her unrealistic rationalization stems from not being able to face her own blackness. Junior is called a "dirty nigger" by his classmates at school and Irene does not want to spoil the idyllic life she establishes for her boys. She and Brian vehemently disagree about the discussion of race. Regardless of how Irene shelters her sons from the atrocities of being black during this era, the boys still find out what it is like to be black in America. Early on, Brian attempts to merge the two selves of his sons into one self with a black identity. As for Claire Kendry Bellew, her cultural roots are hidden and the opposite is revealed. Claire's personality is different from Irene's. There is bitterness in Claire's life that stems from her childhood.
A product of biracial parents, Claire’s life was less than privileged, in fact she lives in poverty. Her father, a white man, is a janitor. Seemingly, there is resentment of her biracial status as a child growing up. After the death of her dad, Claire went to live with her white aunts to be raised as a white girl. All of her friends, like Irene, lost track of her for twelve years. However, she is spotted occasionally in the company of white people, particularly white men. As an adult, Claire seems to have a "live-for-the-moment" personality. Irene see Claire as being catlike, sometimes hard, without feeling, affectionate and impulsive. But, underneath it all, there is sadness and loneliness.

Just as in the case of Irene Redfield, the class status of Claire Kendry Bellew is intertwined with elements of race, gender, economics and culture. From the outset, Claire’s racial identity is known. She is a mulatto with distinct facial features of a white woman. Her European features are so prominent that she is able to pass as a white woman permanently into white society. Claire’s ability to pass for white allows her to marry a white man, Jack Bellew. The most fascinating aspect concerning Claire’s racial identity is that her husband, Jack, calls her “nig.” Claire plays the entire episode off by having Jack to explain to her friends why he calls her “nig.”

15Ibid., 144-145.
Taken as a big joke, Jack states that:

When we were first married, she was as white as--as--well as white as a lily. But I declare she’s gettin’ darker and darker. I tell her if she don’t look out, she’ll wake up one of these days and find she’s turned into a nigger. 16

Jack’s reply represents the progression of Claire’s journey in the return to her black roots. Of course, he is not aware of her true racial identity and her desire to return to her heritage and culture. Furthermore, the use of the term lily is symbolic to white women. Is there something about Claire that her white husband unconsciously sees? Irene seems to think it is her “Negro eyes” that gives her away. Nevertheless, the wealthy industrialist provides a lifestyle that allows Claire to live like a queen. Here again, there are clear cut gender roles for the husband and wife. This life is indicative of the way which men of this economic position treats his wife.

The role of the wife in this situation is to be the caretaker of the household. In Claire’s life, she has a maid to free her of the mundane household chores while she attends social events, shopping, and afternoon teas with friends. Her primary job is to manage the household. Even her only child, Margery, is cared for by the maid. As far

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16Ibid., 171.
as economics is concerned, Jack Bellew is well equipped to provide for Claire and his child. Like most men of his caliber, money is no object. Claire’s life is similar to Irene’s life of leisure.

Like Irene, Claire is not connected to her heritage and culture. Being married to Jack, she has elected to be a part of his white world. Claire passes permanently into the Anglo-Saxon culture. In doing so, she hides her own heritage and forsakes her own people. Subconsciously, Claire suffers from loneliness and subconsciously longs to return to her roots. A chance meeting with Irene in Chicago provides the desire to return to her blackness. At the very beginning of the novel, Claire, in a letter to Irene, speaks of her passion to return to her roots, to see her again. Claire explains her loneliness she feels within her life:

... For I am lonely, so lonely. ... cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life. ... You can’t know how in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of. ... It’s like an ache, a pain that never ceases. ...

Claire is pouring her heart out lamenting about an emptiness, a pale existence, and an ache that penetrates her body. After a twelve year absence from her culture and heritage, that is her black identity, Irene’s appearance
brings back the past she once knew but wants it back because of her dull existence in the dominant society. A remembrance of things in the past brings forth a strong insatiable desire. Claire’s journey in assimilating into a white world and alienating her Africana roots occurs after the death of her father.

Claire’s childhood experience is turbulent. She is the daughter of an alcoholic father, Bob Kendry. Claire is constantly verbally abused. As a result of this treatment, she becomes selfish, cold, hard, and determined. Life with her father is difficult. On a janitor’s salary, he is unable to provide sufficiently for his daughter. Irene recalls how Claire took her weekly wage from doing errands to purchase material for a red frock in order to go to her Sunday school picnic. Poverty did not hinder her determination. After her father’s death, Claire goes to live with her white aunts. With them, she is indoctrinated into the life of whiteness or a way to escape from her past. Obviously, she takes advantage of this situation to introduce herself to a new set of people.

As Claire grows older, she is seen elegantly dressed occasionally with white women and men about town. Her rare appearances cause black people who knew her from the past to inquire about her whereabouts and her acquaintances with the opposite race. After getting reacquainted with Claire, Irene learns that she is married and is passing for white.
Having a lifestyle that allows the freedom to move into various social, political, and economic settings is intriguing to Claire. Passing for her is an easy act and she inquires of Irene's reason for passing permanently. Irene is curious about the concept of passing but is concerned about hiding family and friends. It is amazing that Irene did not think the idea farfetched when she was having tea at the Drayton. Claire knows that Irene passes at times. Yet, the thought is intriguing to her, Irene is married to a black man with black children. She only passes temporarily. For Irene, passing always carries the fear of being caught and it takes a conscious decision for her to pass.

Meanwhile, Claire's lackadaisical attitude is toxic because it causes her to feel that she is invincible. The element of fear does not have a bearing on Claire's reasoning for passing. The psychological pressure to become part of the black bourgeoisie social scene takes over her ability to think straight. Claire is obsessed with the notion of being in the company of African Americans. She wants and desires both worlds! Just as Irene wants to "visit" being white, Claire desires to "visit" being black. The way to describe this burst of gusto, enthusiastic behavior is from her psyche speaking: "I did it once and did not get caught. Now, I can forever do it again and again. Who's going to catch me?" This mental attitude is dangerous
for a person who wishes to return to her black roots after passing permanently for white for years. The perils of returning has devastating results such as the loss of family and friends, suicide, and even murder. The yearning, longing, desiring, and wanting to return to the source, to be a part of black culture pulls and tugs hard on Claire. As she vacillates between the two cultures, Claire does not have a clear understanding of herself or where she wants to belong. She actually does not belong anywhere because she has relinquished all traces of being from the black race. Now, a black identity crisis surfaces.

Claire suffers from a black identity crisis which gives rise to why she longs to be a part of a black and a white world. She cannot make up her mind which side of the fence she really wants; thus, she chooses to straddle the fence. Obviously, Claire has two consciousness levels. Her uncertainty proves that she has not resolved the issues surrounding her childhood experiences that led to her leaving her black world, thus a black identity crisis is born. Claire attempts to fit into a space that in part scorns her because of her social and economic class status. Deep inside of her mind Claire feels left out, not belonging in black society. Does Claire really know who she is? Is she willing to forsake everything by being caught in the company of black people? Entering into Claire’s mind, the
blame for this wanting, desiring, and belonging grows out of her assimilation into the general society.

The assimilation process is intertwined into the social and economic fabric of Claire’s and Irene’s worlds. As African-American women, their skin color allows and provides them the privilege of passing into the white culture. Claire’s complexion is part of the problem because she is allowed to penetrate a world that pays homage to white skin. The same can be said for Irene as her skin color provides her an outlet to the world of whiteness at her convenience. The white skin privilege permits an easy passage into mainstream society.

One of the missing links of enslavement is miscegenation. This concept is rarely discussed because it binds the two races, black and white, sexually. The sexual relationship between Africana women and white men begins the birth of a new race, “New People“ or mulattos throughout the African Diaspora, more specifically for this research in the United States and the Caribbean. This nonbonding, melange creates a situation that impacts the identity of the involved people, particularly when children are born from this union. The offspring of the union may be able to pass depending upon the skin color. Miscegenation continues to linger as it is seen in the faces of Africana people from generation to generation. The legacy of enslavement clearly shines in the faces of Claire and Irene.
Miscegenation and the one-drop-of-Negro-blood rule are the culprits for how people are identified. Actually, miscegenation can have you thinking you belong to another race depending on the skin color. There is no visible trace of the stigmata of Africa on Claire’s face from the perspective of the white majority. She is able to move within their society with ease. More importantly, Claire is able to fool her husband into thinking that she is a white woman even though he at times joking refers to her as his nig. Bellew explains his position as such:

Oh, no, Nig, . . . I know you’re no nigger, so it’s all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I’m concerned, since I know you’re no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be.17

Lucky for Claire, her offspring Margery has a very light complexion which further fools Jack. However, Irene mentions that Claire’s mobility in the dominant white society is not as foolproof to black people. According to Irene, there are telltale signs of blackness according to Irene. Claire’s eyes open up the window to her soul. Her eyes show their blackness. According to Irene, Claire’s eyes are Negro eyes. The remainder of Claire’s features appear to be of the white race, skin color, texture of hair and hair color; Claire is reported by Irene to have blond

17Ibid., 171.
hair. No matter how white you appear, there is always something that can be traced back to the individual’s origins. Even with white and black parents as in the case of Claire, blacks can still detect the Africanism in the passing person.

Passing makes Claire and Irene suppress their own culture and heritage. Claire is notorious for this act of passing. For twelve years, Claire is out of touch with her black friends after the death of her father. Being raised by her white aunts contributes to her alienation from her black friends and family. Larsen does not mention her mother or her mother’s side of the family. The assumption is that her mother is African American. From the onset, Larsen does not mention Claire’s mother. The only insight that Larsen gives to the racial makeup of Claire is the fact that she is biracial. Furthermore, Claire is alienated initially from her black roots because of her class status in the black southside community.

