

# Brokerage and Betweenness: The Case of Nella Larsen

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Much influential analysis of social networks within fictional narratives (character networks) foregrounds measures and kinds of centrality, with structural balance emerging as another key site of interpretation (Algee-Hewitt, 2017; Eder et al., 2010; Moretti, 2011; Sack, 2014; Sims and Bamman, 2020; Smeets, 2021; Smeets et al., 2021; Stier, 2013). Recent work that foregrounds betweenness centrality (Algee-Hewitt; Sims and Bamman) points toward another network measure that emerges from the sociological work of Ronald Burt: that of “brokerage,” that is, high-betweenness-centrality position between relatively segregated groups (Burt, 2005). In a paper that builds on a direction established in earlier articles, I propose that brokerage offers a rich means of understanding fictional models of networked agency, that is, how a character’s sphere of action is enabled and constrained by positioning within social networks (Selisker, 2015, 2018).

My work considers the “character network” as a narratological feature of texts, and as an element of textual representations and explorations of social power: influence, access, belonging, community are reflected in such illustrations. This work builds on recent work in both digital humanities and theories of the novel and narrative that examine the social dimensions of fictional texts (Bordwell, 2008; Jagoda, 2016; Levine, 2015; Schantz, 2008; Woloch, 2003). A substantial portion of authors’ thinking takes place through network structures, in the elaboration of fictional social systems, which we can examine in isolation from the psychic systems of characters’ interiority. For my part, I consider how illustrations and animations of character networks can reveal (1) narrative choices to stage encounters between some characters and not others, (2) the sequencing of those encounters as orchestrated by the author or devised by the characters themselves (3) the establishment of separate groups who mingle in some ways but not others, (4) individuals who move between one larger group and another, (5) the webs of relation that are revealed by the paths that information takes as it flows through a group, and (6) decisions about which characters to flesh out with subplots and more elaborate social surroundings.

For a case study in reading the agency of network brokerage, I take Nella Larsen’s 1929 novella *Passing*, a story about an African American woman, Clare, who has passed for white under Jim Crow segregation, and who reconnects, through an African American friend, with the community she had abandoned to marry a wealthy white man (Larsen, 2003). The novella’s pivotal scene depicts the social complexity of the

revelation of Clare’s secret: her white husband encounters Clare’s friend on the street arm in arm with an African American friend.

While many have read this novella as exemplary of the performative dimensions of racial identity I read it as a depiction of the social complexity of racial segregation (Cutter, 2018). This draws the novella into parallel with roughly contemporaneous sociological questions raised by W.E.B. DuBois and Robert E. Park. W. E. B. Du Bois’s *The Philadelphia Negro* (1897), for instance, catalogs at length the social facts of segregation, the paucity of opportunities for African Americans, and a stark social field in which “ties of friendship or memory seldom are strong enough to hold across the color line.” (Du Bois, 2007, 230). Robert E. Park, writing about the psychology of the mixed-race “Marginal Man,” notes that the “migration” that is central to this figure “involves, at the very least, change of residence and the breaking of home ties” (Park, 1928, 887). I would contend that the sociology of these race relations, contemporaneous the projects of sociometry and early network analysis, share an intellectual project in common with fiction about racial passing (Moreno, 1978). They consider the racial dynamics of group belonging, and how segregation impinges upon individuals’ relationships. Fiction about racial passing, moreover, combines two socially networked phenomena within a plot dynamic surrounding secret identities: group belonging and the keeping (and then dissemination of) of secret information (Schantz, 2008; Sims and Bamman, 2020; Smeets, 2021). The work of passing in narratives like Larsen’s, and the circuit of tragedy in this novella, is less a question of failing or succeeding in “acting” white, but rather the failure of the passing character to manage the complete separation of two segregated communities whom they know.

A script-extracted named character co-occurrence network (using David Bamman et al’s BookNLP to capture pronominal mentions of named characters) succeeds in this case in illustrating the structure of brokerage present in the text, especially when the most significant unnamed characters are manually added to the illustration. In the illustrations that follow, a threshold of three back-and-forth interactions to register a tie captures all the relationships of the novella, with the exception of one instance of a single-interaction relationship, to be discussed below. I’ve color coded the white, African American, and racially ambiguous characters in Figure 1.

The social network features I examine relate to what Ronald Burt has described in business settings as “brokerage” (Burt, 2005). Burt measures both betweenness centrality and network constraint in order to find actors whose positioning allows them to access or control information from one group to another. (I’ve suggested that the ability to act as a broker between separate groups is also a key feature of social privacy (Selisker, 2018).) In the racial passing scenario where one’s African American origins must be kept secret from a white community one enters, the “passer” must serve as a sole broker between the two segregated communities, and this is the dynamic that structure’s *Passing*’s main tragic plot.

