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The New Negro Woman in the Harlem Renaissance Novel:

Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

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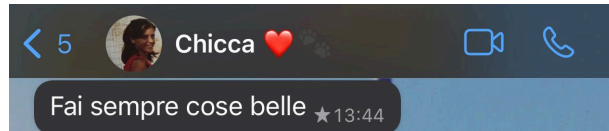
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How do you write like you are running out of time?

Write day and night like you're running out of time?

("Non-Stop," Hamilton)

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A.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT.....	5
INTRODUCTION.....	6
CHAPTER ONE.....	8
The New Negro Woman in the Harlem Renaissance.....	8
1.1 The New Woman.....	8
1.2 The New Negro Woman.....	11
1.3 The Harlem Reinassance.....	16
1.3.1. Passing and the Color Line.....	18
1.4 Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, New Negro Women in the Harlem Renaissance.....	20
1.4.1 Reappropriating the Mulatto Narrative.....	24
CHAPTER TWO.....	26
Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun.....	26
2.1 The Novel.....	26
2.2 Angela: New Negro and New Woman.....	27
2.3 The Maternal Legacy of Passing and Feminine Performance.....	29
2.4 The Marriage Market.....	32
2.5 Angèle: Authenticity in Angela’s Path to Emancipation.....	38
CHAPTER THREE.....	45
Nella Larsen’s Quicksand.....	45
3.1 The Novel.....	45
3.3 Helga’s Struggle With Identity and Sexual Expression.....	50
3.3.1 Oppression and Hypocrisy in Harlem.....	54
3.4 Sexual And Exotic: The White Gaze On Blackness.....	57
3.5 Buried in the Deep South: Helga’s Transformation in the Old Negro Woman.....	63
CONCLUSION.....	71
WORKS CITED.....	77

ABSTRACT

This thesis investigates the literary representation of the New Negro Woman, an ideal that brought together the claims of the 1890s New Woman and the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, in two novels written by African American women authors, namely *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset and *Quicksand* by Nella Larsen, both published 1928. The first chapter provides an overview of the figure of the New Woman, the New Negro Woman, and the Harlem Renaissance. The second chapter provides an analysis of Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and argues authenticity as the core of Angela Murray's successful emancipation. Furthermore, the chapter argues the necessity of Angela's European escape at the end of the novel to evade racial discrimination, in order for her to embrace her happy ending. The last chapter provides an analysis of Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Helga Crane's struggle in the negotiation of her identity and body between the Victorian ideal of respectability embraced by the Black bourgeoisie and the reality of her sexual desire. The chapter argues the impossibility of Helga's existence as a sexual being and New Negro Woman in America, as demonstrated by her tragic death. Ultimately, this thesis finds impossible the uncompromised existence of these New Negro Women in Jim Crow America.

INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines significant fictional representations of the New Negro Woman to better understand this figure and her role in 1920s America and the Harlem Renaissance. The novels chosen are Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, both published in 1928.

The New Negro Woman is a figure that eludes an exact definition. Although Margaret Murray Washington coined the term, her definition stands much closer to the Victorian ideal of womanhood than to the New (white) Woman. Nevertheless, as she stands in the 1920s, this New Negro Woman rejects Victorian values. Therefore, this figure appears to merge the New Negro movement and the New Woman ideal in so far as the former inherits the latter's rejection of patriarchal expectations and demands a place in the public space while carrying the New Negro's racial pride. Angela Murray in *Plum Bun* and Helga Crane in *Quicksand* are literary representations of this elusive figure.

The first chapter attempts to draw a historical and cultural background of 1928 in the United States, the year of publication of both novels. Furthermore, the chapter contextualizes the presence of Black women in the Harlem Renaissance and positions Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen among them.

The second chapter is a study of Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*. It follows the development of Angela Murray's New Negro Womanhood as it is influenced by her mother's legacy of Victorian values and her attempt at negotiating her identity and body in the patriarchal marriage market. Moreover, the chapter argues authenticity as the core of Angela's successful emancipation, as she is rewarded with a happy ending once she embraces her racial identity and renounces racial passing. However, such happiness in Jim Crow America is impossible, resulting in her European escape to Paris.

The third chapter analyses Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. It follows Helga Crane's attempt to navigate New Negro Womanhood in America and the negotiation of her identity and body between the contrasting bourgeoisie ideal of respectability and the individual reality of sexual desire. This last chapter argues the impossibility of Helga's existence as a sexual being and New Negro Woman in Jim Crow America as she tragically dies at the end of the novel.

By analyzing these two novels by African American women authors which depict the struggles of New Negro Womanhood, this thesis concludes that the lives of the two protagonists, Angela Murray and Helga Crane, are made impossible by the systemic oppression of patriarchal and racist America. These literary depictions of New Negro Women do not see alternative endings to Angela's European escape and Helga's tragic death.

This study is grounded in the crucial work of many women literary critics who have masterfully worked on these novels before me, allowing me to grasp these texts and their context better. Mainly, I owe my understanding of the marriage plot in African American literature to Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention* (1993) and my knowledge of domestic representation in the African American literary tradition of the turn of the century to Claudia Tate's *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire* (1993). My work is fundamentally in debt to Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood* (1987), and her look at the intersection of gender, race, and class in texts by Black women authors. Furthermore, McLendon's readings of *Plum Bun* as a "bad fairytale" and of *Quicksand* as a "social nightmare" in *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (1995) are critical to my own analysis of these novels. Finally, I am in debt to Cheryl Wall's *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), her masterful study of the lives and works of many Black women writers of the Harlem Renaissance, among which are Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. I also owe my understanding of the New Woman to the excellent work of Martha H. Patterson in her book, *Beyond the Gibson Girl* (2005), and her reader, *The American New Woman Revisited* (2008).

CHAPTER ONE

The New Negro Woman in the Harlem Renaissance

1.1 The New Woman

The New Woman is a predominant figure in American culture; she was “variously, a feminist activist, a social reformer, a popular novelist, a suffragette playwright, a woman poet,” and most importantly, she was “often a literary construct, a discursive response to the activities of the late nineteenth-century women’s movement” (Ledger 1). This “illusion,” “literary creation and cultural symbol” (Maloni 880), was born in the late 19th century and was central to the early 20th century; it is important to note that a “genealogy of first- and second-generation New Women” has been reconstructed: “the first living and writing in the 1880s and 1890s, and the second in the 1920s and 1930s” (Ledger 1). The name “New Woman” was extrapolated by the English author Ouida¹ from Sarah Grand’s essay “The New Aspect of the Woman Question” (Ledger). The New Woman’s *newness* “marked her as an unmistakably ‘modern’ figure, a figure committed to change and to the values of a projected future” and positioned her among the “modern vanguard” (Ledger 5), where, as a quintessentially modern figure she significantly engaged with public political life. Furthermore, the New Woman was “largely an urban phenomenon, a significant presence in the city landscapes of the second half of the nineteenth century” (Ledger 150).

The “dominant version of the New Woman was a liminal figure between the Victorian woman and the flapper” who was “white, affluent, politically and socially progressive, highly educated, and athletic” (Patterson, “Beyond” 27). Being multiple things at the same time, the figure of the New Woman had an elusive quality that “mark[ed] her as a problem” and as a “challenge to the apparently homogeneous culture of Victorianism” (Ledger 10); she was a “threat to the *status quo*” of the *fin de siècle* that was held by a class that was predominantly male and bourgeois (Ledger 9-10). The “textual representations” of the New Woman that were supposed to incarnate the ideologically charged figure did not always match “contemporary feminist beliefs and activities” (Ledger 1). Nonetheless, this figure pushed the limits imposed by patriarchal expectations on women and rejected the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House – the submissive and devoted wife; the New Woman sought

¹ Marie Louise Ramé, known by the pen name Ouida, was an English novelist active from the second half of the nineteenth century, until the first decade of the twentieth century.

independence, striving for radical societal change. At the end of the 19th century, “an increasing number of women demanded a public voice and private fulfillment through work, education, and political engagement” (Patterson, “Introduction” 1), so the New Woman emerged as the embodiment of a new gender order waiting to overcome traditional society. She was “a revolutionary social idea at the turn of the century that defined women as independent, physically adept, and mentally acute, and able to work, study and socialize on a par with men” (Rudnick 630). As a subversive figure who demanded emancipation and rejected patriarchal norms, the New Woman triggered the public's disapproval; at the *fin de siècle* gender was “an unstable category” (Ledger 2), and in an environment polluted with “male dominance, women who did not adhere to the gendered script were sometimes ostracized” (Curwood 87). In an article published in 1895, Lillian W. Betts², editor of the *Outlook*, disdainfully described the New Woman “as smoking, drinking, and demanding what she calls liberty,” a liberty “of license; the right to live without restraint” (135). Indeed, as the instability of gender became a “site of conflict,” “virulent attacks” were drawn “upon the figure of the New Woman” (Ledger 2); in fact, conservative critics “worried that she represented the fundamental erosion of time-honored sex roles” (Patterson, “Beyond” 27).

In *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, Martha H. Patterson analyses the depiction of the turn-of-the-century New Woman in the popularized image of the “Gibson Girl,” drawn by Charles Dana Gibson, as the appeal of the Gibson Girl’s “image, and the bevy of imitations her success sparked, makes her image the most influential version of the New Woman” (31). Patterson observes that Gibson’s work often appropriated the New Woman’s “desire for sociopolitical change into a desire for new material goods” as the Gibson Girl “embodied the values necessary to sustain a consumer-based economy” (“Beyond” 32). Furthermore, Gibson transformed the New Woman’s “desire for political equality” into a “desire to exert personal preference” (Patterson, “Beyond” 32). Significantly, rather than completely “disavowing Victorian ideals of patriarchal authority,” Gibson’s transformation of the New Woman’s political desires in “preference[s] becomes an act of chivalry in a modern age” (Patterson, “Beyond” 32). Being both a commodity and a consumer, the woman of *fin de siècle* sought new rights and freedom, “exploiting and being exploited by the complex ideology the Gibson Girl promoted” (Patterson, “Beyond” 33); particularly, sometimes Gibson’s images depicted his girl “as an entomologist or a juggler,” “emphasizing [the] male anxieties” that appear

² Lillian W. Betts was the editor of the home department of the *Outlook* from 1893 to 1900. She mainly wrote essays, but she also published two books: *The Leaven in the Great City* (1902) and *The Story of an East-Side Family* (1903). (See Patterson, Martha H., *The American New Woman Revisited* p. 135)

“when the American Girl, at once demanding and capricious, controls the market in men and consumer goods” (Patterson, “Beyond” 40). Furthermore, while “the New Woman as college student too often deferred or outright rejected her maternal obligation, the Gibson Girl offered assurance of eventual marriage and children” (Patterson, “Beyond” 37); in fact, by drawing the New Woman as an aesthetically pleasing cover-girl, Gibson idealized her and smoothed out her ‘harsh edges.’ The Gibson Girl “offered assurance” of eventual submission to the patriarchal expectations, making the New Woman less threatening to the oppressive structure. The feminine and delicate appearance of the Gibson Girl “transformed the threat of the New Woman as masculine woman, who in continuing to defy conventional gender roles [...] risked becoming an androgyne or manly woman” (Patterson, “Beyond” 38). In fact, “while her stature connoted formidability, her large bust, cinched waist, and voluminous hair come to define feminine allure and fecundity” (Patterson, “Beyond” 38). The Gibson Girl, then, seemingly worked as a buffer between society’s anxieties about women’s emancipation and the Victorian ideal that appeased the *status quo* and ultimately saw (drew) women in the home and not in the public space.

The New Woman was considered “sexually transgressive” (Ledger 6) and, in fact, “lasciviousness” was the “most common charge brought against” her (Patterson, “Beyond” 40); this figure’s sexuality was associated with the “free love” movement earning her the label of “sexual decadent,” as “moral decadence” and “sexual license” were supposed to be “her hallmarks” (Ledger 12-4). The “horror” of such decadence was not in the sexual freedom itself, although it would have brought into question the problem of rightful paternity, but in the idea of “free love” that would have seen women engage in sexual *and* romantic relationships without ever marrying; being a threat to the “institution” of marriage made the New Woman a threat to “conventional marriage and domestic arrangements, the social fabric upon which Victorian society was based” (Ledger 12). However, this “putative association” (12) seemed untrue as “New Woman writers of the *fin de siècle* were usually (although not always) stalwart supporters of heterosexual marriage” (Ledger 6). Being associated with “decadence” had the New Woman “after the Wilde trials” become “associated homosexuality” (Ledger 5); however, “same-sex friendship between women in New Woman fiction by women writers of the 1880s and the 1890s never proceeds beyond the romantic friendships” (Ledger 5). New Women are “pathologised as sexual inverts” in novels by men, revealing the main anxiety of this time: “There was a very real fear that she may not be at all interested in men, and could manage quite well without them” (Ledger 5).