First, Bob Kendry’s occupation as a janitor relegates Claire’s existence to a lower class status within her environment. Secondly, Kendry is an alcoholic, which validates his class position. Lastly, Kendry is killed in a saloon-fight, which also exhibits a lower class status. All in all, Claire is not pleased to be a part of this social class because her friends, such as Irene, come from upper-middle-class families. Her friends class status is
intimidating because Claire knows she cannot be included in
their world. Early on, there are signs that illustrate a
behavior change in Claire's life.

At the tender age of fifteen, Claire's behavior is
unsettling at the time of her father's death which is
recognized as pent up fury. This behavior is shown when she
sees her father dead. Larsen describes her actions as
follows:

Claire, . . . , had just stood there with her
lips pressed together, her thin arms folded
across her narrow chest, staring down at the
familiar pasty-white face of her parent with
a sort of disdain in her slanting black eyes.
Then, quite suddenly, she had given way to a
torrent of weeping, swaying her thin body,
tearing at her bright hair, and stamping her
small feet. The outburst had ceased as
suddenly as it had begun. She glanced quickly
about the bare room, taking everyone in, even
the two policemen, in a sharp look of
flashing scorn. And, in the next instant,
she had turned and vanished through the door.¹⁸

The emotions that Claire feels at an early age have a great
impact on her adult life. They aid in the formation of a
confused self without a place to actually call home.
The death of her father is the last vestige of an identity,
of belonging to a family. Claire appears occasionally among
her friends on the south side of town since moving to the
west side with her aunts. Her appearances becomes rare.

¹⁸Ibid., 144.
The stress of living with her relatives is noticeable to Irene’s parents. Eventually, Claire disappears from everybody.

Claire is exposed to three different social class positions in the white world. Her father and aunts represent two social classes, lower, middle, respectively while, Jack’s upper-middle-class represents the other. Claire’s father is poor and relegated to a lower social class environment. The bitter taste of this scenario leaves Claire no choice but to aspire to greater social heights. Claire is alienated from her black friends and acquaintances. The social and economic class status of blacks with whom Claire has childhood contact set them apart from Claire. Therefore, she suppresses part of her own culture and heritage in aspiring to become totally white. These different environments at such an early age cause confusion in Claire’s understanding of herself and her black identity. Larsen permits the reader to venture into Claire’s life of whiteness, and her social and economic class positions.

Larsen provides the reader with an unique opportunity to see black women posing as white at a tea party given by Claire at her home. Even more fascinating is the fact that Claire’s husband, Jack, does not realize or recognize that these women in his parlor are black. Claire, Irene, and Gertrude are playing a game of charade. They are
suppressing their black heritage and culture by becoming white temporarily at the tea party. In the process of denying who they are, all of the women are consciously alienating themselves from their own race and families. This denial leads to a situation that has them nervous, restless, and uneasy.

Jack's denigration of black people did not set well with Irene Redfield. She becomes uncomfortable. Irene could not say anything in the defense of black people because she is pretending as a white woman, and speaking out would reveal her cover. More importantly, Claire's black racial heritage would come to the forefront if Irene or Gertrude took up for the black race. Then, Jack would wonder why black women are in his living room having tea with his wife. As a means to justify her reaction to Jack's racist opinion of black people, Irene rationalizes that she must protect Claire's black identity as well as her own. By acting in this manner, Irene consciously suppresses her heritage and culture, thereby denying her black identity.

The unveiling of a black identity crisis unfolds as both protagonists move within the confines of their environments. Psychological conditions such as neurotic behavior and nervousness enter into the mental psyche of both women. Irene is losing her composure whenever Claire's name is mentioned or if she is in her presence. In the finale of the novel, Irene is absolutely furious when she
learns that her husband invites Claire to her tea party without letting her know. The sour and scornful look on Irene's face indicates that she has ill feelings for Claire. Brian notices her change in attitude and behavior. This marks the beginning of a breaking point for Irene. She admits that her voice "had gone queer." Irene displays a nervousness as she fumbles for the jars and bottles on her dressing table. She realizes that Brian is looking at her so she attempts to mask her feelings and behavior. As Brian leaves the bedroom to receive Claire at their home, Irene exhibits strange behavior, slipping into madness:

For a long minute she sat in strained stiffness. The face in the mirror vanished from her sight, blotted out by this thing which had so suddenly flashed across her groping mind. . . . She closed her unseeing eyes and clenched her fists. She tried not to cry. But her lips tightened and no effort could check the hot tears of rage and shame that sprang into her eyes and flowed down her cheeks; so she laid her face in her arms and wept silently.

Irene's crying spell may be interpreted as an act of jealousy because she feels that Brian is interested in Claire. The contempt that she has for Claire is building up. Instead of a rage of jealousy, Irene is expressing her

\[19\text{Ibid.}, 216.\]

\[20\text{Ibid.}, 217-218.\]
pent up emotions of not passing permanently into white society. Irene wants and desires Claire's life. Her contempt for Claire is so strong that she contemplates telling John Bellew (Claire's husband) of Claire's time spent in Harlem and that his wife is a Negro. Irene thinks that this act will be an excellent way to get rid of her once and for all. Claire reminds Irene of her true desire, to be white and not Negro.

Irene is trapped in blackness but caught between wanting to be black and white. During moments of silence, Irene confesses that she wishes she was not born a Negro.\(^{21}\) The burden of the black race is too much for Irene to bear. Irene feels she is suffering because of the curse of Ham.

The biblical curse of Ham is significant in determining the African's fate in slavery in America. Racist ideology forms the basis of how Africans in America were treated and viewed. The institution of slavery is the answer to validate Ham's curse. Claire and Irene do not want to be associated with this racist ideology. Passing, whether permanently or temporarily, permits an escape mechanism for the two protagonists, an escape from the vestiges of slavery and blackness.

These conditions weigh heavy on their psyche. The protagonists are suppressing their heritage and culture and

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\(^{21}\) Ibid., 225.
subscribing to a standard of beauty that is befitting Caucasian women. Throughout the novel, an Eurocentric standard of beauty is assigned to Irene and Claire. Larsen makes an effort to show these biracial women as beauty objects. References are given to skin and hair color, style of dress, and the physical facial features of the women.

Irene remembers Claire looking like a breath of spring at the Drayton in Chicago. She describes her as "a sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon... of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths..." Claire has "dark, almost black, eyes and... wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin." Irene is more olive in complexion which allows her to be considered as being of another ethnic group other than African American. Her style of dress denotes the similar class position as Claire, bourgeois. Irene and Claire are extremely well-dressed which portrays their bourgeois position and mirrors white women of the day.

However, these women have the ability to pass into another cultural realm. Issues of social and economic class status are important and significant factors that make it possible for black women to want to pass as white. Consequently, they alienate themselves from black people who

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22Ibid., 148.

23Ibid.
are different from their social and economic class. This alienation is seen by the class of people at the charity events and tea parties given by both women. Irene’s notion of racial uplift is to perform charitable dances and galas, that is, to give back to the underprivileged blacks. Claire’s purpose is not only to give back to the black community but also to belong to the race. She, too, is trapped because she wants to be a part of the black race but she desires the perks of being secretly white considered among the white race.

The ending of Passing is ambiguous as are the identities of Irene and Claire. Various rationales are revealed to surmise a reason for Claire’s death. First, Larsen gives little information to determine how she dies. What is known is that she falls from an open window during a social gathering at the home of Dave and Felise Freeland. Murder or suicide, Claire Bellew’s death is symbolic of the result of having a double consciousness and black identity crisis. She does not realize who she is after living a double life. Secondly, if it is concluded that Claire commits suicide, the reason is simple. Jack is very much aware of her racial heritage now. She knows that she cannot take the loss of her social and economic class in white society. Claire will be stripped of all vestiges of a lifestyle to which she has grown accustomed. She is aware of her husband’s hatred of Negroes and may be afraid of the
repercussions. Things are closing in on Claire, therefore, the only means of escape is through the window. The pressure of living a double life proves to be too great. After the fall, Jack’s reaction is surprising. Many questions are asked about Jack’s state of mind concerning his wife’s sudden death.

Is blackness really offensive to Jack? Does he really believe his own racist attitudes concerning black people? Does Jack push Claire out the window due to his fury? Thirdly, a closer examination reveals that Bellew is as shocked as everyone else at the scene of Claire’s dramatic end. There is a tendency to think that an enraged Jack shoves Claire out of the window. Regardless how angry he is of Claire, he did not push her. When Claire falls to her death, according to Larsen, “there was a gasp of horror, and above it a sound not quite human, like a beast in agony. “Nig! My God! Nig!”24 Jack shows remorse for his wife. Yes, he is angry about her black heritage, but the attraction he has for Claire out weighs his resentment.

The above statement tends to demystify the relationship between the white man and the woman of color. The title “Nig” is a term of endearment Jack uses prior to Claire’s death. In fact, Jack calls and uses the term as Claire’s nickname without consciously knowing that she is a black

24Ibid., 239.
woman. The bond is created during slavery where a union of this magnitude is hidden and forbidden. The psychological connections tie together the slavery association between the white man and the woman of color. There is a codependency between the individuals. All of this occurs after Jack crashes the Freeland’s party and states, “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!”