There are three incidents of interracial encounter within the novel that illustrate brokerage of this kind in the character network. In the first, the heroine Irene faints while shopping alone. A cab driver mistakes her for white and drives her to an all-white hotel, where she first encounters Clare, a woman whose African American heritage is a secret to all who know her. The cab driver is, as can be see in Figure 2 has no connections to any other character in the novel, and a betweenness centrality of zero. (He lies along zero shortest paths between other characters.)

In the second, Irene is invited to Clare’s house along with Gertrude, who also passes for white (though her white husband knows about her race). The three occupy a

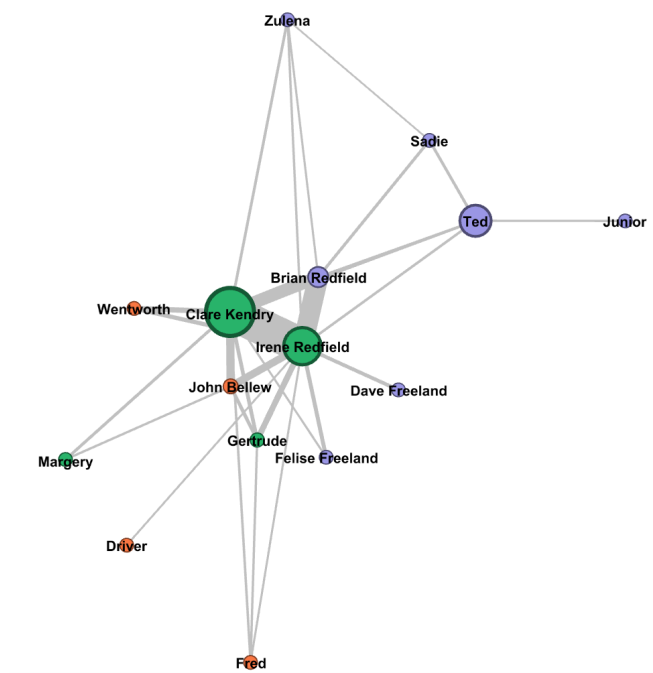


Figure 1: The character network of Larsen's *Passing*, color coded by race: White (orange), African American (purple), and ambiguous (green).

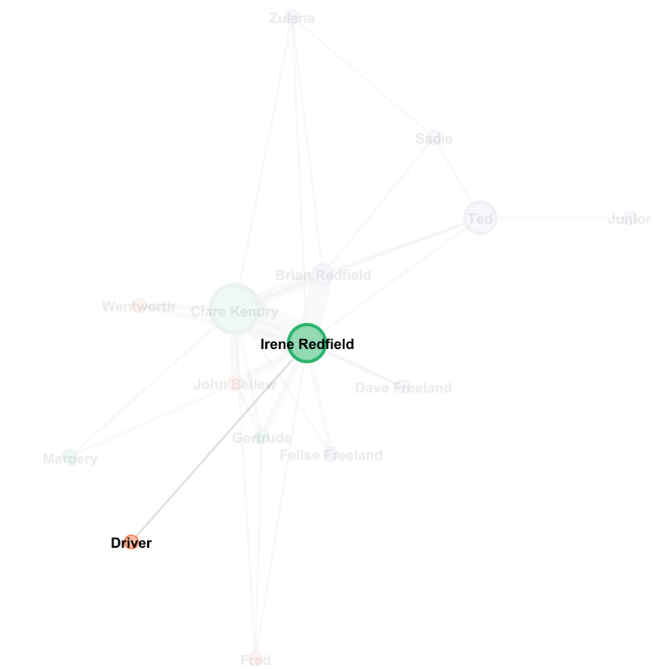


Figure 2: The white driver's ego network. He has access only to the racially ambiguous Irene and assumes her to be white.

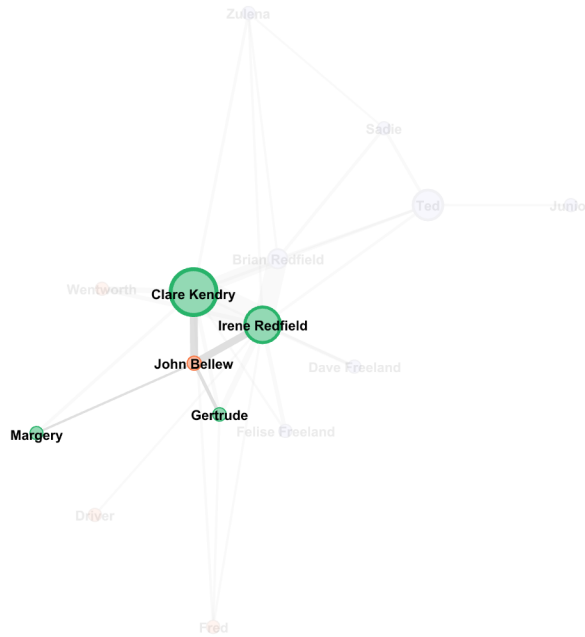


Figure 3: The white, racist Jack Bellew’s ego network is cordoned off from Clare’s African American acquaintances.