Therefore, women's demand to step outside of the domestic space triggered a panic on the idea of women's choices vectoring away from motherhood and marriage. However, as many New Women did marry and had children, with New Womanhood came New Motherhood: women were not only mothers anymore but individuals; however, motherhood was still to be recognized as a "social duty," as "[b]y right motherhood [women could] build the world" (Gilman 149). As the "*man morally is in his infancy*," Ouida stated in 1894, "the child-man must have his tottering baby steps guided by the New Woman, and he must be taught to live up to his ideals" (37). This dynamic between men and women created a *compulsory motherhood*, where a woman would always be forced into a role of responsibility with a man. Cain answers the master, *Am I my brother's keeper?*, and to that question, the woman answers "Yes" – as taking care of men is expected by society to be a woman's responsibility (Washington, Margaret 57). Women exited the private space and fought to be recognized as individuals outside of compulsory motherhood, as more than caregivers and mothers; therefore, the New Woman became the "definition of identity [...] of women finding space in the public arena" (Maloni 880).

1.2 The New Negro Woman

The term "New Negro Woman" seems to have been coined by Mrs. Washington³, and gives a name to the Black counterpart of the New (White) Woman; Margaret Murray Washington was the third wife of Booker T. Washington, one of the primary leaders of the Black elite of the turn-of-the-century, for more than thirty years the leader of Tuskegee University, and dominant figure in the African-American community. Being very influential herself, Mrs. Booker T. Washington was principal at Tuskegee University, founded the Tuskegee Woman's Club, and was elected President of the National Federation of Afro-American Women; in 1895, coining the term "New Negro Woman," Margaret Murray Washington meant to describe "black women who promoted the middle-class ideals of home maintenance, etiquette, and 'neatness of dress'" (Patterson, "Beyond" 50); she linked the New Negro Woman to the "optimistic uplift mission of the black women's club movement" where she had a "unique role of symbolic leader in this uplift mission" (Patterson, "Beyond" 51-2). Being an "[e]ducator, clubwoman, and essayist, Washington certainly worked to claim

³ See Patterson, Martha H. *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, p. 50

Gibson Girl status for middle-class black women as it represented inviolable bourgeois womanhood” (Patterson, “Beyond” 50). Significantly, then, Mrs. Washington did not “invoke” the New Woman’s “association with an unsettling independence,” but “rather [she] claim[ed] negro women abide by an ‘old fashioned’ helpmate ethic” (Patterson, “Beyond” 65).

In 1904, white and racist social critic⁴ Eleanor Tayleur wrote “The New Negro Woman – Social and Moral Decadence” and painted an interesting picture of this new racialized figure: on the one hand, she empathized with this woman as she was being pushed at the bottom of the social ranks, on the other, she rebuked her, as she was not *refined*, and was a mere parody of the New *White* Woman, making her “a parodic inversion of white middle-class norms” (Patterson, “Beyond” 64). The New Negro woman, for Tayleur, lacked class and proper manners, taking advantage of her new freedom like *a child* and mistaking it for *liberties*; Tayleur’s negative remarks – “it was to have been expected that a childish race, suddenly freed from slavery, would mistake liberty for license” (75) – however, recall the ones Lillian Betts used to bash New (white) Women in 1895 – “[...] demanding what she calls liberty. This seems to be not liberty of the law, but liberty of license” (Betts 135) –, further proving that this disdained license was not bound to the “childishness” of the race, but to the emancipation women of all races yearned and fought to obtain.

At the *fin de siècle*, Black women were regularly ridiculed in the papers, Patterson notes that “[a]dvertisements and illustrations featuring black women often satirized their ambitions at becoming the more highly valued Gibson Girl” (“Beyond” 45). The New Negro Woman “as Gibson Girl appeared as a rebuttal to all the popular racist images of the mummies, lascivious wenches, and happy darkies seen so often in conjunction with the Gibson Girl images in *Life*” (Patterson, “Beyond” 47). However, when depicted positively, in her participation in consumerism, the New Negro Woman as a Gibson Girl was depicted having a “very different relationship to her Gibson Man” than her white counterpart: she was not depicted as engaging in lavish consumeristic consumption, but as “a noble icon worthy of esteem, self-sacrifice, and protection” (Patterson, “Beyond” 47). In the Black press, the discourse reflected the many contradicting social, cultural, and political trends that influenced the condition of the *fin de siècle* African-American: “the centrality of racial uplift to the black women’s club movement, a deference to patriarchy, and an anxiety both over the potential to

⁴ See Patterson, Martha H. *Beyond the Gibson Girl*, p. 64.

evoke racist stereotypes and the status of the underclass” (Patterson, “Beyond” 58). Engaging with all of these parts of the politically charged discourse “the rhetoric of the New Woman in the black press either refigured or rejected the dominant image of the New Woman in the white press” (Patterson, “Beyond” 58). In fact, the “dominant white version of the New Woman was repeatedly either censured or refigured in the black press of the period” (Patterson, “Beyond” 51-2).

In her essay, Tayleur further argues that Black women’s behavior needed to be befitting as “the measure of its womanhood is the measure of the potentiality of a race,” as “[w]omen mold the character of a people” (72); therefore, Black women had the arduous task of uprooting themselves by helping to uproot their men. As “[w]omen mold the character of *a people*,” Black women, like their white counterparts, were expected to raise young men and women, and virtually, the race as a whole (“[u]pon her shoulders rests the big task to create and keep alive, in the breast of black men, a holy and consuming passion to break with the slave traditions of the past,” *The Messenger* 7). Moreover, Mrs. Washington argues the importance of *societal* education for young Black girls, as it was essential to teach them proper sexual conduct, so “much of the social purity literature is given out to these girls, and here and there a seed is being sown which will bring forth and better wifhood and motherhood” (58); young Black girls’ happiness, then, was to be found in a pure and noble marriage, in proper ways and social acceptance – essentially, in fulfilling their societal role of Victorian respectability; Mrs. Washington was preoccupied with young Black women fitting into their new social opportunities to earn the best possible outcome out of social submission. In the pathway drawn out in Margaret Washington’s 1895 essay, it is hard to see the free space for a New Negro Woman; this was not a new mechanism: one kind of ownership morphed into another. At that moment, society – virtually, men – owned these young Black girls and gave them a pretense of freedom – as this freedom was ultimately determined by societal expectations and by the will of their future husbands. The *future husband* was a figure bound to come into existence; his shadow loomed over young girls’ lives, and their decisions were to all be made as a function of this abstract but real future husband – to have a proper marriage. Indeed both Washingtons’ rhetoric supported the assimilation of white bourgeois behaviors in African-American communities; particularly, her work “suggests that as black women perform[ed] dominant middle-class identities – becoming New Negro Women – they not only inspire[d] their mates to embrace a bourgeois production ethic,” but they consequentially “inspire[d] white Americans to recognize their fitness for inclusion in

such national rhetoric of progress” (Patterson, “Beyond” 51). It is important to notice that being a white-bourgeois assimilating figure, Mrs. Washington’s New Negro Woman was “dependent on a purchasing power available to only a small percentage of black women,” therefore, relegating “the majority of black women to the ‘old’ school” (Patterson, “Beyond” 62).

The primary concern for Margaret Washington’s New Negro Woman is the “racial uplift within the home” (Patterson, “Beyond” 58); recalling the “cult of domesticity,” Mrs. Washington argued, “that because women and their homes reflect[ed] the moral status of a civilization, black women must be encouraged to create and ideal domestic space that reflect[ed] their race progress” (Patterson, “Beyond” 58). Mrs. Washington’s New Negro Woman was much closer to the Victorian ideal than to the white New Woman, as “[h]omemaking [...] was to be the principal objective of all club [black] women’s activities” (Patterson, “Beyond” 60). Particularly, this perpetuation and assimilation of the Victorian ideals that saw the woman at the center of the home was to be done in the South, which “must be reimagined as the primary place of uplift and modernity,” therefore creating through the uplift mission a “New” South (Patterson, “Beyond” 53). Furthermore, both Washingtons encouraged Black Americans to “publicly down[play] Jim Crow-era abuses while personally committing themselves to racial uplift” in order to present a “more empowered” and “enjoyable” image of themselves (Patterson, “Beyond” 50); notably, it was important to publicly turn a “blind eye” to the cruel horrors of the past (and of the present) because the past was viewed by “contemporary evolutionary theorists as a sign of a race doomed to irrelevance or extinction” (Patterson, “Beyond” 57). Writing essays on personal hygiene and proper house-making, the Washingtons assimilated white-middle-class ideals morphing the Black bourgeoisie into “domestic middle-class ideals of uplift ideology” that was to render them white in attitude, as it was not possible in appearance (Patterson, “Beyond” 79); particularly, Mrs. Washington reminded “her readers that such ideals also mean[t] a continual monitoring of self and surveillance of the black underclass” (Patterson, “Beyond” 79). In her time, Margaret Murray Washington herself became the “epitome of race progress,” being “[m]arried to accommodations, industrial education, and personal ‘progress’” her “image [did] not suggest the painful legacy of slavery, Jim Crow legislation, disenfranchisement, and lynching but a ‘new’ future seemingly divorced from a ‘hated past’” (Patterson, “Beyond” 56).

It is apparent in reading these essays that if women were at the bottom of the social ladder, then Black women were even squashed underneath it: “the negro woman of to-day, [is] the most unfortunate and sinned against creature in all the world, the victim of heredity, of societal conditions, of environment, the very sport and plaything of destiny, yet holding in her hands the fate of a race” (Tayleur 77). These New Negro Women had so many expectations to meet: the new Black standard of literacy, decency, and class, the *ladylike* standard of proper education and proper manners, the womanhood standards of wiseness and maternity, of proper homemaking; all these expectations towered above the New Negro Woman, and she was – as Zora Neale Hurston puts it – *the mule of the world*, carrying the weight of the New Negro society. Tayleur writes:

As she exists in the South to-day the negro woman is the Frankenstein product of civilization, a being created out of conditions of sectional hate and revenge, and set in motion by wild experimentalists who knew not what they did; and within the length and breadth of Christendom there is no other figure so forlorn and pathetic as she. Doubly cursed by her colour and her sex, on her has fallen alike the heaviest burden of the negro and of womanhood. Shut out by her blood from the privileges of the white woman and by her sex from the opportunities of the negro man, she is the victim of every injustice of society, and she revenges herself upon it by striking at the very foundations of the political and social structure. (72-73)

The New Negro Woman then “revenges herself” from the injustices she is a victim of and does so “by striking at the very foundations of the political and social structure” (Tayleur 73). While Tayleur's essay is meant to be a harsh critique of this new figure, she ends up laying out perfectly why the figure of the New Negro Woman needed to exist, why this woman *exiting* the South needed to demand emancipation and equality to stop the unjust treatment she received. The New Woman – Black *and* White – was born from historical change and cultural turmoil and, wearing a shiny new dress for the first time rather than the battered apron passed on from the Angel in the House of previous generations, she changed the course of history for women, “Whether the New American Woman signified a suffragist, progressive reformer, prohibitionist, or flapper, her emergence signaled a tidal change in women's roles” (Patterson, “Introduction” 1).

1.3 The Harlem Renaissance

By 1914, the Washingtons' New Negroes became Alain Locke's New Negroes, "spiritually emancipated, self-determined but with an international race consciousness and centered in a [Locke's] 'prophetic' Harlem" (Patterson, "Beyond" 184). During the Great Migration – an internal migration that mostly involved African Americans who migrated from the South to the North to escape racial persecution, slavery, and lynchings – many of the migrating Black Americans were young and educated, and their pilgrimage led them to Harlem, a New York City neighborhood that quickly became "the mecca of the New Negro" (Locke 36); here, in the already culturally brooding city, Black communities flourished – and the *Harlem Renaissance* was born. In this new age, blackness had reached a new role in White America, one of importance: Black people now had a recognized – however stigmatized and sexualized – role as entertainment; the White public's perception of Blackness as something exotic evolved into a new understanding of Blackness as modern and *in vogue*. This new entertaining role and the blooming of *Black intelligentsia* created a new racial consciousness. Phoebe Wolfskill, in "The New Negro and Racial Reinvention," has studied the work of Archibald Motley, an American visual artist active in Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s, finding that "for many artists, constructing a New Negro meant representing blackness through the lens of respectability and sophistication that had been instituted, maintained, and directed by a majority white population" (25). It seems, then, that Black people sought sophistication to *domesticate* the exotic, dangerous, animal-like creature that the racist White gaze created in their place; New Negroes refuted racial stereotypes – the Old Negro, who "had long become more of a myth than a man" (Locke 9) – so much so that they rejected themselves as well; this aspiration to be sophisticated, to be educated, and, therefore, elevated from the Old Negro, made it so that "their background separated them from their own people much more severely than was the case for white writers" (Singleton 44). Gregory Holmes Singleton writes that the authors of the Harlem Renaissance "sought to express the ethos of the general spirit of regeneration they perceived in the black community;" among them "[s]tyle and characterization varied widely," however, "two themes recur with remarkable regularity: birth and rebirth" (35). What grouped these authors was race and higher education, writing of the same history while telling different stories: the "Harlem Renaissance generated a literary and cultural explosion that would establish the black artist as a seminal force in its artistic engagement with contemporary issues of ideal literary themes, cultural identity, psychological reconstruction" (Hinnov 49). Alain Locke "fostered and encouraged"

(Singleton 60) the New Negro Movement and coined the term “Negro Renaissance;” writing about literature, art, music, and *everything Negro*, Locke painted an incredibly detailed picture of his time and Harlem *intelligentia* (“If we were to offer a symbol of what Harlem has come to mean in the short span of twenty years it would be another statue of liberty on the landward side of New York,” Locke 4).