Lastly, the significance of the last name “Freeland” is metaphorical of Claire’s death. In death, she is in “free land” now, away from her double consciousness, the pressure of being Negro and white American. The resolution to the madness of having two consciousness levels is to destroy or accept one over the other. Claire decides to destroy both. The sudden appearance of her husband rushes her decision. The only way out is through the window. The decision is made by the simple act of falling from the window. The point is not who pushes Claire to her death, but that her racial identity is revealed to all. Claire Kendry Bellew is now free at last and leaves her friend to grapple with her own identity as she vacillates from one culture to another. Irene’s black identity crisis continues as she deals with being a Negro and struggles with the notion of longing for whiteness.

\[25\] Ibid.
Nervous Conditions

Tsitsi Dangarembga’s *Nervous Conditions* recounts the experiences of two young African girls as they interact in the post-colonial world in Rhodesia. Tambudzai is the narrator of her story. She lives and struggles in a world that relegates and subjugates women as second-class beings. Tambu wants to escape the legacy of poverty that is apparent and inherent if she does not obtain the education she needs to succeed. She resents her brother, Nhamo, because he is able to continue his education at the mission school where their English educated uncle, Babamukuru, is head master. The loss of profits from the vegetable gardens causes Tambu to halt her education. Nhamo is the only one who is able to continue schooling. Aggressively and with an independent spirit, Tambu decides to cultivate her own garden to obtain her school fees by selling her own mealies. However, the death of her brother allows the continuation of her education. Since Tambu is the second oldest in the family, her position in the family allows her to be educated next. Therefore, it is her turn to be educated at the mission school. As she later finds out, there is a high price to pay in being educated in English ways. Her cousin, Nyasha, is a prime example of the high price.

Nyasha and her brother Chido spend several years in England and South Africa becoming educated while their parents, Babamukuru and Maiguru, work on advanced degrees.
When the family returns from England after five years, they have fully assimilated into an English lifestyle, manners, food, religion, and language. The transformation is extremely noticeable such that Tambu hardly recognizes her young cousins. She is most surprised that they have forgotten Shona, their traditional language. Nyasha experiences and struggles with living in two worlds, two customs, and two cultures. Confusion sets in for her as well as for Tambu as he sees the effects "Englishness" has on the family, particularly Nyasha.

The examination of Nervous Conditions begins with understanding the characters under investigation. Character sketches of the two main protagonists, Tambudzai and Nyasha, reveal their personalities, position as girls within society, and relationships with their families.

Throughout the novel, Tambu is constantly trying to find her own way. She realizes that education will release her from the weight of motherhood and escape the poverty of blackness that encaptures her mother and grandmother. Tambu is very determined and hardworking as seen in her attempts to grow mealies to fund her education. She heeds to the message of her grandmother as it relates to the "wizardry" of the colonizers in Rhodesia. Nhemo is a prime example of how the wizards capture one's mind and soul.

26Throughout this examination, Tambudzai is recognized as Tambu.
Tambu resents Nhamo because he is allowed to continue his education when money is not available for her. His male status within the family allows this privilege. The resentment runs deeper when she discovers that he stole her mealies to keep her from selling them to obtain her school fees. Tambu’s personality is revealed early in the novel, thus setting the stage to understand her desires, frustrations, struggles, and accomplishments.

Sally McWilliams asserts that Tambu describes herself “as a young girl wanting to find another self” when she attends her uncle’s mission school. The goal of this new self must relinquish ties to her family’s homestead to blossom into a “clean, well-groomed, genteel self.” As she struggles for self-identity, McWilliams maintains that her identity becomes complex by shifting: Tambu is “obedient, hardworking, self-abnegating as well as adventurous, rebellious, and strong-willed.” These character traits are needed to meet the challenges that lie ahead as she intermingles within two cultures. Tambu’s place in her home is based on a patriarchal society where men are at the forefront.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 105.
Tambu’s position is marginalized within her Shona society. Women in Shona society have limited access to education, thereby having limited power. Women are recognized in this patriarchial society as second class citizens. Men are the patriarch of their families regardless of whether they fail to provide support as in the case of Tambu’s father, Jeremiah. Jeremiah sees Tambu’s position in the family differently from Nhamo. In this society, women are the rearers of children, caretakers of the elderly, vegetable growers, and performers of household chores. He believes that Tambu should concentrate on becoming the typical woman and not concern herself with education. As an uneducated man, he relies on Babamukuru to provide for his family. Without education, Jeremiah will always have to depend on his brother for financial support because he is not a black colonial elite. Education is seen as a means to an end, an identifier that signifies an upper-middle-class status, and gateway to English colonial society.

Colonization aids in establishing newly set positions for women and men based on the English societal ideology. The colonizer’s ideas on education cause an altering effect on the family structure. The education of boys in the family is on the priority list of things that must be done if the family is to survive in the future. Selected African boys are trained and expected to provide for the family,
whereas African girls are expected to work and take care of the household. For girls and women, education is not an inherited tradition. Supriya Nair states that “education is an inherited tradition, a patriarchal investment that allows the man to play primary breadwinner.”

In Tambu’s family, Babamukuru is passing the torch to Nhamo to keep in line with traditions. Very little attention is paid to the education of girls. In fact, Jeremiah does not see the benefit of Tambu’s education because when she marries it will only become beneficial to her husband’s family.

Moreover, education would place Tambu in a position that upsets the Shona patriarchal structure by allowing her an independent spirit.

African women’s class status under colonialism is derived from a Eurocentric perspective. The home is the first priority for African women in this structure. Unlike their white counterparts, African women’s lives are filled with heavy burdens of planting and tending to vegetable gardens, cooking, caring for children and the elderly, and obtaining school fees for the children’s education. With all these duties and responsibilities, women are expected to obey their husbands. Maiguru, Nyasha’s mother and Tambu’s

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31 Ibid.
aunt, is a perfect example of this aspect of womanhood under colonialism and patriarchy. Her education does not provide her access to power because of patriarchy. On the other hand, men and boys have unlimited power under this patriarchal framework.

Tambu is displeased with her brother Nhamo because of his educational opportunities at the mission school and class status as a male in Shona’s patriarchal society. She is upset with him because he alienates himself from anything that is indicative of Shona society and culture. Tambu mentions an incident of how Nhamo conveniently uses his language skills, Shona and English. She reports that “when a significant issue did arise so that it was necessary to discuss matters in depth, Nhamo’s Shona - grammar, vocabulary, accent and all - would miraculously return for the duration of the discussion, only to disappear again mysteriously once the issue was settled.”

His mother, Mainini, complains that she cannot communicate with her son anymore because Nhamo does not like to speak Shona. This demonstrates the problem of the two cultures through the use of language. Nhamo’s experience is short lived. Upon his death, his mother is upset because she feels his Englishness is the culprit of his fate.

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Tambu does not offer any explanation for her brother's death. She realizes that the only reason she is allowed at the mission school is due to Nhamo's untimely demise. As a determined and independent girl, Tambu does not allow her father to discourage her from attempting to grow and sell mealies for her school fees. Instead, she gets support from her mother and grandmother. Mainini speaks with her husband to convince him to permit Tambu to grow and sell mealies for her school fees. Her grandmother supplies the land for her garden. Tambu decides early on that that when she becomes educated, she would not mimic her brother and cousin Nyasha.

Nyasha is the epitome of Englishness. She and her brother Chido are formally educated in England while their parents are pursuing advance degrees in England and South Africa. Highly intelligent and with an independent spirit, Nyasha clearly displays her English behavior with her relatives. Tambu notices her style of dress—miniskirts and makeup—mannerisms, and language. Tambu is appalled at Nyasha because she claims she does not know the Shona language anymore. Miki Flockemann asserts that the inability to speak Shona is a classic case of cultural alienation. Nyasha does not have respect for her African

culture when she forgets how to speak Shona, a violation of
tradition, heritage, and culture.

Prior to her English education, Nyasha and Chido spoke
Shona and adhered to the culture and traditions. After five
years in England, Nyasha’s and Chido’s appearances,
attitudes, and actions are changed and are very noticeable.
Their family lives an Eurocentric lifestyle. The English
education and way of life causes alienation among the
family. Nyasha and Chido keep to themselves when they are
around Tambu’s family. Tambu sees the change and is saddened
by her cousins’ transformation.

Nyasha is caught in between Shona patriarchy and
English colonialism. The iron-clad rule of her father
attempts to suppress Nyasha’s strong will and independent
spirit as she searches for herself. Her world consist of
two distinct cultures, Shona and English. Nyasha’s attitude
is similar to Tambu’s brother, conceited and haughty. She
is not liked by other African girls. Their claim is that
she acts like she is white. Nyasha’s confusion comes into
focus by having an English upbringing in a Shona
environment.

Babamukuru aids in the confusion by his relentless
nagging concerning Nyasha’s behavior. She is argumentive,
defiant and not living up to his expectations. He feels
she is beyond redemption. His position as the headmaster of
the mission gives him an image of an authority figure and patriarch within the Shona and colonial world.

As the English educated patriarch of his family, Babamukuru even suppresses the voice of his wife, Maiguru. The suppression of her voice causes Maiguru to speak in an uncanny manner, a sort of baby talk to her husband. After a long day at the mission, Babamukuru comes home to dinner and notices that they were about to have dinner without him. He questions Maiguru and her reply is:

No, no, my Daddy-dear, . . . . We were only just about to begin. But now you have come. Help yourself, my Daddy-pie!  

Then, Maiguru begins to hold various bowls so that her husband is able to serve himself food. This behavioral trait is representative of a subservient wife attempting to appease the breadwinner of the family. Tambu cannot help but to become affected by the trappings of the English behavior of her uncle, aunt, and cousins. The more Tambu is around them, the more English ways penetrate into her being. In her attempt to become a part of the family, she is alienated from her own family. This is the price Tambu pays for education, ridding herself of tribal ways and characteristics.

Tambu gleefully embraces the opportunity to be educated in order to rid herself of a world that hinders her progress

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34 Ibid., 80.
and freedom. More importantly, education would eliminate the weight of womanhood and the poverty of blackness. Tambu is given the chance to go to the mission school. She slowly journeys into being alienated from her Shona culture, traditions, and, more importantly, her family.

Tambu leaves behind the old self to embark on a new self. Tambu has no regrets as she climbs into the front seat of her uncle's car. She describes the moment of her new adventure with excitement and anticipation. As Tambu reflects on the old self, she looks toward the future as being "another self, a clean, well-groomed, genteel self who could not have been bred, could not have survived, on the homestead." From the inception of leaving home, Tambu is alienating herself from her immediate family. Tambu has fond memories of her past as she approaches her new life at the mission. Those fond memories will not hinder her new life. The longer she lives with her uncle, aunt and cousins, she is sucked slowly into being assimilated into the English lifestyle.