“backstage” space of open exchange about passing until Clare’s white, racist husband Jack arrives, at which point they must all pretend to be white, and cease to speak of mutual acquaintances. Jack’s ego network (Figure 3) reveals that he has only connections to racially ambiguous characters, relationships those characters carefully manage to keep the secret of Clare’s race from him. Each of these characters lay along his paths toward other characters in the novella.

The third is an encounter on the street where the rules of brokerage in the prior two incidents become explicit: Jack sees Irene on the street, and she is arm-in-arm with Felise, a dark-skinned African American woman, and the secret of Irene’s identity, and by extension Clare’s has been revealed: the firewall of strict segregation between Clare’s marriage to a white man and her friendships with African American friends from her past has been broken, not by a decision on Irene’s part but on Larsen’s, the author who orchestrates this encounter between characters. Here, we can dip below the practical threshold of three interactions to create a tie, with the phrase: “Surprise, incredulity, and—was it understanding?—passed over [Jack’s] features. He had, Irene knew, become conscious of Felise, golden, with curly black Negro hair, whose arm was still linked in her own” (Larsen, 2003, 103). If we manually add this tie in Figure 4, we can see the breaking-down of the firewall of segregation that had allowed Clare to pass for white. This moment of short-circuiting, of the exposure of a social secret, is the novella’s pivotal shift in terms of both plot and character groupings.

Can such illustrations, and the metric of high betweenness centrality that’s afforded pivotal characters, be operationalized? I think they can aid in reading individual texts, and they lead indirectly to some conclusions that can build on Mark Algee-Hewitt’s work (Algee-Hewitt, 2017). Algee-Hewitt suggests that when different characters exhibit high eigenvector centrality and betweenness centrality within a plot, it indicates that a key actor in the social dynamism of the play is not a main character. Rather, there is a “hidden faction, linked to the network of the play by a bridging character who can act across structural and class divisions” (Algee-Hewitt, 2017, 758). Never-

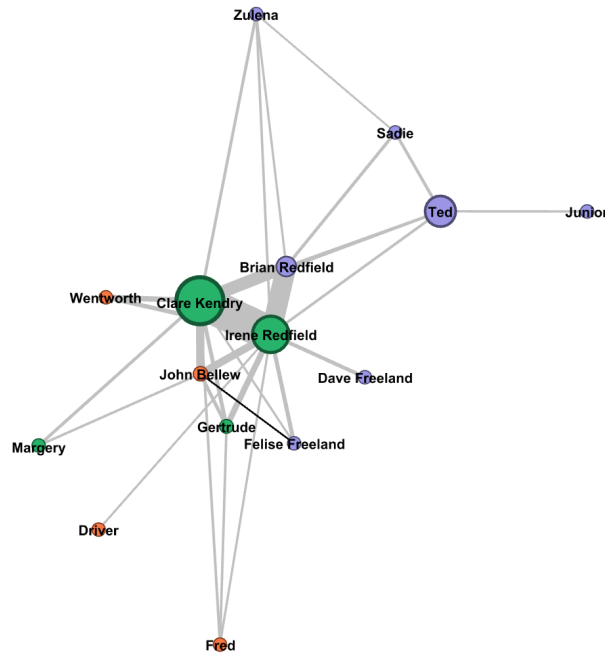


Figure 4: Bellew notices Felise as a friend of Irene’s, a connection that ends the managed segregation that allowed Clare to pass for white.

theless, in a recent large-scale study of contemporary Dutch fiction, Roel Smeets found that in that corpus there were not significant indicators for betweenness or eigenvector centrality with regard to characters’ racial identities (Smeets, 2021, 81). Betweenness centrality is, rather than a marker of identity, one of function within a plot.

At the other extreme from sole brokerage between groups, characters with zero betweenness centrality are at a high risk of being minor and functional characters targeted by recent popular criticism: as manic pixie dream girls, tokens of exchange, or sidekicks of color, or failures of the Bechdel test. High betweenness centrality, on the other hand, suggests a socially constituted dynamism of character, plot, or both. A close reading of the structures of brokerage and betweenness centrality within a single novella can aid us in thinking through the functions of characters, and the social positioning that grounds their agency within a fiction’s model of a social world.

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