Black people started to inhabit Harlem after the eviction many were subjected to from their apartments in Midtown, where entire blocks were taken down to build Penn Station; this made it so that, all over New York, African American people suffered residential discrimination. Harlem realtors were among the few willing to rent to Black people, as they figured out they could rent smaller apartments (often, one apartment divided into more units) at an increased price and with extra fees. Soon, the ethnic and racial concentration in Harlem became the strength of the neighborhood; it created the opportunity for colored people to live in a space where they could explore autonomous cultural forms and a safer sense of community – this culturally pregnant space grew until, around 1920, it gave birth to what is known as the Harlem Renaissance, a cultural trend that served as an example of the “effects of important historical trends on one segment of the population“ (Singleton 30). From around 1919 until halfway through the 1930s, Harlem housed some of the best intellectuals and artists of the African-American community – who were “achieving something like a spiritual emancipation,” a “spiritual Coming of Age” (Locke 10, 20). The delicate balance of this flourishing neighborhood depended on the aforementioned sensualization of Black culture in the eyes of White America, which perceived Black people as exotic, primitive creatures. Furthermore, during nationwide Prohibition, which lasted in the United States from 1920 to 1933, Harlem acted as a permissive oasis; there, alcohol and drugs kept flowing, making the neighborhood a landmark of White nocturnal tourism. The combination of this permissive pilgrimage and the Black migration to this *new mecca* led to a severe overpopulation issue; however, Harlem stayed the essence of the American dream for Black people, as the “Negro mind reaches out as yet nothing but American wants, American ideals” (Locke 15): the African-American dream became that of white America, holding upward social mobility at its crux. The New Negro Movement wished to establish an aesthetic that did not come “simply [as] a Black artistic movement but a movement to find a new aesthetic to project Negro identity and culture” (Stewart XXXVI), and the cosmopolite neighborhood gave Black people a community and safe space, and Black intellectuals a voice: “Harlem was not so much a place as a state of mind, the cultural metaphor for black America itself” (Gates 27).

1.3.1. Passing and the Color Line

The Negro's 'blackness' remains like a spot before their eyes. 'How would you like to have a black baby?' still strikes terror into every heart, even Negroes are quick to distinguish between light and dark. (Broyard 58)

Black pride was supposedly one of the critical points of the Harlem Renaissance; however, color prejudice – colorism – had its roots firm in the heart of this cultural trend. Essentially, although not openly stated, whiteness was the ideal, and blackness needed to be eradicated – through skin bleaching, makeup, or associating with lighter-skinned people. In *The New Negro*, Alain Locke argues that a colored person would forever be influenced by a racist society, regardless of their background, and this reflects in the New Negro figure. To the New Negro, becoming a racial stereotype was *the* nightmare, the least undesirable of things, and the most desirable thing was to take on a *white-likeness*:

If the northern, middle-class, white society of the twenties was fascinated with everything Negro, black society during the Harlem Renaissance was preoccupied with everything mulatto/a. (Cherene Sherrad-Johnson as quoted in Wolfskill 8)

This obsession “with everything mulatto/a” showed a clear reflection of White society in the mirroring Black spaces. In her 1982 “If The Present Looks Like The Past, What Does The Future Look Like?,” Alice Walker addresses, in the form of an open letter, the divide between lighter and darker skin Black women and the lack of the latter in Black literature: “as late as 1929 it was unheard of for a very dark-skinned woman to appear in a novel unless it was clear she was to be recognized as a problem or a joke” (299).

The concept of the color line perpetuated racial discrimination in Black communities, so much so that “blue veins clubs” were created to perpetuate the idea that social hierarchy was to be decided in relation to the percentage of European ancestry, shown in the lightness of skin; these color-based beliefs caused discrimination and ostracization of darker people in their own families and communities. This racial hatred was perpetuated in both Black and White society through concepts such as the “color line” and the “one drop rule;” these were societal conventions that mingled with the segregation laws and determined the discrimination of non-white people. However, miscegenation led to the issue of defining the concept of White and non-White, bringing to light how arbitrary color-based discrimination was. Overall, while the “one drop rule” meant that during Jim Crow, all people of some sort

of African American descent were legally discriminated against, the “color line” meant that mixed-race people lived a much easier existence in Black communities, and if “White enough” even in White communities. Whiteness, being a requirement even in Black communities, gave birth to the commerce of damaging whitening treatments in the form of bleaching creams and unguents, lighter foundations and powders, and silk presses to *tame* “natural hair.” On this self-hating phenomenon, Broyard writes in 1950,

Until he stops bleaching his skin and his soul with patent preparations, until he begins to straighten out himself instead of his hair, no improvement is likely. Certainly his situation into which he’s born is untenable, but, instead of doing, plays right into the hands of his vigilant enemy, the anti-Negro. (64)

The concept of the “color line” played in favor of some colored people who fell on the ‘right’ side and created a phenomenon called “racial passing.” This phenomenon occurs when a member of a specific racial group is perceived as belonging to another racial group and lives among the latter, omitting their real lineage; historically, this behavior was adopted to escape ostracization and racial persecution and to pursue social mobility, as “in the postbellum period, there was clearly a black bourgeoisie that aspired to ‘whiteness’” (Watson 1). Nathan Irvin Huggins writes, “[p]assing’ has been a product of the single consensus in American race relations: the promise of American life and American Dream actually applied to white men only” (245). The “passers” would trespass the racial issue by living a “race-free” life on the white side of the color line. As in color theory white is the absence of color, in the race issue, *whiteness* is the absence of *race*. Willie Harrell writes, “[i]n racial politics, passing enables African Americans to assume certain character traits or identities from which they would be excluded by fundamental social standards in the absence of their disingenuous behavior” (189). Moreover, passing had “survive[d] the destruction of American slavery and the failure of Reconstruction to appear persuasively in the literature of the 1920s and ‘30s” (Harrell 191); the phenomenon is featured in many pieces of literature, — *The Human Stain* by Philip Roth, *Passing* by Nella Larsen, *The Autobiography of an Ex-colored Man* by James Weldon Johnson, *Passing* by Langston Hughes, *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset, and many more — however, often literary mulattoes, usually mulatto girls, are tragic figures who are punished for their *blurriness*, for tiptoe-ing the harsh lines of racial identity in a world where race defines everything else. Particularly, mulattoes passing as

White are then punished by a sense of uneasiness in both White and Black communities, finding they do not belong in either place; their feet seem stuck on the color line. It is interesting to notice that “from 1865 to 1900, it was reported that many blacks seemed to accept passing and even encouraged and protected those who engaged in it,” however, “with the coming of the Harlem Renaissance and black pride movements beginning in the 1920s, passing was mostly seen as an act of betrayal and a shameful denial of racial pride” (Watson 3), and this reflected in the literature of the time. As a trope, passing rarely hides a happy ending for mulattoes, as if rejecting one’s own race and roots has to result in retaliation in the form of isolation and a karmic tragic end. Philip Roth’s *The Human Stain* shows incredibly well how, in a racially discriminating society, what one earns in rights, respect, and opportunities, one loses in community and support.

1.4 Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, New Negro Women in the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance’s intellectual circles often had remarkable women at their center, namely, Jessie Fauset, who edited for *The Crisis* – the official journal for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People – and Zora Neale Hurston, a Southern writer and anthropologist. Despite Hurston being recognized among the most significant African American writers, tales of her strong personality seemed to condemn her work in some of her day’s critics’ eyes; Alice Walker commented on their critique of the Southern author and wrote, “[t]hough almost everyone agreed she was a delight, not everyone agreed such audacious black delight was permissible, or, indeed, quite the proper image of the race” (89). Zora Neale Hurston, a New Negro Woman in the flesh, lived unapologetically, and for that, strong criticism was thrown her way, overshadowing, at the time, her, now critically acclaimed, writing. In the Harlem Renaissance, New Negro Women were indeed present, their work deeply influential in this time of cultural turmoil, but while Harlem was meant to be a proud and open environment for Black *literati*, this world still voiced loud discontent and disapproval of any sign of female licentiousness, resulting in ostracization and erasure of important Black women writers of the Harlem Reinassance.

Jessie Redmon Fauset is described by Langston Hughes as the “midwife” of the Harlem Renaissance, relegating Fauset to the sides by stating that she played the part “of one who assists at a birth but is otherwise considered inessential to it” and the statement “might

well be said to have served as her epitaph” (McDowell 286). However, Fauset cannot be reduced to a mere midwife, a “role reserved for women [...] who failed to conform to their socially assigned role” (McDowell 286), as she was a “renaissance woman in the most exemplary sense” (Jerkins X), and crucial to the Negro Renaissance. As McDowell reports, “Gloria Hull observes that though women certainly participated fully in its movement, broad social factors worked to exclude and marginalize its women writers,” but Fauset was able to “side-step” these “norms and expectations “ that “served a regulating function” (McDowell 287). Jessie Fauset’s New Negro Woman attitude in her efforts to step over Negro society’s attempts to regulate women’s lives and the consequential dismissals and erasures of her and women like her, from the history of the Harlem Renaissance shows how women at the time struggled to hold onto their place in society. Author Nella Larsen was one of these dismissed women authors; while exploring “through her characters the possibilities, conflicts, and consequences of recontouring black, female, subjective space, she simultaneously sought for herself a space in Harlem’s literary movement that went beyond midwifing and mothering” (Stavney 555). Scratching out these Black women writers from the Harlem Renaissance was perpetuated by later scholars; despite playing “prominent roles in the black literary heyday,” the recognition of Nella Larsen’s and Jessie Fauset’s “work as significant contributions to the literature of that period came only with the recuperative efforts of the late seventies and early eighties, primarily by women scholars, part of whose purpose it was to challenge male-biased critical practices” (McLendon I).

Gregory Phipps notes that “[t]he consensus [among critics] is that Fauset’s social critiques are subtle and tentative, lacking the vigor and subversive potential of other members of the Harlem Renaissance” (230). Furthermore, he notes, “[h]er narratives are [considered] ‘feminine’ as opposed to feminist, dabbling in questions of autonomy while upholding gender divisions and sexist characterizations of the aspirations and interests of women” (230); however, moving this criticism means ignoring the thick irony with which Fauset treats these “feminine” themes to satirize them. Pointedly, Claudia Tate considers Fauset’s works “domestic parodies” (“Domestic Allegories” 15) and Anne duCille notes that “Fauset draws on the romantic form and traditional social and literary conventions to explore racial and class ideology to critique the ways in which the sentimental romance idealizes love, marriage, and family” (93); like Fauset, Nella Larsen also did not participate “in the discursive glorification of motherhood or the valorization of domestic desire” (Stavney 555). In fact, very far from the late nineteenth-century “utopian partnership” of Black women novelists,

these authors “began to look closely at the marital relation itself, identifying it as a site of confinement and oppression for women” (duCille 144). Alain Locke judgment of Fauset’s works as “too mid-Victorian,” marks it as not up with the “times of change” of the Harlem Renaissance, as “Locke’s charge of mid-Victorianness was also gendered in its close identification of Fauset with the women writers who rose to prominence in the late nineteenth century,” identifying her “with the older regional women writers, turn-of-the-century novelists of manners” (Goldsmith 259). These late nineteenth-century women’s literary tradition is well documented by Claudia Tate in her *Domestic Allegories of Political Desire*, where she concludes that “by the 1920s the allegorical link between idealized domestic tropes, on the one hand, and liberational racial and sexual desire, on the other, had become disengaged” (15-16). Furthermore, Tate does not group Fauset with the literary precedents that Locke associates her with, as her satirization of domestic desire and marriage puts the author in the later tradition of the 1920s; Fauset writes of a “moment of transition in the literary development of black female identity” (Phipps 230). Susan Tomlinson argues that *Plum Bun* depicts a conjunction between the New Woman and the New Negro, as Fauset’s “synthesis of these personae [New Negro and New Woman] produces a modern, urban, and bourgeois individual who opposes the ‘authentic’ figure of the Southern, rural, and hypersexualized African American” (Phipps 230). Despite Locke’s endorsement of this New Negro generation as being the result of a break from the past, Fauset’s writings show a transitional generation; these characters inherit and rebuild – they do not break, do not cut. Meredith Goldsmith writes that “Fauset’s characters establish themselves not so much as members of a 1920s cultural vanguard but as inheritors of a cultural history that lay only a few decades in the past: the Reconstruction era, African American migration to northern cities, and the entrance of black women into the labor market” (261). The investigation of the “push and pulls between desire and ambition” among young Black people “who are a part of the first generation removed from slavery” in Fauset’s *There Is Confusion* has Jerkins wondering of “the dream” these characters “allowed themselves to dream” (Jerkins X): for the first time, America is the land of opportunity for Black people as well, they get a taste of the American Dream. Fauset chooses “the cultivated Negro society of Philadelphia and New York for her milieu. Her race pride did not turn to the Negro heritage in the soil, but to his heritage in ancient lineage and in culture” (Saunders 106). Goldsmith observes that *Plum Bun* “addresses the possibilities that urban modernity seemed to offer African American women in the 1920s” (260), and Nella Larsen operates similarly in *Quicksand*; in fact, “[b]oth Larsen and Fauset focused on the psychology of black women” (McLendon 12) in urban settings,

and both novels follow their modern urban heroines⁵ while they try to figure out their place in the world, specifically as middle-class women in the United States.