By Christmas, Tambu laments about going home. Her cousin Chido is not too keen about going to the homestead either. He is scheduled to attend an outing with some of his white friends. But all in all, she recalls and speaks for her cousins about going home, "we all were, and too

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Ibid., 58-59.
civilised too - to be amused by eating matamba and nhengeni, and by trips to Nyamarira."³⁶ As the car approaches the homestead, it become even more depressing for Tambu. She remarks that "the homestead looked worse than usual."³⁷ Seemingly, Tambu is irritated at the site of her home, especially the latrine.

The pungent smell of the latrine reminds Tambu of the backwardness of her family and the times she has cleaned the latrine. Moveover, it generates awful memories. Her homecoming has her once again cleaning it in order to make it presentable for use. Cleaning of any form or fashion is not a way of life for Tambu at the mission. Living at the mission lightens Tambu's burden of cleaning, cooking, fetching water, and tending to vegetable gardens. While the entire family is gathered during this Christmas holiday, Babamukuru announces that his brother and Tambu's father, Jeremiah and Mainini, her mother, need to have a Christian wedding to legitimize their marriage. Their previous wedding consisted of Shona tradition and custom. Tambu believes that old ways should be left behind in order to obtain progress. However, she is upset that a wedding between her mother and father places "doubt on her

³⁶Ibid., 120.

³⁷Ibid., 123.
legitimate existence in the world." In fact, Tambu's identity is called into question. This places pressure on where she is in her own family. Although she pretends that the wedding is a great idea, Tambu is mentally tired of the farce.

Nyasha informs Tambu of the effects of the colonizer and that Christian ways are not always progressive ways. She reminds Tambu that, "it's bad enough... when a country gets colonised, but when the people do as well! That's the end, really, that's the end." Tambu does not fully understand the implications of what Nyasha was trying to tell her about being a colonized subject of the British crown because of her limited exposure to that lifestyle. But, Nyasha is referring to her father's colonized behavior in not recognizing Shona marriage customs. Babamukuru beliefs are seen through a western gaze. Soon, Tambu will learn the ways as well as the gaze of the colonizer as she prepares for her studies at the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart.

The nuns from the prestigious private school come to the mission school to recruit young African girls. Tambu realizes that her acceptance to Sacred Heart would raise her status and esteem among her peers and society. Tambu feels

38 Ibid., 163.

39 Ibid., 147.
this is what she needs to escape poverty, the burden of womanhood, and experience a lifestyle that is different from the homestead. On her written entrance examination, Tambu performs brilliantly and believes she will be accepted into the school. If given the opportunity, Tambu will have the privilege of being admitted on an honorary basis into their [English] culture. The excitement that Tambu feels is thwarted by Nyasha’s assessment of her so-call “opportunity.” Nyasha warns Tambu by stating:

It would be a marvellous opportunity, she said sarcastically, to forget. To forget who you were, what you were and why you were that. The process, she said, was called assimilation, and that was what was intended for the precocious few who might prove a nuisance if left to themselves, ... So they made a little space into which you were assimilated, an honorary space in which you could join them and they could make sure that you behaved yourself.

Tambu hears Nyasha’s warning but rebuts by acknowledging that the experience would be wonderful. Based on her relationship with Babamukuru, Tambu feels she would be comfortable in that setting. Her escape from the hardships and struggles of the homestead outweighs any of Nyasha’s warnings. Tambu wants to take advantage of the opportunity bestowed upon her. The motivation for going to

40Ibid., 178.

41Ibid., 178-179.
the convent is to experience what she has come to believe, that is, European schools had better equipment, better teachers, better furniture, better food, better everything.\textsuperscript{42} The convent is an escape for Tambu. More importantly, it would provide freedom from the mundane life at her home and village. Tambu understands that going to the convent will allow her to “... step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags; from stomachs which were seldom full, from dirt and disease...”\textsuperscript{43}

Slowly and surely, Tambu becomes absorbed into the English way of life. Her admission into the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart has her friends acting strangely.

During her only day at the mission before going to the convent, Tambu sees her friends Maidei and Jocelyn playing netball. She is extremely elated to see them and goes to play netball but they ignore her. Tambu’s previous encounters with her friends prove to have a sense of closeness and camaraderie. However, this time their meeting is different. They really did not want to play with her because she is going to Sacred Heart. An angry Maidei knocks the ball from Tambu’s hand exclaiming:

They don’t play netball where you’re going, do they? So what are you doing here? Basketball, she chanted, ... and hockey

\textsuperscript{42}Ibid., 179.

\textsuperscript{43}Ibid., 183.
and tennis and swimming. That's what you'll be doing. With your Whites. Tambu does not realize that gaining acceptance into the prestigious Sacred Heart is alienating herself from her friends. Nevertheless, she is very impatient and cannot wait to enter the gates of the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart to begin her assimilation process. Now, her burdens will be lightened and eventually disappear as she becomes more educated. After more warnings from Nyasha and her mother, Tambu sees that the problem of the Englishness has played a major role in her own existence. She has allowed it to enter her life. Tambu rationalizes:

I told myself that I was a much more sensible person than Nyasha, because I knew what could or couldn't be done. In this way, I banished the suspicion, buried it in the depths of my subconscious and happily went back to Sacred Heart.

In the final analysis, Tambu is able to rethink and revisit questions that come to the forefront in her mind concerning her Englishness. Although she claims not be brainwashed in the ways of the English, Tambu has assimilated and continues to grapple with the nervous conditions that affect herself and her family.

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44 Ibid., 187.

45 Ibid., 203.
The effect of this condition on Nyasha is also devastating. Her assimilation into the English society begins early in her childhood due to her father’s elite status. Based on her father’s position as a promising young African boy in his family, Babamukuru is appreciative of the opportunity given to him by the missionaries. Tambu’s grandmother tells the story of how Babamukuru is cared for by the “wizards”. He worked in their farms by day and is schooled by night in their “wizardry”. It is his mother plea to the missionaries to prepare him for life in the colonizer’s world.

The assimilation process commences with Nyasha being educated and living in an Eurocentric environment. Being educated in England and the mission school, Nyasha is provided with the tools to transform herself from a young girl who adheres to Shona language and traditions to a young girl who forgets her language to cling to English mannerisms and customs. Prior to living in England, Nyasha spoke Shona with Tambu and other family members. Now, Nyasha appears more grownup, wearing makeup and miniskirts. Her European appearance is a response to colonialism and at the same time an acceptance of an Eurocentric standard of beauty. Her look and style of dress are not approved by her father. Consequently, she and her father are at odds with each other. Tambu sees her smoke cigarettes, which shocks her to no end. But, this is nothing compared to her attitude.
Nyasha does not like to speak Shona just as Tambu’s brother. In fact, many of her friends do not like to associate with her because she is seen as a snob and feels she is superior to others. With the pressure of not belonging among her friends, Nyasha’s confusion of who she is in society leads to a serious eating disorder.

The bulimic and anorexic behaviors that Nyasha suffers from are closely related to her Englishness and assimilation. The diseases are regarded as western afflictions and uncommon to African girls and women. But, she has an insider and/or outsider position in western culture, thereby not belonging in either location. Nyasha adopts a lifestyle, mannerism, and behavior indicative of Eurocentric culture but with an African heritage. The two cultures are not congruent, a match is not made. Her reaction to these positions results in a destructive behavior.

The bulimia is a metaphor for the purging of the colonial infiltration into Nyasha’s life. The lack of eating is symbolic of not having to ingest colonialism and patriarchy. Eating and purging are the methods Nyasha uses to cope with the differences between the dual societies. She takes it in only to let it go of later. Binging and purging are methods of dealing with the atrocities of her life. She continues to grapple with living in two distinct cultural worlds even though she feels she does not belong in
either. The alienation she experiences is so dramatic that it brings on nervous conditions. The more alienated Nyasha becomes, the more the bulimia and anorexia worsens. Many instances within the novel records the time Nyasha shoves food in her mouth and later gets permission to leave the table only to vomit. Sadly, her parents are unaware of her illness, even as she appears thinner. The eating disorders are not the only symptoms that make up her nervous conditions. Psychological problems plague Nyasha to the point of a nervous breakdown.

Nyasha’s continuous weight loss produces a weaker state of mind. On one occasion, she passes out at the dinner table from weakness. In a catlike position, Nyasha sits on her bed spouting out accusations pertaining to colonialism and assimilation in an English society. She is very adamant about not groveling to them as does her father. She despises him because he represents the world she purges out of her system. Actually, she does not want to be like her father. Suddenly, Nyasha begin to rock back and forth in a rage. The words that come from her mouth bring her mother and father running to confront the noise. In a mad frenzy, Nyasha actions are very disturbing, as her parents watch her in amazement. They are sadden at what they see:

Nyasha was beside herself with fury. She rampaged, shredding her history book between teeth ('Their history, Fucking liars. Their bloody lies.'), breaking mirrors, her clay
pots, anything she could lay her hands on and jabbing the fragments viciously into her flesh, stripping the bedclothes, tearing her clothes, from the wardrobe and trampling them underfoot. 'They’ve trapped us. They’ve trapped us. But I won’t be trapped. I’m not a good girl. I won’t be trapped.'

Nyasha is filled with mental anguish. She is acknowledging her hurt, anger, and guilt in her unconscious acceptance of the ways and manners of the English, a situation she cannot control. Nyasha’s behavior is so bizarre that her parents decide that she should see a white psychiatrist. They are unaware that her nervous conditions are rooted in the family’s adoption of the English culture. Tambu remains clueless to the cause of her illness. However, Mainini seems to be convinced that “it’s the Englishness.” Sue Thomas notes that Mainini is on target in her assessment of the family’s and Nyasha’s condition. Thomas maintains that “Englishness alienates the Shona of the black colonial elite from their ancestors, their racial heritage, ... especially the tie of shared language; it kills psychically and spiritually, if not physically.” This is exactly what happens to Nyasha, Babamukuru, Maiguru, and Chido as well as

46Ibid., 201.


Nhamo. They represent the black colonial elite of the family. Their assimilation into the English society causes them to succumb to a black identity crisis. Similar to her family, Nyasha’s assimilation into the English culture causes her not to know her real self. She lacks a true black identity. Nyasha suppresses her own culture and heritage for a Eurocentric lifestyle and identity. The impact of colonization and assimilation leaves an ugly mark on her physically and mentally.

Nyasha struggles with her black identity in the midst of an environment that really considers her second class regardless of the amount of education, status, or her perception of herself. Skin color is the ultimate identifier and controlling factor of how she is considered and treated. She will always be an African regardless of her adoption of the English language and culture. Consequently, the confusion impacts her black identity. Nyasha is not identified with or accepted into either culture which tears at her subconscious mind. Yet, she continues to embrace what is not African in nature. Her English upbringing is so intrusive that her behavior leads to an Eurocentric standard of beauty and lifestyle.

The pressure to become thin and obsession with becoming fat is a subconscious reaction and response to her Englishness. Nyasha is never pleased with her appearance. Even her mother, Maiguru, is “fragile and small . . . [and]
looked as though a breath of wind would carry her away.”

This researcher concludes that subconsciously, Nyasha is attempting to take control over her body because consciously she cannot govern her life at the mission. Nyasha is profoundly affected by Eurocentric culture so much so that she sounds like a well-bred English girl instead of an African girl.

There is an instance in the novel that reveals the language that Nyasha speaks. After Nyasha and her family return from England, they visit Tambu’s family. At the celebration, Tambu overhears a conversation between Nyasha and her mother. The sounds coming from Nyasha’s mouth are very unfamiliar to Tambu. She remembers that Nyasha “talked to her mother eagerly in an English whose accent was so strange I could not understand a word of it . . . .” In addition to her English accent, Nyasha reads English novels such as Lady Chatterley’s Lover, that her parents forbid her to read. Nyasha’s Englishness finally spills over to her cousin, Tambu. She is affected by the colonization process of her country. Although she vows that she would not become like Nhamo, Tambu embraces slowly the assimilation process. One of the ways is through education.

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49Ibid., 50.

50Ibid., 43.
As a powerful identifier, education acts as the initial catalyst to progress in society. Without education, Tambu would continue the tribal ways of Shona culture and suffer the pain of poverty and the weight of womanhood. As a mechanism for escape, Tambu readily accepts education and her residence at the mission school. Maiguru is her role model because of her lifestyle at the mission. Tambu does not realize that she is embracing an Eurocentric lifestyle. Subconsciously, Tambu suppresses her own culture and heritage to progressively move within the society that captures her uncle, aunt, and cousins. After the return of Babamukuru and his family from England, Tambu feels awkward at their presence, especially Nyasha. She is ashamed of a tradition that she so warmly embraced. Her rejection of Shona tradition included that which she enjoyed the most—dance. The tradition of dance is a way to express various emotions and feelings within the African society.

Dance is a powerful tradition in the Shona culture during celebrations. Since childhood, dance is a major part of Tambu’s life. Dancing freely and in time with the music, Tambu embraces the moment. But as she became older, her people did not find her dancing amusing anymore. Tambu recalls:

... I realized that there were bad implications in the way I enjoyed the rhythm. My dancing compressed itself into rigid, tentative gestures. I did
not stop completely, but gatherings were much less fun after that and made me feel terribly self-conscious.51

With feelings of self-consciousness, Tambu slips into being alienated from her own people. Whether Tambu realizes this or not, the initial stage in the assimilation process is to suppress one’s culture and heritage. When Tambu becomes fully versed in the thought patterns of Englishness through education, she is admitted into the Young Ladies College of the Sacred Heart. Tambu is so engrossed in her studies and eager to attend this school that she is unaware that differences are made toward the African girls and white girls.

Sister Emmanuel, principal and Mother Superior, speaks of Tambu as an object when she asks “which one is it”? Her short term memory fails her because they were just introduced. All black faces look similar. More importantly, the sleeping arrangements for the African girls suggest that there is a segregation policy. According to Sister Emmanuel, the six African girls must sleep in one small room with four wardrobes because there are more students enrolled than usual. Normally, there are four girls to a room. This does not bother Tambu because she is getting closer to her goal of being educated and away from the tribal ways of life.

51Ibid., 43.
Simply being at the convent, Tambu would assimilate faster into the English ways. Mainini, her mother, warns her to be careful of the Englishness. She is indifferent to her mother’s warning because Tambu does not see herself as her brother or cousins. Therefore, Tambu suppresses any thoughts of negativity and remains eager to assimilate into Sacred Heart and mainstream society.

In the end, Tambu realizes that she is affected by the Englishness and aware of the nervous conditions that it causes. The effects of assimilation have caused her family emotional hardships, from death to destruction of self. Tambu has come full circle, from loving tribal ways, to embracing Englishness, to suppressing her culture and heritage, to gaining an identity that enables her to tell the story of the effects colonization has on her family.
CHAPTER 5
SYNTHESES OF THE NOVELS

This section explains the similarities and differences among the characters in the novels, *Passing* and *Nervous Conditions*, in terms of their response to their black identity crisis and alienation. This illustrates that regardless of the location of Africana women there are common factors that affect their identity. These factors suggest that: they deny and suppress their culture and heritage, embrace an Eurocentric standard of beauty, adopt an English-speaking pattern, and behave as the oppressor, the enslaver or colonizer. Moreover, they are alienated from the general culture and their families when assimilation attempts occur.

**Denial and Suppression of Culture and Heritage**

One of the main similarities between the characters in the novels is that they deny and suppress their heritage and culture. The depiction of cultural and heritage suppression and denial is seen at the beginning of the novel with Tambu’s brother, Nhamo, who is the epitome of Englishness. Dangarembga allows the reader to see the effects Englishness has on African people. She uses Nhamo to illustrate the massive effects of colonization when he denies his
heritage and culture to embrace another lifestyle. The process begins with him denying the ordinary things that are part of his Shona society such as riding the bus with the local people, performing chores at the homestead, and speaking his Shona language.

Nhamo negates things that are part of his life in the communal lands. For instance, Nhamo does not like riding the bus from school because it is too slow and the body odors of the people are offensive. More importantly, he feels that there should be a special bus to transport students "like they have for students in Fort Victoria and Salisbury." Nhamo's superior attitude causes him to establish an elitist status among his family and surroundings. Since matriculating and living at the mission, Nhamo is embarrassed by the poverty of his family. He is not sociable and does not help with chores because the family gets along well without his help while he is at school. Nhamo gives any excuse to disassociate himself from the trappings of poverty and ignorance. Education allows Nhamo to view life with an European gaze.

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2Ibid., 2.

3Ibid., 7.
Dangarembga uses Nhano to foreshadow what is to become of Nyasha and Tambu in their journeys.

In Nervous Conditions, the protagonists Nyasha and Tambu suppress their African culture, traditions, and heritage to gain acceptance into the English way of life. The method of achieving the colonizer's lifestyle is through education. Education holds the key to Nyasha's and Tambu's lives and identities. After living in England for many years, Nyasha is indoctrinated into an Eurocentric environment so much so that she forgets her native language, Shona. Maiguru defends her children on the subject of not understanding Shona by remarking that "they don't understand Shona very well anymore. . . . They have been speaking nothing but English for so long that most of their Shona has gone."4 Many remnants of the Shona culture are not a concern to Nyasha. She is extremely disrespectful to her parents, especially her father; She is not moved by the music of her culture; She fancies white boys; and she is overly obsessed with her weight. For instance, Nyasha and her father argue constantly at the dinner table concerning her manners, attitude or behavior. She always has something to say that irritates her father. A disrespectful behavior is not allowed in African society because one must always respect and give reverence to the elders. Again, at a family function, Nyasha is indifferent to the traditional

4Ibid., 42.
music. The only movement she musters is tapping her fingers on her knees to the beat of the drums.5 These behaviors are not indicative to African culture. Nyasha is individualistic in her approach to people, including her family. She isolates herself by reading books to hide her feelings, passions, and thoughts. But being a child of a selected colonial black elite, Nyasha is judgmental of the colonialism and the role it plays in the altering of African people’s lifestyle, mannerism, and families. Her contradiction to colonialism is due in part to her confusion of her own identity. One minute Nyasha embraces her new lifestyle only to criticize it later. To save her cousin, she attempts to explain the damaging effects to cousin, Tambu.

Tambu is excited to reside with her uncle’s family in order that she can receive an education. Although she sees the changes in her cousin, Tambu does not see the changes in herself. She slowly emerges into the world of the colonizer. Education is a sure way out of the tribal ways of her immediate family, a way to leave behind the nonprogressive traditions and customs. She is individualistic in her way of thinking, and she is eager to accept the colonialist world of economic and social transformation. Tambu’s admission to the Sacred Heart School helps her make the change quickly. Babamukuru has to

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5Ibid., 43.
obtain permission from Tambu's father in order for her to attend the school. In a discussion centering around Tambu's future, Babamukuru and Jeremiah plan her education. Tambu's uncle is well aware of the transformation that would occur when Tambu enters the Sacred Heart school:

It may change her character for the worse. . . these Whites, you know. . . you never know, mused Babamukuru. No, agreed my father. How could you know with these ones? You never know. With Whites! No. You never know. 6

Babamukuru knows too well because his mission school education altered his life and how he sees the world around him. Tambu is knowledgeable that her life will change, but to what extent is unknown. What is known is that an education would position her in a different class status, and, more importantly, provide an escape from poverty. Tambu sees her escape as "another step away from the flies, the smells, the fields and the rags: from my father's abject obeisance to Babamukuru and my mother's chronic lethargy. Also from Nyamarira that I loved." 7 Tambu must alienate herself from her culture and family in order to take her steps toward freedom. Yet, the similarities are closely related for all of the characters in the novels. The denial

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6Ibid., 182.