Accusing Jessie Fauset of a mid-Victorian attitude, Locke seems to attempt to call Fauset ‘prudish,’ as her choice of contents is related to sex (both intended as gender and the act), but never deals with sexual intercourse explicitly; while Fauset writes of sex and sexual desire, her character’s sexual encounters usually “fade to black.” As the Black woman was perceived as “a matrix of the concepts of motherhood, sensuality, and idealized beauty” (Singleton 40), Fauset’s conservatism in the sexual sphere for her female characters, Mary Jane Schenck speculates comes from a desire to protect from fetishizing eyes the “exotic” Black female sexuality. McDowell notes that Fauset “was particularly alert to their [publisher’s] lurking prejudices against any writing that detailed to satisfy the demand for [...] the cult of the primitive exotic” (290), and despite her novel *Plum Bun* “brims with innuendoes” (300), the author purposefully, “bypasses” the sexual implications in the title and the nursery rhyme, “in favor of a clear-sighted examination of the politics of sex” (301). Similarly, du Cille sharply notes that compared to the “raunchy lyrics of the blues” and “the graphic portrays of ‘low-class Negro life’” painted by male writers, “the fiction of Fauset and Larsen seems [...] sexually stultified and anachronistically reticent,” however, put in the historical literary context, “Fauset’s and Larsen’s forays into the forbidden realm of female sexual desire appear progressive, [and] counter conventional” (86). The “heroines of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen are by no means spayed, passionless decorations, adorning the pristine pages of immaculately conceived lace-curtain romances. They are, on the contrary, implicitly sexual beings, finely tuned to both the power and the vulnerability of their own female bodies” (duCille 109). Both Larsen and Fauset engage in explorations of the time’s “sexual politics from a female perspective” (duCille 86); therefore, considering either of their *corpora* as “mid-Victorian” completely ignores the very modern engagement with new feminist thought and these authors’ exploration of the meaning of sex for the public and private lives of these modern urban heroines. With these novels, “[...] a new image of the black female body is born” (Moore 88), Fauset and Larsen “participate in [the] battle over the black female body, locating that struggle within both marital relations and wider social, political, and professional engagements”, focusing on the “social forces and patriarchal ideology” and the demand of “participation of black women in their own objectification and

⁵ As Goldsmith addresses Fauset’s characters. See Goldsmith, 260.

domination” (duCille 94), in a time when female Black sexuality was either not acknowledged or circumscribed to racial, sexual stereotypes. As “black female writers,” Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen “inherited a tradition of major racial fault lines,” in which Moore includes the “humiliating pre-aesthetics of slavery,” the “anti-black aesthetics of Jim Crow Law,” the “Western media’s control of racial images,” and “each artist’s own experience with racism” (Moore 96-97). To this list, duCille adds a series of gendered characteristics, such as Black women’s questioning of the objectification of their bodies for the male desire and becoming “actively sexual beings,” marriage becoming the “symbol of material achievement” and therefore crucial in “times biting critiques of bourgeois black society and so-called middle class values,” patriarchy as a “pervasive institution” oppressing “black women within their own communities, households, and erotic and marital relations,” and, at last, heroines gaining depth; they were not “uniformly heroic, good, pure, blameless,” but became “multidimensional figures, full of human [...] faults and foibles” (duCille 87). Particularly, Larsen’s attempt to “clear a gendered space in Harlem for herself and for her female characters [...] meant proposing ways in which the black woman’s body could be brought back into public view neither as the sexually wanton female of white racist imagining nor as the Brown Madonna, the woman-as-African-mother, constructed by black uplift ideology” (Stavney 556).

1.4.1 Reappropriating the Mulatto Narrative

According to Jaquelyn McLendon, Fauset and Larsen “parodied” and “satirized” the “mulatto narrative [...] in order to deconstruct the ‘master’ narratives” (25). McLendon sketches these master narratives out through the analysis of various pieces of literature mentioning mulattoes (or octoroons⁶) and finds that these writers would often draw out a young girl who, despite being beautiful and intelligent, is doomed to a tragic ending due to her Black roots. This intrinsically racist approach in narrating these literary mulattoes’ stories was accompanied by a caricature and parodical exaggeration of the “fully Black” characters, all inferior to the mulatto girl “bettered” by her White blood. Authors like Larsen and Fauset re-appropriate the mulatto narrative, assimilating it into a new African American literary tradition; furthermore, despite Larsen’s tragic endings, the Black blood of Larsen’s and Fauset’s characters does not

⁶ “Octoroon” is the term used for people who had one-eighth of Black descent.

become an inherent curse, nor are “fully” Black or dark-skin characters misrepresented or parodied. These authors “wished not only to present more realistic mulattoes but also to interrogate traditional assumptions about color and class,” representing “an existing slice of Harlem life” and showing “the ways in which the ‘eternal race question’ was the concern of all” (McLendon 25). While Southern Jim Crow’s “separate but equal” policy “reinstated the subjugation of Negroes, reinscribing the black body as untouchable and different from that of the white and national ‘American’ body” (Moore 91-92) in the North, authors like Fauset and Larsen were writing of the New Negro Woman, making literature out of the arrival of the “mobile black [female] body” (Moore 89). The passing plot allowed authors to show the new racial mobility of Black educated men and women of the new Black bourgeois class while simultaneously further attacking the evident racial discrimination ingrained in the American societal and political system; Fauset attempts to show that the “very belief in the necessity of passing – of attempting to escape the racialized body – is a legacy of slavery” (McLendon 28-29). In Larsen’s and Fauset’s “novels ‘race’ and ‘color’ are essential to describing and defining both inter- and intra-racial power relations and therefore are important in addressing the issue of blacks’ overall position in American society” (McLendon 8); “Jim Crow America, with its pejorative legal, public, and media control over the imaged of the black body, provided a backdrop of the times” (Moore 92), and, although “progressive,” the Harlem Renaissance proved to be a perfect setting for representations of gender inequality, and women’s oppression. While a new mobile Black female body is born, and the New Negro Woman walks the streets of the American Northern *metropolises*, Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen get “caught up in what Cheryl Walls calls the ‘self-destructive masquerade of passing’” (Showalter 74); passing allowed “white-skinned Negroes,” that lived among these new mobile Black bodies, to “‘suppress the evidence’ of bodily identification” (Moore 92).

CHAPTER TWO

Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*

2.1 The Novel

Plum Bun. A Novel Without a Moral (1928) is Jessie Fauset's second novel and is a novel of passing. Since it closely treats the intricate and multiple dimensions of gender oppression, the "narrative's trajectory demonstrates that gender norms are always already racialized and, conversely, that racial norms are always already gendered" (Rottenberg 267). Being also a novel of manners, *Plum Bun* recreates the social world, conveying the customs and *mores* of society, and offers "a repository of precisely what Locke labeled retrograde: seemingly outdated plotlines and tropes that draw upon multiple literary, historical, and popular cultural sources" (Goldsmith 260). However, Fauset's characters are "modern urban heroines" (Goldsmith 260) because, while her writing style was perhaps still loyal to the late 19th-century novel tradition, it was definitely '20th century' in contents. Depicting the 20th-century Black woman, *Plum Bun* is an example "of the bourgeois novel of passing and protest in mulatto literature that reflect[s] this historical rise of the mulatto elite" (Watson 1). Additionally, the gendered themes in the novel make it "a novel of female and social development" (duCille 93). Fauset writes about the complicated reality of a light-skin New Negro woman trying to negotiate freedom in racist America and drafts for her a fairy-tale-like happy ending in Europe. This chapter follows the development of the protagonist's New Negro Womanhood as it is influenced by her mother's legacy of Victorian values and her attempt at negotiating her identity and body in the patriarchal marriage market. In this chapter, I will claim authenticity as the core of Angela's successful emancipation, as she is rewarded with a happy ending once she embraces her racial identity and renounces racial passing. However, such happiness cannot be embraced in Jim Crow America, resulting in her European escape.

Following the story of Angela Murray, a light skin colored girl who grows up in Philadelphia and moves to New York City to pass as white, *Plum Bun* analyzes "the paradoxes of color prejudice in America" (McDowell, "Afterword" 296). Angela is raised in Philadelphia with her sister Virginia by their parents, Mattie and Junius; while she grows up casually "passing" in her hometown, when her parents die she decides to move to New York

and *permanently* pass. In the city, she goes to art school, makes friends among white young artists, and learns about the ways of cosmopolitan living for women, the delight and distress of the dating game, and sexual pleasures. In the end, after living in poverty and understanding the deep loneliness that comes with “inauthenticity,” she decides to live her life as a Black woman and moves to Paris, where she is joined by the man she loves.

Angela’s complicated journey to the other side of the color line brings her back “home,” and she develops morale and racial pride, demonstrating “her protest against a color-conscious hierarchy” (Watson 7). The novel works as an allegory of the cultural shift of the time; Fauset intertwines through the themes of religious community and individualistic goals, her ancestors, and her contemporaries, drawing the shift and changes of her age. At the end of the novel, when Angela visits Philadelphia, she has accepted her racial identity; by accepting her past as a fundamental part of her, she brings it with into her in her future, as a New Angela, a New Woman, a New Negro, her history is not changed, but her future, and virtually the past of those who will come after her, is.

2.2 Angela: New Negro and New Woman

Living in New York as Angèle Mory, her white pseudonym, Angela, meets people across various cultural, generational, and racial lines, entering “into multiple communities, demonstrating in the process the flexibility and variability of her social identity” (Phipps 227); Paulette Lister and Martha Burden, the New Women, Rachel Salting and her Jewish roots, Mrs. Denver, the white, rich neighbor, the socialite Elizabeth Sandburg, Miss Powell, and many more characters, help the author bring into the narrative frame all kinds of racial and social statuses, experiences and generations. Particularly, the novel reflects on the difference between the New (white) Woman and the New Negro Woman, a difference that has to do with “the power of the salvific wish that so shaped modern middle-class African American subjectivity” (Rottenberg 280).⁷ Fauset does not erase the past or give her characters a shiny new path to walk on, but a path that was paved by their ancestors, by their direct family ties. In *Plum Bun*, the stories of Mattie’s youth, Junius’s pride, and Anthony’s father are chosen carefully to trace a racial history for these New Negroes. With her narrative,

⁷ “The life of this upwardly mobile community is saturated by what Candice M. Jenkins has aptly termed the ‘salvific wish,’ loosely defined as the embrace of bourgeois propriety, especially in matters concerned with intimate sexual conduct.” (Rottenberg 269)

the author emphasizes that as New Negroes “many young Harlemites like Angela, Virginia, and Anthony were heirs to similarly painful family narratives” (Goldsmith 268). Furthermore, Fauset positions Angela among the Fourteenth Street School artists, an artistic movement between the 1920s and the 1930s, depicting working men and women and the middle class in a realistic style, calling attention to the lives of ordinary people. By inserting Angela in a so important, historical, artistic movement, the author simultaneously stresses the importance of Angela’s surroundings in her personal, and consequently artistic, development, but also the importance of Angela as a type, as a figure, as a New Negro Woman in this artistic tradition. As Angela draws her “Fourteenth Street types” and observes the rushing crowd of Union Square, she draws, in the same way that Fauset writes, “the past forever being overthrown; the future forever being coaxed into existence. [Union Square] is the vortex of change, it is America in transition” (Todd 85, as quoted in Tomlinson 92).