7Ibid., 183.
and suppression of culture and heritage are not just relegated to Africana women in African literature.

The protagonists in Passing deny their roots and suppress their culture and heritage to assimilate in mainstream society. In Passing, Claire Kendry disappears for twelve years and later reappears as a white woman married to a white man. By this act alone, she no longer views the black race as her own, therefore passing permanently into the white world and alienating herself from friends and family. Claire’s childhood home life triggers her escape into a world that would accept her based on her physical features and skin color. Skin color provides her the mechanism to venture into mainstream society undetected. Her black world finds her unacceptable because of her class status. Claire denounces her entire family to successfully pass. Her white aunts provide a home for Claire, but with a price.

Her white aunts treat her as a Negro by having her perform all the housework and washing. Her Negro blood stands in the way of Claire being treated as white by her aunts. Claire’s aunts aid in her denial of her roots and suppression of her heritage and culture by permitting her not to mention her past. Claire informs Irene that her aunts’ religious beliefs play a part in her denial of self by stating:

The aunts were queer. For all their Bibles and praying and ranting about honesty, they didn’t
want anyone to know that their darling brother had seduced—ruined, they called it—a Negro girl. They could excuse the ruin, but they couldn’t forgive the tar-brush. They forbade me to mention Negroes to the neighbours, or even to mention the south side. You may be sure that I didn’t.\footnote{Nella Larsen, \textit{Quicksand and Passing} (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), 159.}

Now, she embraces an Eurocentric cosmology of being individualistic in her approach to life. Denying her past and her roots suggests she never existed, at least, not the black Claire. She thinks only of herself and nothing would hinder her in passing, not even having children.

At tea, Claire explains to Irene why she does not want more children. Her reasoning is astonishing. She tells Irene that during her entire pregnancy with Margery she was afraid that she would be dark and the stress was simply hellish.\footnote{Ibid., 168.} Claire’s sentiments are felt by Gertrude who also agrees that having a dark child is not acceptable. In fact, she admits that “nobody wants a dark child.”\footnote{Ibid.} One difference between Gertrude and Claire is that Gertrude’s white husband knows that she is black and he is not concerned about his wife’s racial heritage. Gertrude is an example of marrying white to whiten the family because she does not want a dark child. The stigma of blackness is a
taboo for these women. Even Gertrude is exceptionally shocked to find that Irene has a dark child. The denial of their roots spills over into replenishing their legacy. Their passing is safe as they continue to deny their existence and future generations.

On the other hand, Irene Redfield passes temporary, that is, whenever it is economically and socially feasible. Again, physical features and skin color are integral in gaining acceptance. Her olive skin tone allows her to pass as white or another ethnic group. She protests the idea of living in South America where the majority of the people are of color. In Brazil, South America, she would be included with the majority of the people since she has a latina appearance. It seems that racism does not bother her because she has a choice to live as a white woman, even if it is temporary. Her husband experiences racism and is trying to escape. Brian is not able to venture temporarily into the white world because he is black and does not have that dual luxury of passing for white when one deems it necessary.

A duality exists which enables Irene to view life from both perspectives. She has the privilege to position herself as an insider and/or outsider within society. As an insider, Irene passes to receive the niceties that only the white world is capable of giving to its kind. The reward for passing is total inclusion in white culture. Discrimination and segregation are no longer issues because
her skin color allows her to assume a position of superiority. She is not denied entry into white establishments because she is able to mingle with the people and their lifestyle which oppresses her as an outsider, a Negro.

Irene's outsider position in the white world has her subject to discrimination and segregation policies when she is in the company of other Negroes. A chance meeting with Jack Bellew when she is downtown shopping with Felise Freeland blows the cover of her denying her roots. The look on Bellew's face is of displeasure as Jack stares at Felise's "golden, . . . curly black Negro hair." Surely, he is shocked and ponders her involvement with a Negro woman. The association causes a sour look on Bellew's face. Obviously, Felise's hair texture announces her blackness to Bellew and Irene's association with Felise declares her status as a Negro. Irene admits to Felise that Jack Bellew is the only person she ever met while disguised as a white woman. Maybe he is the only person that she knows who has caught her passing as a white woman.

Irene's marriage to a black doctor and her relationship with her immediate family will only permit her to pass temporarily. Her main connection to the black race is

\[11\text{Ibid., 226.}\]

\[12\text{Ibid., 227.}\]
performing charity work, therefore, she is somewhat an outsider in the black world. Irene’s economic and social class status alienates her from other blacks. Her lifestyle, similar to her white counterpart’s, Claire, keeps both women in a position of alienation.

Irene’s and Claire’s economic and social class status only allows them to socially interact with people of their own kind, Irene’s white/black world and Claire’s adopted white world. Both of them suppress their culture and heritage in order to live white for a moment and/or for a lifetime.

**Eurocentric Standard of Beauty**

Embracing an Eurocentric standard of beauty plagues all of the Africana women protagonists in the novels. This is another way to uphold the colonizer’s or enslaver’s standards. There is an old saying that beauty is only skin deep, but the protagonists are mainly concerned with their outer selves. The characters’ reaction to beauty signals a cry for help, particularly in Nyasha’s case.

Nyasha’s eating disorders, anorexia nervosa and bulimia, and her quest to become thinner may be seen as a response to colonization and her assimilation in the general society. Colonization has Nyasha vacillating between her traditional Shona society and her new found Englishness. Her limited exposure to Shona culture has Nyasha questioning how she looks when she returns from England. She wears makeup and miniskirts which is not how young Shona girls dress; nor
are Shona girls obsessed with their weights. Exposure to English society has Nyasha mimicking English girls. The quest to be thin is not an Africanism. In fact, African women with more weight are considered healthy. A slim or "skinny" appearance suggest that the woman is in poor health. Babamukuru and Maiguru do not seem to notice Nyasha's frail appearance, due to their unconscious attempt to subscribe to Eurocentric standards. Nyasha's eating habits come into question when she does not eat at the table. She knows this action infurates her father and he feels she is going against his authority as the partirarch of the family. On one side, Nyasha finds colonization repulsive, yet, on the flip side, she embraces a lifestyle and standard of beauty that is Eurocentric. Nyasha is not the only female affected by the ills of colonization and assimilation. Tambu subconsciously accepts her fate.

Slowly but surely, Tambu desires to have a clean self, to wear dresses, gloves, and shoes like the white girls at the mission school. The filthy appearance is no longer acceptable for Tambu. She is very aware that she must look like her cousin and other girls at the mission school to be accepted by her peers and the general society. Tambu's main concern is to escape the homestead and its environment of filth.

Acceptance is important for Claire and Irene in *Passing*. The wispy organza and silk dresses that they both wear are indicative of the latest fashion. As usual, both
women are impeccably dressed to blend in with the general society. Hair and makeup are fundamental in helping to display their European features. Their style of dress, makeup, hair, and physical features allow Claire and Irene into the white world. Moreover, their physical appearance establishes their class status.

Evidence of this is seen at the various tea parties and charity events. On one occasion, Claire has tea at her home and invites Irene and her friend Gertrude. Irene makes judgments concerning Gertrude’s class status. Irene makes notice of Gertrude’s appearance. Gertrude is described as:

... broad, fat almost, and though there were no lines on her large white face, its very smoothness was somehow prematurely ageing. Her black hair was clipt, and by some unfortunate means all the live curliness had gone from it. Her over-trimmed Georgette crepe dress was too short and showed an appalling amount of leg, stout legs in sleazy stockings of a vivid rose-beige shade. Her plump hands were newly and not too competently manicured—for the occasion, probably. And she wasn’t smoking.¹³

Gertrude’s appearance denotes that her class status is questionable. Her frumpy look suggests that she is not of the same class status as Claire and Irene. In fact, the women remember that her husband, Fred, has a meat market business which places them in a middle-class status.

¹³Ibid., 167.
Therefore, Gertrude is identified by her appearance and her husband's occupation which makes her more black than white. This is not to say that Gertrude is not subscribing to an Eurocentric standard of beauty. Yet, her own economic class position is based on what her husband's money can buy her. Gertrude's skin color provides her an inroad to mingle with the likes of Claire and Irene, plus it does not hinder her from passing.

In an environment without other African Americans, Claire and Irene, who possess the physical features and skin color associated with an Eurocentric standard of beauty, can successfully pass without fear of being recognized. This mantra for beauty masks their true identity in both the black and white communities. Claire and Irene both forego their black identity to gain acceptance permanently and temporarily, respectively, in the mainstream society.

**Adoption of English Speaking**

The partition of Africa during the Berlin conference of 1884 and the colonization and enslavement period in the United States, people came to be defined in terms of the languages of the European, in this instance, the language of England.\(^{14}\) As Frantz Fanon states:

> Every colonized people--in other words, every people in whose soul an inferiority complex has been created by the death and burial of

its local cultural originality--finds itself face to face with the language of the civilizing nation; that is, with the culture of the mother country. The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country’s cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle.\footnote{Frantz Fanon, \textit{Black Skin, White Masks} (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 18.}

Fanon recognizes that to erase the stigma of blackness is to adopt the colonizer’s culture and language, therefore embracing a new identity. Africana people use language as a determining factor in their identity; thus, the quicker they can bury their original culture to embrace the culture of the mother country, the whiter they become in society. The characters in \textit{Nervous Conditions} and \textit{Passing} adapt to a new identity based on language.