In the novel, Fauset concentrates on social, gendered power dynamics and criticizes “the norms of female socialization, and the social double standard” (McDowell, “Afterword” 296); in doing so, she endorses female independence beyond traditionalist views, making *Plum Bun* a display of progressiveness. Fauset’s novel endorses a new approach to gendered social relations, ironizing on the role-playing in courting and showing Angela’s character development and her growth into an independent, self-sufficient young woman; this new approach can be pinpointed in *New Womanhood*, the racial factor making Angela a New Negro Woman. Furthermore, the author explores her female characters’ sexual autonomy; she does so in Paulette Lister’s character, one of Angela’s art school friends, and the New Woman *par excellence* of the novel. Taking the “opportunity to explore female sexual autonomy more radically and with fewer political ramifications than in Angela’s depiction,” Paulette’s sexual freedom introduces Angela to “the possibilities for women’s liberation” (Tomlinson 94-5), showing Angela’s moral limits at the same time. Putting side by side the New Woman and the New Negro Woman, Fauset “provides insight into how acceptable black middle-class feminine behavior was being intensely renegotiated during the Harlem Renaissance” (Rottenberg 267). *New Womanhood*, for Angela, is a transformative process: on the one hand, she has a seemingly innate inclination towards independence and naturally desires the public space; on the other, she has to learn self-sufficiency to grow into adulthood — into womanhood. When, in the end, she decides to leave for Paris, she does so as a New Negro Woman, understanding the hardships of life as a woman in the public sphere and that her identity cannot be separated from her Blackness. Susan Tomlinson states that “Fauset unites

the New Negro and the New Woman in a character defined by her inability to recognize two aspects of her identity, two cultural desires, at the same time” (90-1) and then argues that the “novel implies their irreconcilability” (91); however, it is essential to notice that the novel implies the irreconcilability of the two movements *in* the United States as the author closes the novel with a happy ending for the now racially conscious, and independent Angela in Paris. The result of the experiences in her identities – plural as she lives both as the mulatto, middle-class daughter, and as the white artist Angèle in New York – is a racially conscious New Angela, a New Negro Woman. Furthermore, while Tomlinson states that Angela must remove herself from the United States to embrace her racial pride, I believe she achieves it before leaving, as demonstrated by her confession, “I’m colored too” (Fauset 261), in support of Miss Powell towards the end of the novel. Already having entered the public space as an independent woman, Angela’s racial pride awakening cements her identity in New Negro Womanhood. This New Angela is aware that to be free of the anti-Black sentiment and exist “freely” as a New Negro Woman, she needs to leave America. As a New Negro and a New Woman, Angela, the reader assumes, will live happily ever after in Europe with her New Negro Prince Charming; so, the two movements, New Negro and New Womanhood, can reconcile in Angela in America, but for her, they can only reconcile *happily* in her European escape, where she would quite literally be escaping racial prejudice.

2.3 The Maternal Legacy of Passing and Feminine Performance

The Murrays live an ordinary, quiet life on Opal Street, “an unpretentious little street lined with unpretentious little houses, inhabited for the most part by unpretentious little people” (Fauset 3), in a quiet Philadelphia neighborhood, that “while urban, has the feel and sensibility of a small town or suburb” (Rottenberg 268). A patriarchal order rules the Murrays’ family; in the house, it is Junius who “*possess[es]* a charming wife and two fine daughters,” making him a “patriarchal” and “almost biblical” father figure (*emphasis added*, 11). As patriarchal figures, Mr. and Mrs. Murray are strong pointers of Black bourgeois morality; having known poverty and struggle, they both understand the importance of righteousness over pleasure. This family structure portrays Claudia Tate’s idea of “domesticity” as a “tenuous medium for instructing black people in responsible citizenship and personal ambition” (“Domestic Allegories” 228); particularly, in *Plum Bun*, the parents’

past is to Angela, “a manifestation of the sort of thing which happens to those enchained it might be by duty, by poverty, by weakness or by colour” (Fauset 5).

From the first pages of the novel, Fauset emphasizes how Angela’s understanding of color is deeply rooted in her mother’s habits, as she inherits her “mother’s fair skin,” and it is from her “that Angela [learns] the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness” (Fauset 5). The author “takes care to ground Mattie’s behavior” of strolling through “Philadelphia’s exclusive [White] Walnut Street seeking leisure-class consumer pleasures” in “her early experience of economic deprivation and her venture into the workforce in the early years of the twentieth century” (Goldsmith 262). In fact, Fauset stresses that Mattie “had no desire to be of these people” and that these “innocent, childish pleasures” were not more important than her housework, than her “black husband whom she had been happy and proud to marry” (5), than her daughters, or her community.

In the happy Saturday afternoons spent in the white part of town, Angela does not see only small pleasures in an already happy life; rather, she sees these moments as flickers of a life she is restrained from having because of her Black blood. Little Angela observes that “coloured people were to consider themselves fortunate only in proportion in which they measured up to the physical standards of white people” (Fauset 8) and develops an understanding that whiteness can be used for social advancement; this belief will stay at the core of Angela’s very being long into adulthood and will shape most of her life decisions. Fauset coordinates a particular episode to stress the misunderstanding of values between mother and daughter further: while Mattie and Angela are standing on Walnut Street, Virginia and Junius walk by them, and while Angela’s father and sister do not see them, she and her mother *do*; seeing her mother purposefully ignore the rest of their family teaches Angela that the passing masquerade is more important than their familiar relations. After this crucial episode, where Mattie shows shame, regret, and guilt in ignoring her husband and daughter while “passing,” Angela *sees* her future; at the end of the chapter, Angela dreams “excitedly of Saturdays spent in turning her small olive face firmly away from peering black countenances” (Fauset 9). Angela’s childhood dream is a life of “passing forever,” where her Blackness and her relations to it would be forgotten. The Walnut Street episode is so striking that it will follow Angela throughout the novel, but it is a long time before she truly understands Mattie’s feelings. When Angela later rejects and ignores her sister — “who was colored and showed it” (Fauset 114) — at Penn Station, in favor of not revealing her Black relations to the man she believes to be her soon-to-be-fiancé, she will think back to her

mother and that time on Walnut Street, and just then she finally understands that her mother would have never made the same sacrifice.

The advantages of lighter skin are not the only thing Angela learns from her mother; Mattie's daughters grow up with her rendition of Victorian femininity. In fact, Fauset puts the Murray family in the tradition of the rising Black middle class's "adoption of Victorian gentility," which came "as evidence of its presumed superior civilization [...] because appropriation of gentility meant approximating racial equality" (Tate, "Domestic Allegories" 59). The narrator tells Mattie and Junius's story, and "[t]hese origins of the Murray family form a necessary precursor to the novel's plot" (Goldsmith 263); when they meet, Mattie is working for an actress who "projects her own immorality onto [her]," and Junius "offers himself as her protector, and the two promptly quit the actress's household and marry" (Goldsmith 262-263). Therefore, at the roots of this family's existence, Mattie's womanhood and Junius's manhood, their relationship, and their parenting are the ideals of marriage, morality, and respectability. Furthermore, Meredith Goldsmith notices that Mattie is employed "by the most successful unmarried woman in the novel: an autonomous, sexually self-determining, woman professional" (263), the actress Madame Sylvio; however, as the working environment is depicted "as degrading," with "Mattie's departure from that environment [...] Fauset reestablishes a patriarchal order dominated by aspirational African American men" (Goldsmith 263). Moreover, Mattie and Junius's performative gendered dynamic is further stressed in Fauset's "depiction of Mattie's decline and eventual death" (Goldsmith 264). Junius gets sick while waiting for Mattie outside of the hospital when she faints, and as he eventually develops pneumonia, Junius dies in the role of Mattie's protector in a performance of manly strength. Consequently, Mattie, letting herself get sick "to follow him" (Fauset 43), dies performing feminine frailty, evoking the "nineteenth-century trope of the beautiful death" (Goldsmith 265). Particularly, Fauset frames Mattie in the "old Morris chair," where she "stages her impending demise," and Virginia "ventriloquizes her father," revealing "how thoroughly the family assimilated the patriarchal value of feminine frailty" (Goldsmith 265).⁸ As the author's choice of Europeanized aesthetics in the use of the English-made Morris chair is symbolic "of the Murrays' culturally enriching aspirations, coexisting with their deep cultural roots" (Moore 124), one could argue that the choice for a

⁸ Explaining the concept of Beautiful Death, Elizabeth Bronfen quotes Bram Dijkstra's exploration of the "dangerous fantasies" of nineteenth-century culture in which a "woman in a state of sickness unto death" became an "icon of virtuous femininity." [B. Dijkstra, *Idols of Perversity. Fantasies of Feminine Evil in Fin-de Siècle Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986, p.24 as quoted in Bronfen 59]

“Europeanized aesthetic” for the house on Opal Street coincides with the “Europeanized aesthetic” of Victorian gender performativity assimilated in the Murray’s familiar relations; the English-made Morris chair is, in fact, the chair where Mattie tells Virginia she wants to let herself die after Junius’s funeral — “do you think I can make myself ill enough to follow him soon?” (Fauset 43). Notably, then, the English-made chair in which Mattie is sitting represents the English-made aestheticism she is fulfilling — as the Victorian feminine and the beautiful death are not only European but English. Showing her daughters the employment of Whiteness and femininity, Mattie teaches them that if whiteness is an asset, then so is femininity.

Fauset’s “fiction reveals just how ‘mid-Victorian’ American culture in the early twentieth century still was” (Goldsmith 274), mainly through Mattie being the author’s “facetious image of a condescending Victorian depiction of women as helpless and yet as moral guide and companion, the domestic maternal ideal” (Moore 108). Notably, “Fauset anchors the problems of her contemporary New Negro Women in the previous generation’s gender ideals as well as in the racial ideologies and conflicts with which her characters must contend” (Goldsmith 262). Through the Victorian characterization of Mattie’s mothering, Fauset shows how the New Negro Woman, embodied both by Angela and by Virginia, is heavily influenced by the long-nineteenth-century. Where the Harlem Renaissance *intelligentsia* was arguing for a sharp break from the “Old Negro,” Fauset stresses how short the distance between the Old and the New actually was.

2.4 The Marriage Market

The title, *Plum Bun*, is taken from a nursery rhyme “to market, to market.”⁹ The market that Fauset alludes to, with the title and sections of the novel, is the marriage market. du Cille notes that “[i]f *Pride and Prejudice* suggests the degree to which the gentry of Jane Austen’s era was preoccupied with money and marriage,” novels like Fauset’s “suggest the extent to which black Americans have been similarly concerned with the social, economic, and erotic arrangement” of marriage (143). Moving to New York, Angela “believes she can escape her racialized body because her skin is white, [but] she is unaware of being also marked as

⁹ The nursery rhyme, as quoted by McDowell goes, “To Market, To Market, / To Buy a Plum Bun; / Home again, Home again, / Market is done.” (“Afterword” 292)

‘other’ because she is a woman” (McLendon 41); however, she eventually becomes aware of these social differences – “[i]f I were a man [...] I could be president” (Fauset 61). As Angela learns to “discern that both whiteness and masculinity are external markers of privilege” (Phipps 234), she realizes that it would “be better to marry... a white man” (Fauset 62); the already underlying theme of marriage becomes more evident, as Angela identifies it with clarity as the means through which to achieve money, power, and status. The power she desires, Angela “knows, is related to economics” (Foreman 654); therefore, for her, marriage becomes merely a socioeconomic transaction, one through which “all that richness, all that fullness of life which she so ardently craved would be doubly hers” (Fauset 62). As she realizes this, Angela enters the marriage market; in it, the author “invert[s] the hierarchy: Angela would capture, in the form of a man, the sign of the ‘power and protection’ she wishes to possess” (Foreman 654); having Angela realize that “as a white woman she needs ‘protection and power’ of a white man in order to ensure that she can maintain that freedom [she has while passing]” (Foreman 654), Fauset explores the issue of gender power. In a patriarchal society, gender is intrinsic and decisive, and Angela develops the false belief that she can bypass this issue by marrying somebody who would open her “the doors to beauty” (Fauset 102) through money and status. When Angela finds herself *on* the market, she finds the currency is sexuality; in fact, the “entire novel can be read as an extended sexual metaphor that raises critical questions about the relationship between power and passion, dollars and desire” (duCille 100). Angela, however, enters the market with no sexual or romantic intentions, as she believes that by “purchasing” a husband, she will be able to acquire his privileges. Teaching gender performance to her daughters, Mattie teaches Angela to make of femininity an instrument; while Mattie desires a protective masculine figure that she finds in Junius and passes this desire to Virginia, Angela desires protection through money and status and only incidentally through a man.

As she starts her quest to find a “white spouse,” Angela learns from her White friends that “courting with a powerful man is nothing more than a game” (Harrell 195). Living in Bohemian Manhattan, Angela “observes the constricted ambitions of the young white women” she meets and “the compromises that define their personal lives” (Wall, “Histories” 70). Many women cross Angela’s path, and through them, the author shows the variety of approaches to gender issues: through Rachel Salting, Angela’s neighbor, Fauset demonstrates “that moving to the city does not free women from the psychic effects or force of dominant norms” (Rottenberg 276), but through characters like Paulette Lister she shows awareness of

gender performance and gender norms, as in the novel she is the most obvious portrayal of the New Woman; watching Paulette declare boldly that “[t]here is a great deal of the man about me. I’ve learned that a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants,” Angela is astonished and observes, “She had never seen a woman more completely at ease, more assuredly mistress of herself and of her fate” (Fauset 74). Martha Burden, a student at Cooper Union, is another crucial woman in Angela's exploration of life in the city; when she asks Martha for advice on men, Martha laughs at Angela's naivety, so rare in what she calls “Flapperdom” (Fauset 104). As freedom, bodily autonomy, and sexual liberation are keywords for the figure of the flapper, the use of the word foreshadows Angela's choices later in the novel, when she will start an extramarital sexual relationship. Martha's laugh turns bitter when she explains to Angela that to win the “courtship game,” women need to withhold their affection, not reveal their cards; like “passing,” courting is also a game of inauthenticity. Martha herself is married and unhappily adds, “Think of loving and never, never being able to show it until you're asked for it; think of living a game every hour of your life!” (Fauset 105). Angela thinks of her mother, who so openly loved her father, and reflects on how different her future will be by playing these games of inauthenticity; however, these sexual and romantic didactics reinforce her mother's teachings “regarding her body as a commodity because of its whiteness,” as she learns from “her white friends [...] that her body is also a commodity because of sex” (McLendon 41-42).

Roger Fielding, whom Angela meets at a dinner at Martha's, is her white and rich man-to-marry of choice. She starts to date Roger as Angèle and is giddy with the knowledge of her swindling, not feeling any remorse as she thinks “stolen waters are the sweetest” (Fauset 88). Harnessing her femininity to win the dating game, she is proud of her deceitfulness and satisfied with the outcomes – “Here I am having everything that a girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance” (Fauset 88). However, as Roger kisses her, she is left feeling “thrilled [and] excited” but also “vaguely displeased” (Fauset 89); her deceitful actions, Angela realizes, come with real-life consequences. If between him and Angela, there are “no touching points for their minds,” Roger seems to be Angèle's perfect fit as he is “a boy who gets everything he wants,” and “he [knows] nothing of life except what [is] pleasurable” (Fauset 91-92). Although she does not love him, she pushes the fact aside as not a deciding factor in choosing him as a husband; after all, for her marriage is a socioeconomic transaction, and “most women *learned* to love their husbands” (*emphasis added*, Fauset 93). Things complicate between them when Roger

is aggressively racist towards a group of Black patrons in a restaurant; triumphantly walking back to their table, he asks Angèle, “I could tell [...] that you had no time for darkies. I’ll bet you’d never been that near to one before in your life, had you?” (Fauset 95). Although shaken by the episode, Angela keeps seeing him – “[d]oubtless later on she could manage his prejudices” (Fauset 100) – believing he will eventually propose. However, Roger does not propose, quite the opposite, “he ask[s] everything else” (Fauset 120): he proposes to her a life as his mistress, and Angela’s fantasy of her future as Mrs. Fielding shatters, “her sudden set-to with the realities of the society in which she had been moving, bewildered and frightened her” (Fauset 135). Flapperdom is too complicated a kingdom for Angela, and, ironically, she “tries to ‘buy’ in a society that only allows her to ‘sell’” (McDowell, “Afterword” 294). Nevertheless, Angèle and Roger keep seeing each other, and what should have been a point of rupture between them seems a new start: a “singularly sweet and curious intimacy” (141) slowly grows between them, and she ends up not accepting his proposal, but sleeping with him regardless, helpless to her feelings — she is lonely, and Roger and his pleasures are “an anchor for her frail, insecure bark of life” (Fauset 142). Angela seemingly experiences a natural sexual awakening, Fauset uses a metaphor from nature to describe her new sexual feelings, “a flower turning to the sun” (148), however, their sexual relationship, “is a replay of the racial prehistory of concubinage and sexual exploitation” (McDowell, “Afterword” 294). The socioeconomic contract Angela was looking for when she entered the market is farther away than ever.

When Angela and Roger end their relationship, “his tone [is] unbelievably insulting” (169):

She could only stare at him, his words echoing in her ears: ‘You knew perfectly well what you were letting yourself in for.’ The phrase had the quality of a cosmic echo; perhaps men had been saying it to women since the beginning of time. Doubtless their biblical equivalent were the last words uttered by Abraham to Hagar before she fared forth into the wilderness. (Fauset 170)

This episode leaves her burnt, and she reverts to the teachings she had from the community of Opal Street, abandoning the courtship game: if Whiteness and femininity are commodifiable, femininity is not as much of a valuable asset. She truly never escapes the “patriarchal [...] almost biblical” (Fauset 11) system she was living in Philadelphia; “the power of patriarchy is exhibited by its timelessness, alluded to in this reference to the Bible” (McLendon 46) in the goodbye scene with Roger, and in stern morality and religiousness of her father.

Alone, Angela thinks back to Anthony Cross, another friend from Cooper Union, and the afternoon in Van Cortlandt Park when he had admitted being fond of her; in the park, he had asked how much she was willing to sacrifice for the sake of love, and surprised, Angela had pondered the question and thought of her mother — the washdays, the tiredness, the “little, dark, shabby house, of the made-over dresses and the turned coats” (Fauset 102). Unable to see her mother's happiness, she had rejected him, thinking, “I’m not going to live that kind of life” (Fauset 103). However, in the new light of the reality of her relationship with Roger and “Rachel Salting’s notion of love and self-sacrifices” (165), she thinks of Anthony and the park “sacred” (Fauset 108) to him. Having acquired experience in the market, Angela sees “the conventions, the rules that govern life [...] everything was for men, but even the slightest privilege was to be denied to a woman unless the man chose to grant it” (Fauset 168). With this new fundamental understanding, Roger becomes for Angela, “the symbol of all that was most futile” (178), and Angèle exits the market. Through “the gaze of a mature protagonist who has crossed the line of female sexual propriety and discovered through that transgression and its price her own subjectivity, Fauset teases out the individual and political potentials of New Womanhood” (Tomlinson 96).

Having Mattie conclude the fairytales she reads to her daughters with “[a]nd they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me” (Fauset 20), Fauset “focuses on the powerful role fairy tales play in conditioning women to idealize marriage and romantic love” (McDowell, “Afterword” 292). Using these elements to satirize the connection between gendered expectations and fairy tales, the author builds a “fairy tale’s ironic inversion” (McLendon 29). The cultural translation of the fairytale prince rescuing the princess falls for Virginia in a “homey and comfortable” (Fauset 274) Black man and for Angela in the “dominant cultural fantasy in which women are rescued by wealthy men and secondarily share their power” (McDowell, “Afterword” 293). Using elements associated with childhood, fairy tales, and nursery rhymes, Fauset emphasizes how Angela’s unattainable fantasies are rooted in her parent’s teachings; it is only through the actual experience of the world that Angela is disillusioned and becomes aware of herself as a New Negro Woman in America. Melting together the teachings of her parent’s fairytale-like love story and her mother’s involuntary teachings on Whiteness, Angela daydreams, fantasizes, and romanticizes over and over. Seeing “her life rounding out like a fairytale” (Fauset 94) as she plans, Angela becomes more and more determined to “beg, borrow, or steal for herself the ‘happily ever after’ fantasy marriage of which fairy tales are made” (duCille 101). By the end of the novel,

the tiny house on Opal Street is again a magical place, “full of secrets, of knowledge of joy,” and she believes “that entering the house once more [...] would be a complete panacea” (Fauset 272), healing her suffering. At the end of the novel, Paris restores in Angela “her old sense of joy in living for living’s sake” (Fauset 281), echoing Aestheticism’s *art for art’s sake*, and the narration ends in fairytale fashion, with everything magically resolved, and Prince Charming finally saving his princess. While she cannot enter the house on Opal Street and be healed, it will be “Anthony’s reappearance [that] saves her from malaise” (Phipps 237), revealing that it is not her parents' fairytale anymore but hers and Anthony’s, the new generation.

Upon entering the marriage market, Angela believes that marrying a white-and-rich man would open for her “the doors to beauty” (Fauset 102); however, by the novel's end, Angela believes, like the Harlemite writer W. E. B. Du Bois,¹⁰ “in the irreducible value of a ‘feminine’ idea of beauty” and she “connects [it] to materialistic goals: power, status, wealth, and freedom” (Phipps 231). For Angela, femininity is a currency and a commodity that, in a vicious cycle, needs to be reaffirmed in commodities and materiality. Du Bois “implies the presence of morality in beauty and aesthetics” (Moore 96), and this is what Angela discovers in what she naively believes to be only honest research for beauty and aestheticism – in the form of wealth and social status. As she learns from her experiences in New York, Angela’s search for beauty stops being attached to commodities and social status and becomes her art, her love for Virginia, and her love for Anthony, but most importantly, her love for Blackness, colored people, and her community. In the novel the summit of Black Beauty is Van Meier, a Black leader, and his “presence and appearance tap immediately into Angela’s love of beauty” (Phipps 236); going to his lecture, Angela realizes “she had never heard its equal for beauty, for resonance, for culture” (Fauset 160). Van Meier, “a great coloured American, a *littérateur*, a fearless and dauntless apostle of the rights of man” (Fauset 153-154), it is agreed among critics, is a fictional representation of Du Bois. Therefore, as a fictional rendition of a Harlem Renaissance artist, although at first denying her Blackness, Angela inherits, as Fauset and her contemporaries, the research for Beauty, which she only understands in the end, is inherently morally charged.

¹⁰ see Du Bois, W. E. B. “The Damnation Of Women.”

2.5 Angèle: Authenticity in Angela's Path to Emancipation

“Coloured! Of course I never told you I was coloured! Why should I?” (Fauset 51)

Mary Hastings is a girl Angela befriends in school, and she is also the first direct encounter Angela has with the consequences of passing: in high school, Angela is lonely and alienated from her childhood friends until Mary, a new girl, sits with her at lunch and mindlessly becomes her friend. However, the idyll is quickly shattered when a schoolmate reveals to Mary that Angela is colored; Mary is astonished by the revelation and, with an “accusing face” and “accusing voice,” says, “Coloured! Angela, you never told me you were coloured!” (Fauset 25). Humiliated and hurt, Angela's answer to Mary's accusation is very telling of her understanding of passing and foreshadows what would be her reasoning for her future choices: “Tell you I was coloured! Why of course I never told you I was coloured! Why should I?” (Fauset 29). Angela's hurt does not cover her bewilderment, and she does not understand why she should have given up that information voluntarily. This episode has her, for the first time, ponder between morality and authenticity: “Which was the more important, a patent insistence on the fact of colour or an acceptance of the good things of life which could come to you in America if either you were not coloured or the fact of your racial connections was not made known” (Fauset 31). Perhaps in her friendship with Mary Hastings, Angela starts to forge her identity as Angèle.

Inauthenticity, in the form of Angèle Mory, Angela's White-self, is her *passe-partout* to the life she desires: away from ostracization and into a life of beauty. As they grow, Angela and Virginia move from being witnesses to the rhetoric of the race issue to discussing it with their friends; as they discuss the possibilities for Black people and racial responsibility, Angela openly retorts that she does not think that “being coloured in America is a beautiful thing,” in fact, she adds, “it's nothing short of a curse” (Fauset 37). To her, an artist who looks for beauty, color is a heavy, *visible* weight one cannot get rid of...unless one can pass. The solution to be free of the race issue and to be “happy simply, naturally” (Fauset 37) is to pass as white. As her sister and their friends engage in discussions on the importance of being examples of *worthiness* for the race, Angela stays out of the discourse, establishing her own goals and aspirations as more important than uplifting the race, and positioning herself outside of racial responsibility.

Angela starts studying at the Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts, where she passes as White, but when her instructor finds out she is colored, the same frustrating scene repeats, “‘But, Miss Murray, you never told me you were coloured.’ She felt as though she were rehearsing a well-known part in a play. ‘Coloured! Of course I never told you I was coloured! Why should I?’” (Fauset 51). The moments she describes as being a “part in a play” are the first moments of authenticity she has with the people these interactions happen with; although she is far away from understanding the crux of the problem, Angela starts to question whether there is “something inherently wrong with ‘passing’” (Fauset 51). As Angela’s desires are kept locked away behind the pearly gates of Whiteness, what Angela “voices is an American semiotics of power; whiteness, she says herself, is only a sign, a ‘badge’” (Foreman 653). The realization that she needs to leave Philadelphia comes after an incident that occurs with Matthew Henson¹¹ when his darker color impedes them from entering the cinema; in order to “safely” pass, she needs to be away from the Black people she knows so as not to be associated with them — “For Angela, the act of rewriting her narrative cannot be severed from the moving and pertinent advantages of doing so” (Harrell 195). Although she understands there is no intrinsic value in Whiteness, Angela becomes “sick of seeing what [she] want[s] dangled up in front of [her] eyes” (54). Angela refuses to accept being defined by her color and the discrimination that comes with it, as she understands that “it isn’t being coloured that makes the difference, it’s letting it be known” (Fauset 55), emphasizing the paradox of racist America.

As she is convinced that her racial relations will impede her emancipation, Angela moves to New York City, “burn[s] her bridges behind her” (Fauset 58), and lives as Angèle Mory, a young, White aspiring artist, an identity that she believes “will maximize her positive life experiences” (Phipps 233). The anonymity of the city, Angela believes, will let her pass undisturbed, making her “a quintessentially urban figure” (Rottenberg 271). Now enrolled at Cooper Union, as an outsider with an “inner secret knowledge” (Fauset 66), Angela – Angèle – observes the colored population of New York: downtown Manhattan, she sees “few coloured people,” different from those she had known in Philadelphia, and when she visits Harlem, she is amazed “[s]he had never seen coloured life so thick, so varied, so complete” (Fauset 68). The visit to Harlem throws Angela into a vivid, alive, and breathing picture of the possibilities for Black people in New York, what she could have had, or what she could have, if only she chose to be her authentic self – in her aesthetic terms of beauty she reflects,

¹¹ “[W]hom Fauset proudly names after the first black man to reach the North Pole” (Moore 113).