The use of language as an identifier is similar in both novels. Proper English is used as an identifier in African and African American societies. Moreover, English is the official language in British colonized areas such as the United States and Rhodesia (Zimbabwe). Proper English is using correct sentence structure and wording, not a patois or dialect of the language, but rather the ability to speak and write the Queen's English. The Africana women who have an English education, Maiguru and Nyasha, in \textit{Nervous Conditions} speak English except Tambu who speaks Shona. Moreover, she, her grandmother, and mother are the female
characters who have not received an education and are still attached to their original culture. There is a correlation between education, assimilation, and language that affects black identity. In the assimilation process, education is needed to fully integrate into the colonized society. With education, the colonizer’s language is the method of communicating. Consequently, Tambu’s female relatives are incapable of assimilation due to the lack of education and their lack of being recognized as a member of the black colonial elite. As Tambu moves in the colonialist society and receives education, she learns to speak English. Consequently, speaking the English language properly is synonymous with education. Flockemann maintains that “English is seen by all members of Tambu’s family (except her mother) as the route to the family’s advancement.”

Shona represents tradition, culture and lack of power with the general society. The use of English is a way to advance through society and it also illustrates the adoption of the culture as well.

Nyasha’s mother is a fine example of the type of speech pattern used to illustrate her Englishness. Maiguru uses phrases such as “we are all fit and jolly” when asked how

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17 Dangarembga, 73.
she is doing. Throughout the novel, Maiguru uses British cultural forms of endearment when speaking with her children, especially Nyasha. Upon entering Nyasha's room to speak with her daughter, Maiguru says "What are you reading, Nyasha-washa, my lovey-dove?" Clearly, this African woman speaks to her daughter in a manner that can be mistaken for British English easily. Maiguru's adoption of English erases Shona language and her original culture. Regardless of how well Maiguru, Nyasha, or Tambu speaks English, in the minds of the oppressor, they are still African and not British. They maintain a place in the general society because of their black colonial elite status. Confusion is established when they think they are English-speaking Brits and then are relegated to an African position in the mother country. This is why Nyasha acts in a defying manner; she does not know where she actually fits into the society.

Nyasha realizes that Shona does not have the same economic and social power as English.

English is associated with power, prestige, and esteem. Nyasha and her family are part of the black colonial elite; therefore, the English language is a necessary function to rise within the general society. Language is used as a stratifier in African society. In America, language is often used to stratify and to identify people because of the

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18Ibid., 75.
concept of race. The use of ebonics is an example of a speech pattern that is identified with black Americans.

The notions of white and black are extremely present in a race-conscious society and culture in America. Economic success is the primary goal. Consequently, the correct usage of English is symbolic of an educated person and is needed to assimilate into mainstream society. The Africana protagonists in Passing have no problem with this aspect of their journey into white culture. Claire's and Irene's skin color and command of the English language allow them to mix and mingle with both worlds. Their speech patterns are associated with upper-middle-class black women whose social fabric is Eurocentric in nature. With language at the forefront of the assimilation process in colonized worlds, attitude and behavior are mechanisms that Africana women in the novels share in a common bond. The urge to live as the oppressor is highly sought among the black colonial elite as well as the upper-middle-class African Americans.

**Attitude and Behavior as the Enslaver or Colonizer**

Another similarity that confronts the main characters centers on mimicking the attitude and behavior of the oppressor. Seemingly, with education comes power, but it is limited power. The operative word for the black colonial elite is power. The oppressor has the selected Africans thinking that their status gives them exclusive rights to economic, political, and social opportunities. They are made to believe that they are superior to the indigenous
African on the homestead. The black colonialist elite's education and money provide resources to further stratify and alienate themselves from their African communities. More importantly, they tend to forget that they are black. The assimilation process has the black colonialist elites thinking that they are members of mainstream society. Thus, their behaviors and attitudes change and are similar to the people who oppress their own countrymen. The oppressors are their role model and the African elite proceed to mimic their behaviors and attitudes in assimilating within the general society. The perception is that the black educated elite is the oppressor's equal, but the African is still African in the oppressor's eyes.

The assimilation process is the culprit in the case of the women in *Passing*. Claire and Irene act as oppressors in their worlds. Both of these women have maids in their homes and they treat them as servants. The initial impression is that they re-enact the relationship of white plantation mistresses and the house slave women. Both maids know their purpose and place in the households. Claire's and Irene's female servants are treated as objects and subject to never ending work. Their house maids are responsible for all household chores, children, announcing visitors, answering phones, and serving at tea and bridge parties. While all of these things are performed by maids, Claire and Irene get their beauty rest, shop, plan teas and bridge parties, and attend charity events to benefit various societal causes.
These women’s lives are similar to their white counterparts during this era. They manage their households while their professional husbands are breadwinners of their families. Jack and Brian provide the necessities and luxuries that enhance their class positions in society. There can only be feelings of superiority among Claire and Irene with this type of lifestyle.

Claire invites Irene and a friend, Gertrude, to have tea at her home. Irene shows her superiority by passing judgment on how old Gertrude looks, her body type, and style of dress. Although Gertrude is light enough in skin color to pass, she is married to a butcher and is not able to afford luxuries like Claire and Irene. In her own superficial way, Irene feels superior to Gertrude because of her economic class. Whether it is their maids or friends, Claire’s and Irene’s economic and social classes place them in positions that make them think they are superior to others who are not in the same class status. This feeling of superiority is indicative not only in Passing, but also in the attitude and behavior of the women in Nervous Conditions.

The relationship Maiguru has with her maid is similar to Claire’s and Irene’s relationship with Liza and Zulene. Anna, the maid, takes care of the household chores, cleans, and serves the meals. One thing that Tambu notices about Anna is that she kneels when she enters the doorway to announce that dinner is served. Nyasha gives her a tongue
lashing concerning kneeling. She constantly reinforces to Anna that the kneeling when entering a room and when she speaks to a family member is not necessary. Obviously, Anna is conditioned by the nature of her class status that she feels it is necessary to kneel as if the Sigaukes are kings and queens. Then again, it could be a subtle form of rebellion. While there are similarities among the women protagonists on the issue of passing, there are also differences.

Passing can be seen in terms of race and class as it relates to the two novels under examination. In racial terms, the two main protagonists, Irene and Claire, cross over the color line. The effect of the crossover suggests that the color of one's skin determines the manner in which people identify themselves, especially if they have the physical appearance of the Caucasian race such as eye color, hair texture, and "thin" lips. The physical features enable Irene and Clare to infiltrate another cultural world, the world of the white race.

On the other hand, passing, as it relates to class, reflects the position held within society. Class is a social construct that places people in superior and inferior positions based on economics and education. The construct is not centered on skin color as it is seen in the novel Passing. Dangarembga does not inform the reader of the color of the complexion of the characters; therefore, it cannot be determined that colorism plays an important part
among the protagonists. Instead, passing in this arena concentrates on the economic, cultural, and social class of the black colonial elite.

Nyasha’s father, Babamukuru, is selected by the missionaries to be educated at the mission school where he is trained in the ways of the colonizer. After receiving the colonizer’s education, he is given a prestigious position as the headmaster of the mission school. Babamukuru’s obedience to the colonizer allows him to have limited power and money. Thus, he is able to pass the torch to his own family. Maiguru, Nyasha, and Chido are able to become educated based on tradition. Economics allows Nyasha to have material possession and experience other people and places. The only way to achieve economic opportunity is to be educated.

Education is the gateway to another way of life and provides another identity. Nyasha is able to pass into another cultural world because she speaks the colonizer’s language - English. This is the world which Tambu is eager to join. English stratifies people into superior and inferior positions. Subconsciously, Tambu no longer wants to be in an inferior position. She wants to be like her cousin, Nyasha. Without thinking through the implications, Tambu is willing to forgo her Shona traditions and customs to achieve class status as her uncle. Therefore, Tambu becomes alienated within her own immediate family and culture. More importantly, passing will allow her to escape
the trappings associated with living on the homestead and
the poverty of blackness. Aside from the economic
conditions that are associated with the passing victim, the
cultural ramifications aid the passer in adhering to the
oppressor’s traditions. Tambu and the others find
themselves immersed in the British tradition.

Boxing Day is a British holiday that is celebrated on
December 26, a day Tambu has off from school. Traditionally,
this holiday is celebrated the day after Christmas. The
very fact that this holiday is observed pays tribute to
British culture. Babamukuru, Maiguru, and children head
home to the homestead to celebrate Christmas. What is
important is that Babamukuru uses his position to bestow an
English tradition on Tambu’s family who are not fully
assimilated in the mainstream society.

Using Christianity as a method to civilize the natives,
Babamukuru, again, uses his position in the family to
suggest that Jeremiah and Mainini have a christian wedding
as a cure for Jeremiah’s self-indulgence. Babamukuru is
upset with the fact that Jeremiah wants to take Mainini’s
sister, Lucia, as a second wife because she is pregnant with
his child and, therefore, living in sin. Babamukuru
suggests a Christian wedding that provides them with being
married in a church before God.\(^19\) Babamukuru imposes his
English beliefs on his brother’s family whose beliefs are

\(^{19}\text{Ibid., 147.}\)
steeped in their own indigenous culture and tradition. The social perspective of the protagonists focuses on the alienating effects assimilating has on their lives.

Socially, Tambu is alienated from her family and her black friends at the mission school. As she ventures into the world of the colonizer, Tambu’s girl friends resent her because of her educational attainment. Her cousin, Nyasha, alienates herself from her family because she is searching for herself within her environment without success. She can not come to terms with the person she has become. Instead, her nervous condition leads to psychological and physical extensions of a divided self.

In conclusion, the similarities and differences between the protagonists in Passing and Nervous Conditions are that: they forego their own culture and heritage; they deny their families; two of the characters, Irene and Nyasha, suffer from afflictions in the form of temporary madness and an eating disorder, respectively; Claire falls to her death; Tambu eagerly embarks on a new identity for herself; and all of the protagonists are unhappy in the final analysis.