“[n]owhere down town did she feel like this. Oh, all this was fuller, richer, not finer but richer with the difference in quality that there is between velvet and silk” (Fauset 69); despite that, Angela stubbornly goes “back to the New York which she knew” (68), away from the “conversations, grave and gallant and gay, of these people whose blood she shared but whose *disabilities* by all lucky fluke she had been able to avoid” (*emphasis added*, Fauset 245). Life as Angèle, with new friends in a new city, makes her giddy; however, as time goes on “[r]epeatedly Angela, who believed that ‘artists were noted for their broad-mindedness,’¹² is disillusioned,” as Miss Powell, the only “visibly black student,” is “alienated by and from her peers; the honorific ‘Miss’ by which she is always addressed serves chiefly to mark her distance from the group” (Wall, “Histories” 69). While Angela chooses New York “to take advantage of the broad-mindedness and opportunity she thinks the city will provide” (Rottenberg 272), she does not take into consideration her own new racial status; as a White person, she needs to comply with social expectations and ostracize her colored peers.

When Virginia comes to New York, Angela commits the ultimate betrayal: forsakes her sister in order not to reveal herself to Roger Fielding. Aggravated with guilt, finally, Angela understands she is branding a double-edged sword. However, she seems to think that the hurt that will come from the decision to pass to even associate with strongly prejudiced people, will all be worth it in the end: the riches, power, and happiness she is able to acquire performing whiteness will be enough to make up for that hurt, to heal those wounds. She tries to excuse her actions with promises to amend and use her future powers – status and wealth – to help uplift the race; she plans her expiation, imagining “a future moment when she will return to some version of her original community, bringing with her tools she can use for social amelioration” (Phipps 235). The episode with Virginia in Penn Station has Angela realize, perhaps for the first time, how immoral and hurtful her choices are and what real consequences they come with; if she is “forever passing,” she also has to leave Blackness behind for good. But Angela does not seem able to commit to it and eradicate her roots; she loves her sister, and she loves Black people, and not acting accordingly makes “her heart sick” (95). Although “sick” Angela stands on the “wrong” side of the color line – where she is the one discriminating. As to Angela, happiness comes in a freedom that she cannot reach being Black, she is bound to be sick in the racist society she is part of, and she must make a choice on which side of the color line to stand on. As Virginia angrily asks the question that

¹² See Fauset, 44, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*. United Kingdom, Beacon Press, 2022.

Angela has been running her life as Angèle on – “If you can get more out of [life] by being white [...] why, why shouldn’t you?” (124) – Angela wishes “not so much that she had never left Jinny and the security of their common home-life, as that the necessity for it had never arisen” (Fauset 165). Her dreams of a life without racial labels are impossible in racist America, and as her ambitious drive runs her life decisions, it makes it necessary for her to deny her Blackness.

Angela’s self-defined identity, Angèle Mory, cannot form meaningful relationships or find a community, permeating the novel with “ennui and loneliness” (Jerkins, XI). Obstinate, Angela is still committed to reaching her goals, however, after her relationship with Roger ends, Angela is alone; without real friends, not close to her sister, and without a wealthy future husband, Angela falls into poverty — “Gradually the triumphant vividness so characteristic of Angèle Mory left her” (Fauset 173). Alone in the city she was convinced would emancipate her and make her happy, Angela ponders, “Jinny had changed her life and been successful. Angela had changed hers and had found pain and unhappiness. Where did the fault lie? Not, certainly, in her determination to pass from one race to another” (Fauset 180). Angela thinks she is not defined by her race, but she forgets that race is a factor in her past, her growth, her youth, and her family; making the executive decision to live as a White person, she cuts out a big part of herself and has to actively hide another – therefore, her existence is inauthentic. Being so lonely, Angela thinks of asking her sister for forgiveness and starting a new life in New York with her, but she is not ready to drop her act as Angèle, “as for colour when it seemed best to be coloured she would be coloured; when it was best to be white she would be that” (Fauset 188). Angela does not yet understand, that is her rejection of authenticity keeping her from what she wants – happiness; she is self-serving in calculating her choices but not realistic: she cannot enjoy the privileges of Whiteness while in the comfortable net of Blackness.

When Angela thinks of marriage again, she is stripped of her ambition for wealth, power, and status, and Anthony Cross, who had only his bare heart to offer, has all she needs. As she thinks, “it would be fun, fun to begin at the beginning, to save and scrape and mend” (196), the idea of that pure, *disinterested* love brings her back to her life on Opal Street: “For a moment she was home again [...] they were at the table, her pretty mother, her father with his fine, black face” (Fauset 196-197). Thinking back to her father has her reflecting on color; ‘what was she to do now?’ If her love with Anthony was pure and sincere, it had to be honest, and authentic. While Angela starts to understand the importance of authenticity, she does not

yet understand the importance of racial pride; she thinks of race as a personal matter and not as a political matter; the racial pride of the Harlem community and of her hometown friends is not a priority; her priority is herself and her “right to live and be happy” (Fauset 197). She is not yet willing to sacrifice her white life *for the race*.

So, Angela tries to start a relationship with Anthony; she speaks to him with honesty: “I love you [...] I think you love me” (Fauset 211). However, trying to walk away from her, Anthony admits to being colored, as his racial identity is “too *vital*, too important” (*emphasis added*, Fauset 217); this honest admission has Angela daydream about their future together, and romanticize even renouncing passing: “she would label herself, if he asked for it; she would tell every member of her little coterie of white friends about her mixed blood” (Fauset 220). Her daydreaming is crushed as a narrative twist breaks this not-yet-born relationship; when she confesses she is colored, Anthony confesses back that he is engaged; the truth is revealed: Anthony is engaged to Virginia. Angela sets on her decision immediately, “I took her sister away from her; I won’t take her lover. Kiss me good-bye, Anthony” (Fauset 228), and renounces her dreams of a life with him.

Since *Plum Bun* is a critique on passing and a parody of sexual morality, Angela is not biblically punished for the extramarital sex she engages in, but she is punished for forsaking her race and obstinately passing: karmically by rejecting both Anthony and Virginia and choosing whiteness, she pushes them in each other's arms; as the plot unravels it is more and more evident, that her stubborn desire to be content in whiteness pushes her away from happiness. Works like *Plum Bun* are written “to protest or disclaim the willingness of some blacks to ‘disconnect’ themselves from any racial pride or struggle” (Watson 18). The cosmic punishment is even more evident when Virginia confesses, “I always wanted to marry Matthew!” (Fauset 237). As the irony of the facts strikes her, finally, Angela realizes that authenticity and honesty are key factors to emancipate herself while forming meaningful relationships and reaching happiness.

After Martha Burden brings Angela to Van Meier’s lecture, Angela grows, slow and steady, a sense of racial pride: “the peculiarly brutal terms which white America effects in the discussion of this problem made her blood boil,” and makes her wonder, “[w]ould it be worth while to throw away the benefits of casual whiteness in America when no great issue was at stake?” (Fauset 250). As Angela’s racial conscience develops, she becomes less and less amenable and tolerant to these shows of institutionalized racism, and the boiling rage erupts

with the Miss Powell incident: both Angela and Miss Powell, having won an art contest, are set to leave for France, but Miss Powell's prize is revoked because she is Black.¹³ This unfortunate situation triggers in Angela an understanding of the importance of racial responsibility, and asks herself, "[j]ust what is or is not ethical in this matter of colour?" (254). Slowly understanding the importance of color in her own identity, Angela wishes for herself a new life in Europe, where, this time, she would not be escaping her Blackness, but American racism, the discrimination that had her want to flee her Blackness to begin with. Angela desires to be free of being unapologetically Black without having to face backlash, without having to lose what – the privileges, the advantages – she so desperately clings to with her White persona, Angèle. Angela's issue "is no longer one of aesthetics and the juxtaposition of pain and pleasure, but rather one of morality" (Moore 112); by consciously "choosing" Whiteness, she stands on the side of the oppressor and by not speaking up she is complicit in the oppressing. Angela has a "moral awakening" (Moore 113); however, it is essential to notice that Angela has two different *racial* awakenings: the first when she realizes that her mother ignoring her father and sister meant she could virtually do the same, and the second when she realizes that she cannot express racial pride without revealing her identity; these two episodes, which prod at her racial awareness, trigger the start and the end of the passing-plot. Sacrificing her racial identity for a *free-er* existence in the public space seemed like a good bargain for Angela at the start of the novel; however, the same injustices that pushed her away from a life as a Black woman are what is gonna push her to drop the facade and admit her color, in the name of racial solidarity. In the cruel scene in Miss Powell's room, Angela, motivated by racial consciousness, admits being colored, and to the White journalists' shock, she retorts, laughing at the journalist, "Do you really think that being coloured is as awful as all that?" (Fauset 261). She finally has an answer to "Why should I?". She now understands the importance of standing up for the race in the face of the racism of 1920s America, and she feels "relief and contentment" when she tells what happened to Virginia, who cries at having her "sister back again" (Fauset 263). Post-revelation, Angela sends her friends cutouts of the articles from the day at Miss Powell's; the title she sends as a farcical obituary is "Socially Ambitious Negress Confesses to Long Haux" (265), and, as she declares, "I am on the coloured side" (Fauset 280), Angèle is dead.

¹³ Miss Powell's story is inspired by a real episode: Harlem Renaissance sculptur Augusta Savage was revoked her scholarship from Fontainebleau in 1923.

As Angèle's time ends, Angela's body is renewed in a "postpassing narrative" (Wald as quoted in Harrell 196), and with her desire to go back to Philadelphia one "last" time before leaving the US, "Fauset begins to restore [Angela] to her nonpassing and natural body and the black Philadelphia community" (Moore 107). The author, in fact, only "begins" to restore Angela as a Black body, as she is mistaken for White and, because of that, mistreated in her old neighborhood; however, it is metaphorically the Black Philadelphia community that re-embraces her, through Matthew Henson, emphasizing how it was not leaving that was wrong, but burning "her bridges behind her" (Fauset 58). In the end, "the only solid foundation in her life is her identity as a black woman, which continues to frame her sense of autonomy" (Phipps 235), and having Angela give up passing, "Fauset is successful in moving Angela away from the perception of the 'tragic mulatto' and frees her from her mental slavery and racial entrapment" (Harrell 207). Nonetheless, to ultimately escape racial entrapment, Fauset arranges Angela Murray's happy ending away from American racism in Europe, restoring her colored body. As she lives authentically as a New Negro Woman, although not in the United States, Angela is rewarded with her happy ending, a life of love, art, and racial freedom.

CHAPTER THREE

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*

3.1 The Novel

Quicksand (1928), Nella Larsen's first novel, tells the story of Helga Crane: a child of miscegenation. Born from a white mother and Black father, Helga is a "mulatto," as confirmed in the "novel's epigraph from Langston Hughes's poem 'Cross,' which treats the problem of racial dualism" (McDowell, "Introduction" XVII), and in her own self-definition of a "despised mulatto" (Larsen 18). Nella Larsen's "particular use of the mulatto figure allow[s] her protagonist to be both inside and outside contemporary race issues" (Carby 171), allowing her to comment on "issues of marginality and cultural dualism" (Wall, "Passing" 88). In particular, *Quicksand* dramatizes the "personal odyssey of an upper-class mulatto woman[,] unveil[ing] the tortured search for identity among the racial disinherited" (Tate, "Desire and Death" 238). Nella Larsen's novels are considered "psychic dilemmas" that resemble the "tragic mulattoes of literary convention" and become "means through which the author demonstrates the psychological costs of racism and sexism" (Wall, "Passing" 88-9). In *Quicksand*, Larsen "brilliantly dramatizes the ways in which social forces impinge upon the individual psyche" (Monda 37); she is "quite specific in depicting the mechanism of Helga's sexual psychology," as she was "well versed in the popularized Freud of New York in the twenties" (Brickhouse 538): through the novel Helga's behavior is "symptomatic" of an "abandonment neurosis" (Tate, "Desire and Death" 244), she suffers "attack[s] of nerves" (17) and her nerves are often "strained" or "fried" (Larsen 111).

Quicksand follows Helga Crane's search for self-realization and satisfaction, virtually, her search for identity. As Du Bois reads it, *Quicksand* depicts a "typical [...] new honest, young fighting Negro woman – the one whom 'race' sits negligibly and Life is always first and its wandering path is but darkened, not obliterated, by the shadow of the Veil" (DuBois, "Two Novels" 202). However, by the end of the novel, the "once vivacious woman exists only as an illusion in the memories, fantasies and dreams of the despondent wife" (Tate, "Desire and Death" 234). When the narration ends, Helga is a shell of herself, completely annihilated, transformed from "[a] slight girl of twenty-two years" (2) into "Pore Mis' Green" (Larsen 126). Helga lives the push and pull of the contradicting forces of New Negro-hood:

on the one hand, the new mobility of the Black body; on the other, the positive resignification of the race, rooted in the values of the American White middle-class of the nineteenth century, inspired in turn by Victorian morals.