The differences focus on the issue of passing from a racial perspective and a class position. With regards to the two main protagonists in Passing, their passing involves race and class. The African women in Nervous Conditions attempt at passing on the basis of economics, cultural, and social positions. Race is not a significant factor, since they cannot physically appear as white women. But,
regardless of their location, these Africana women are subjected to a black identity crisis. They alienate themselves in the drive to become part of a society that oppresses and subjugates them.
CHAPTER 6
CONCLUSION

This chapter has a dual purpose, that is, it gives a response to the findings of the dissertation research questions. Moreover, the chapter provides a model to examine black identity and alienation in literary works of Africana people throughout the Diaspora.

The dissertation examines Africana women’s responses to black identity and alienation in the selected novels Passing and Nervous Conditions. Interestingly, Nella Larsen and Tsitsi Dangarembga respond to the issues of black identity and alienation similarly in their respective texts. More importantly, these Africana women tend to write about their own experiences in response to the legacy of enslavement and colonization. From the texts, regardless of their space, place, or location, the struggles of the protagonists to assimilate into the dominant culture causes them to experience a sense of alienation that results in a black identity crisis. In finding their space within the dominant society, the protagonists have to pass to achieve the class position necessary to belong to a culture that has the economic, political, social, and cultural clout. The
passing is from a racial or class status depending on their regional location. The goal for them is to belong, but in belonging the tradeoff is to alienate themselves from their own heritage and culture. They must deny their roots. Family and friends are no longer important because they belong in the past, this past relegates them back to the poverty of blackness, second class status, and invisibility.

The dissertation answers the questions raised in Chapter 1. There are social, cultural, political and/or psychological factors that contribute to a black identity crisis. Africana women protagonists experience these factors as they interface with the dominant society. Passing permits them to climb the social, cultural, and political ladder within the general society.

Socially, in the case of Claire and Irene, these women are able to go places that Negroes are not allowed, such as the Drayton Hotel. They are able to enter establishments to shop, purchase tickets to plays and shows, and get a taxi without conflicts. When they pass for white, the general society caters to the wants and needs of Irene and Claire. Similarly, Nyasha and Tambu are allowed to attend school dances that are integrated with white children. Tambu gets the chance to attend the Sacred Heart school that is blended with white girls of her own age, but not her class status. In fact, she is actually the minority in this situation.
Education places Tambu in a social position that for her culture makes her an elitist. Climbing the social ladder within mainstream culture is part of assimilation. The higher the protagonists climbs the ladder of success, the further they move away from their own traditional culture.

Culturally, the black women characters forgo their own culture to assimilate and adopt the culture of the general society. Customs and traditions are seen as not progressive in the opinion of Tambu. Nyasha adopts the English language and forgets her traditional Shona language in an effort to assimilate into the British society. The adoption of the English language is a requirement in the assimilation process. Her style of dress as the standard of beauty is similar to a western ideology. Nyasha is extremely weight conscious and develops eating disorders. She is extreme in her adoption of mainstream culture. Nyasha is in good company when taking the women in Larsen’s novel into account as they venture into the cultural life of the general society.

The women in Passing are similar to the African women in Nervous Conditions in that they embrace an Eurocentric standard of beauty to culturally fit into the mainstream society. Since Irene and Claire have light complexions, they can easily pass into the mainstream culture with the hair texture and physical features that are accepted in
white culture. They adopt the attitude and behavior of their white counterparts by being able to live a life of leisure. Their world is full of tea parties, charity events, and shopping. Irene and Claire are both in economic positions to be able to employ servants that take care of the daily household tasks and the caring of children. Culturally, they are tied to the black race, but they have a choice, that is, to pass for white or to pass for black. More importantly, Irene and Claire do not feel the sting of segregation or the pains of being relegated to a second class status. Instead, they are born with the genetics to portray whiteness which keeps them from experiencing the poverty of blackness.

Through inheritance, Nyasha is established politically. Her father is of the black colonial elite chosen by the colonizer to represent his family within the homestead. Therefore, Nyasha is given the opportunity to obtain an education, live in a nice house, have a steady diet of good food, and have a wardrobe of nice clothes. Not only is Nyasha entitled to these wonderful experiences and materialistic things, her mother is also a recipient of a politically charged life due to her marriage to Babamukuru. Maiguru is educated with her master’s degree, has a maid to attend to household chores, and a nice home. The
materialism in the lives of these African women is similar to the lives of their sisters in America.

Irene and Claire are political animals. Their skin color gives them the opportunity to marry men that place them into a lifestyle that is flexible. They both vacillate between the black and white worlds. These African women have the economic power to be political in mainstream society. Irene is politically associated with the Negro League to raise the level of consciousness of the plight of Negroes. However, her class status prohibits her from feeling the Negro struggle and plight. On the other hand, Claire is not interested, so it seems, because it could cause suspension of her black heritage if she gets involved in such causes. Yet, she does not see the harm in attending a function to reunite with her black roots. Living in two cultural worlds, Claire and Irene are subject to confusion about their own identity. The confusion turns into a psychological nightmare, especially for Claire.

Larsen ends her novel with a psychologically intriguing conclusion. Claire Kendry Bellew is murdered or commits suicide at a party. The ending of the novel is extremely ambiguous. Whether Claire is murdered or commits suicide, the death terminates her confusion and the hiding of her culture and heritage. The discovery of her heritage and how it is dealt with within the novel illustrates the
psychological ramifications of living in two distinct cultures.

Irene is also a victim. She steadfastly slips into madness because of her jealously of Claire. She is jealous of Claire because she is able to pass permanently. Irene knows her economic life could be much more prosperous, if she is recognized as a white woman. Irene becomes more aware of her situation the more she sees Claire. Psychological problems also plague the women in Africa as they vacillate between two cultures. The assimilation within the mainstream culture causes challenges that result in disorders of the mind.

Nyasha's eating disorders are psychological in nature. The binging and purging of food is metaphoric of the ingesting and eliminating of the colonial manifestations in society. The condition has her lashing out at her parents and making them think she needs to see a psychiatrist. Obviously, two worlds, two cultures, and two ideals cannot be served at the same time. The result of this travesty is confusion that leads to psychological problems for the victim. In the case of the characters in the novels, the victims fall prey to murder/suicide, eating disorders, and madness.

Cross-culturally, the Africana women protagonists have similar experiences when they assimilate in mainstream
society. These Africana women protagonists deny and suppress their culture and heritage; embrace an Eurocentric standard of beauty; adopt English-speaking patterns; and have attitudes and behaviors of those of the oppressors. The degree to which they act out these factors is indicative of their own surroundings, but the basic characteristics are the same. These elements cause them to become alienated within mainstream society because of their blackness. On the other hand, they are not accepted in their own cultural society because of their white mannerism. Consequently, there are problems that attribute to black identity crisis and alienation.

Assimilation is the culprit that causes many of the problems that these characters face within their respective societies. Larsen's and Dangarembga's black women characters are actually victims. They are subjected to a split or dual existence. The assimilation process makes the characters deny their roots and forgo their cultural upbringing. Passing makes the character Claire cease associating with family and friends in denial of her own roots. With all the assimilation and following the rules, these women are not fully members of the dominant society because of their blackness. In real life experiences, Du Bois and Fanon experience the acceptance and rejection of their respective societies. Assimilation is actually an
alienation. The victims are taught to feel as if they are members of society only for the rug to be pulled from underneath their souls, their identity.

W. E. B. Du Bois' notion of double consciousness and Frantz Fanon's notion of the colonized mind are the springboards for the study of black identity and alienation. Their experiences help to understand the mindset when the act of assimilating within mainstream society render them invisible regardless of subscribing to the standards of the dominant culture. Like the Africana women in the novels, they realize the alienating affects the assimilation process has on the individual and the human psyche. Moreover, the experiences and observations of Du Bois and Fanon lead them to rethink their position in society. Du Bois leaves America for the mother continent, Africa, and Fanon strikes back by using revolutionary methods to decolonize the mind. Clearly, regardless of the location, Africana people suffer from the effects of trying to fully assimilate into an alien society. Assimilation causes the victims to alienate themselves from their own culture. In reality, the assimilationists are actually alienated from the mainstream society because of the color line. Thinking they are a part of the general society, they find themselves on the outside looking inside. Ultimately, they become alienated, which gives rise to a black identity crisis.
Finally, an examination of black identity and alienation in the literary works of Africana people throughout the African Diaspora is relevant in the study of Humanities. First, in examining the works of Larsen and Dangarembga, it was necessary to include the historic past in order to understand the cultural world of the characters and the varied ways its shaped their self-perceptions. It is important to be culturally sensitive, that is, aware of the ways in which various cultures interact with each other and creating either comfort or chaos for its members. Secondly, basic parameters were needed to flush out the elements that are classified as a black identity crisis. The black identity crisis included such factors as: denying and suppressing culture and heritage; embracing an Eurocentric standard of beauty; adopting English-speaking patterns; and mimicking the attitude and behavior as the oppressor. Thirdly, the most important element was a critical analysis of the ways in which the characters assimilated within society. Assimilation was important because it was within this domain that the characters displayed the elements of a black identity crisis. More importantly, an understanding of the authors’, Nella Larsen and Tsitsi Dangarembga, lives within their own society was a reflection of how they portrayed their characters.
The authors' lives give clues to their response to black identity and alienation. For instance, Larsen's work speaks about mulattos in America and their interaction with mainstream society. Being a mulatto herself, Larsen writes from her own experience in the 1920s. Similarly, Dangarembga writes from her experience of living in Zimbabwe during the 1960s, being educated in England, and how that type of education made an impact on her life. Lastly, the analysis revealed the problems related to as experienced by the main protagonists. They forgo their identity to the point of denying who they really are. They are ashamed of their family or lifestyle as presented within the novels. The characters exhibit psychological changes in their personality: there is a suicide, a sudden death, and a madness reflected in the work providing a clearer understanding of the socio-cultural-psychological ramifications of the black identity crisis and alienation in the lives of the authors as well as the protagonists in their narratives.
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