In the novel, Helga “struggles to define and declare her sexual self in the face of iconographies that objectify, exoticize, and ‘ladify,’ and otherwise oppress her” (duCille 94). Helga’s struggle with identity resides in the issue of female sexuality and female sexual identity. By succumbing to the societal pressure to deny and even refuse to acknowledge her sexual desires as these are considered immoral, Helga feels pulled at the seams between her sexual desires and her education as a “lady,” and oscillates between the refusal of this title and the perpetuation of the bourgeois definition of respectability; as the pretense of respectability is what would make her fit for Black bourgeoisie, the result is a feeling of alienation from society. Helga wears something toned down when she looks for jobs but hates the Naxos’s rhetoric of ‘proper dressing,’ rejecting it once again before leaving Harlem when she wears a “too *décolleté*, and too *outré*” dress (Larsen 56); in the text, the clothes serve “as signifiers of both simmering sexuality and genteel femininity” (duCille 15). To make up for this feeling of alienation, Helga moves impatiently from place to place; in that sense, *Quicksand* “announced a certain arrival of the mobile black body” (Moore 89). Helga’s movement across the Atlantic “to seek new freedoms and opportunities” in Copenhagen is, however, “haunted by an earlier passage, the middle passage, which signals the nonliberatory forces behind circulation and movement,” making mobility not *a priori* a movement that “represents liberation” (Scheper 682). Although free to the possibilities of mobility, Helga is still forced into racist stereotypes and haunted by her racial history. In Helga’s escape to Denmark, Larsen both criticizes “the process of objectification and eroticization” (Barnett 595) and the naivety perpetuated by her contemporaries of a European escape; in fact, Helga’s “movements follow the larger demographic and social patterns of the ‘Great Migration’ of African Americans to Northern cities from the rural South, as well as the rich cultural and social trans-Atlantic circulations between Harlem and Europe in the 1920s” (Scheper 692). Therefore, in *Quicksand*, Larsen argues that existing in a Black body makes inescapable the racist sexualization and exoticization in the White gaze and the strict overruling and controlling of Black women’s bodies in the Black bourgeoisie — the uplifting crowds. The “novel, like its protagonist, would seem to want two lives as well: as female sexual confession and novel of racial uplift” (McDowell, “Introduction” XVII); virtually then, the novel shows how intertwined race, class, and sexuality are — “Larsen’s

representation of both race and class are structured through a prism of black female sexuality” (Carby 173-4). Thus, Larsen’s Helga Crane is written to try to resolve the contradictions of existence in a cultural time and space where “black female sexuality” is “coded by racist imagination in the impossible space both of hyper sexuality and of not-woman” (Scheper 686); trying to work out the existence of this woman “within the limiting framework of a U.S. cultural imaginary of race” (Scheper 686) results in impossibility. The solution to this conundrum seems to be the expression of sexuality within the sanction of marriage; however, Helga’s ending is a tragic death, which seems to argue further the impossibility of such expression being happy, natural, and inconsequential. Thus, this chapter follows the protagonist’s attempt to navigate New Negro Womanhood in America and the negotiation of her identity and body between the contrasting pulls of the ideal of respectability and the reality of her sexual desire. In this chapter, I will argue the impossibility of Helga’s existence as a sexual being and a New Negro Woman in Jim Crow America as she tragically dies at the end of the novel.

Larsen’s novel investigates the complexities of identity and sexuality in a racist and sexist society, as she sees the perpetuation of the conflict “lady/Jezebel or virgin/whore” in “the network of social institutions – education, marriage, and religion, among the most prominent – all interacting with each other to strangle and control the sexual expression of women” (McDowell, “Introduction” XXXI). Helga attempts to “fashion a sense of self” that is “free both of suffocating restrictions of ladyhood and fantasies of the exotic female Other” (Wall, “Passing” 89); however, she fails, as the “tragedy of these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition” (Wall, “Passing” 89). As Helga is destined to fail and ends up trapped “in a victimizing cycle of unwanted pregnancies,” Larsen purposefully constructs her novel “against the familiar script of the race heroine and the ideal of uplift” (Fabi 104-5). Ultimately, Helga’s story is bound to tragedy and social submission until her inevitable death: her happiness and survival are impossible.

3.2 The Impossibility of Sexual Expression Outside of Marriage

Jacquelyn McLendon reports that in a letter to a friend, Larsen described *Quicksand* as “an awful truth” (71).¹⁴ In the novel, Helga tries to resist the societal forces that oppress her;

¹⁴ The friend mentioned is Carl Van Vetchen, writer and photographer; he was one of the patrons of the Harlem Renaissance, and he is famously known for *Nigger Heaven* (1926).

however, she is “ultimately trapped within those constructions” because Larsen “is committed to telling [that] ‘awful truth’” (McLendon 93). Helga struggles against the impositions of defined ideologies of Blackness and womanhood; the “difference” that haunts her all throughout the novel and that impedes her happiness is “her refusal to accept these definitions even in the face of her inability to define alternatives” (Wall, “Passing” 97). Narrating Helga’s struggle against societal conventions, the novel “explores the choices open to educated and middle-class black women in Western society” (Wall, “Passing” 96). However, these “choices” are barely choices at all, since as shown in the novel’s narrative, Helga encounters oppressive forces in all her movements. Even on the actual means of transportation through one destination and the other, she is oppressed by the policies of Black uplift, sexualized, or exoticized. For instance, on the train from Naxos to Chicago, she is allowed to move coaches (from the Jim Crow car to a white car) when the conductor “subject[s] her to a keen, appraising look” (Larsen 25);¹⁵ on the train from Chicago to New York, she is scolded and criticized for being truthful about her parentage, as these stories of miscegenation “do not exist” (Larsen 39), and on the boat to Copenhagen, she is an exotic novelty for the Danish people onboard.

If looked at “through the prism of black female sexuality,” the tragic endings to her novels show Larsen “grappling with the conflicting demands of her racial and sexual identities and the contradictions of a black and feminine aesthetic” (McDowell, “Introduction” XII). The authors of the late nineteenth century were responding to “the myth of the black woman’s sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity,” by imitating “the ‘purity,’ the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIII). Furthermore, it is necessary to look at the endings of these novels through a feminist perspective, not as “*concessions* to the dominant ideology of romance” but as “radical and original efforts to acknowledge [the repressed] female sexual experience” (*emphasis added*, McDowell, “Introduction” XII). As Larsen’s narrative direction demonstrates, “for black women, sexual pleasure leads to the dangers of domination in marriage, repeated pregnancy, or exploitation and loss of status” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIV). Interestingly, “[in] Larsen’s view, to succumb to a preexisting paradigm means to accept one pattern, one stereotype, at the expense of growth or change, cutting oneself off from identity as a process and dialogue” (Hostetler 44). However, Larsen does not seem to depict any other choice for

¹⁵ Admittedly, she is also charged ten dollars for the change; however, that is not an option when she asks the first conductor, as he does not find her sexually appealing.

Helga: all the places she visits come with a suitor or a romantic/sexual tension of some sort, and all the possible “marriage” choices come with a set and strong compromises that would have her “succumb” inevitably to preexisting paradigms. Helga's marriage choices — Vayle in Naxos, Anderson in Harlem, Olsen in Copenhagen, and, finally, Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green — are all choices that do not allow for authentic and sincere self-expression. Although it is never explicitly romantic throughout the novel, Anderson is definitely a prospective romantic interest, especially in Helga’s sexually charged daydreaming — when she later reflects on her life, she understands “how deeply, how passionately, she must have loved him” (Larsen 128). Furthermore, James Vayle’s and Robert Anderson’s aim is to uplift the race, and this translates into their emulation of white bourgeois behaviors and hypocritical discourse of hate of white people, determinedly ostracizing those who interact with them. Thus, this belief would be reflected in their marriage as shown in the argument Vayle makes when Helga states she is not sure she wants children, and Vayle replies that “[t]he race is sterile at the top” (Larsen 103), meaning that getting married would be done with the aim of benefiting the race. Robert Anderson, one could argue, dances in the Harlem nightclub with Audrey Denney, whom the Harlemites Helga is friends with condemn for mixing with white people. However, Anderson ends up marrying Anne Grey, with whom Helga lives, and who is often “harangu[ing] on the needs and ills of the race” (Larsen 52). Thus, through this marriage, Anderson himself succumbs to the Black uplift ideology, making him “the very embodiment of sexual conflict and repression” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIX). Finally, a marriage with Olsen would have stripped Helga of her agency and turned her into a sexualized primitive object of the art and the sexual desire of the husband/artist.

Therefore, Helga’s destiny would have been ultimately one of succumbing to a “preexisting [oppressive] paradigm” (Hostetler 44). Helga’s own sexual desire could have found expression only in a legitimized encounter, and in 1920s Black America, the only legitimizing institution was marriage. Thus, because “of the traditional sexual expectations that govern a woman's life, each scenario has a romantic plot, as social convention attempts to stage Helga's marriage” (Tate, “Desire and Death” 243). Therefore, given the building tension of Helga’s sexual desire throughout the novel, Helga’s destiny was always going to be stifled by marriage, through which she would have succumbed to a societal oppressive paradigm. Ultimately, the “impossibility of resolution is the impetus behind the book; Helga’s fate is [...] a deliberately constructed failure” (Barnett 599); there could not be a resolution to Helga's existence as a sexual being – her final happiness is impossible to achieve.

Nella Larsen's attempt to narrate a Black woman's sexual desire "was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class" (McDowell, "Introduction" XVI). Therefore, the expression of this desire could only be permitted "within the context of marriage, despite the strangling effects of that choice both on her characters and on her narratives" (McDowell, "Introduction" XVI); this is the crux of Helga's conundrum. Ultimately, to express her sexuality in a way that is proper and socially acceptable, Helga ends up hurriedly getting married to a Reverend, signing her fate of death through childbirth. *Quicksand* looks to criticize "the repressive standards of sexual morality upheld by the black middle class" however, it "cannot escape those values" (McDowell, "Introduction" XXII). With its hopeless ending, the narrative "punish[es] the very values the novel implicitly affirms, to honor the very value system the text implicitly satirizes" (McDowell, "Introduction" XXX). This narrative trajectory is inevitable; throughout the novel, sexuality and sexual feelings are associated with feelings of shame, humiliation, and suffocation. Therefore, to keep Helga committed to the inescapable bourgeois values, Larsen enacts her sexual 'liberation' through the limiting boundaries of marriage, and through the biblical consequences of motherhood. What Larsen's narrative trajectory demonstrates is that Black female sexual desire cannot be expressed without it being 'punished' by social constrictions — marriage or social suicide/ostracization — and biological consequences, such as pregnancy.

3.3 Helga's Struggle With Identity and Sexual Expression

As a character, Helga Crane is a woman who does not seem able to "grasp any wholeness within herself or her society" (Hinnov 59-60); she is silent and restless, and "her 'restlessness' as both escape and search" (McLendon 74-5). Thus, Helga can be understood as a "questing figure" (McLendon 75), her quest being for an environment that allows her self-expression in a 1920s America ruled by institutionalized racism that morphs into exotic and primitive sexualization. Living among the Black elite, first in Naxos and then in Harlem, Helga attempts to make herself "right" for the Black bourgeoisie through aesthetics; these attempts to conform and belong are often due to Helga being "trapped by her stereotyped view of what 'true' black culture is" (Wall, "Passing" 113). In fact, Helga "performs her identity as a bourgeois black woman" although not fully conforming to the "Victorian mores

of the prim and proper” (Barnett 584). Her alienation thus stems from the intersection of sexuality and race.

At the start of the novel, Helga is a teacher at Naxos, a school built on racial uplift ideology. The school seems to be “an amalgam of Tuskegee Institute and Fisk University” (Tate, “Desire and Death” 244), and the name itself is an anagram of the word “Saxon” revealing the “institutional program” to “adopt white values and to create from the multiplicity of black persons a ‘machine’ of dull conformity” (Hostetler 38). In Naxos’s stultifying atmosphere, “neither innovation nor individualism” (Wall, “Passing” 96) are tolerated, and the racial uplift ideology is strictly correlated to white Victorian standards; in fact, while promoting “race consciousness” and “race pride,” in theory, the institution “seems intent on stamping out those qualities in its students, which Helga characterizes as racial” (Wall, “Passing” 96). In the school’s “strenuous rigidity of conduct” (1), “[e]nthusiasm [and] spontaneity, if not actually suppressed, were at least openly regretted as unladylike or ungentlemanly qualities” (4) and their clothing is strictly controlled as well: “a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts – ‘bright colors are vulgar’ – ‘black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people’” (Larsen 16-7). These rigid rules of conduct are an assimilation of white middle-class values that are then used to exert control over Naxos’s students and teachers, virtually policing Black bodies. Furthermore, at Naxos, the matron of the dormitory is Miss MacGooden, a woman so prudish that she deems intercourse “too repulsive” (Larsen 12) even in the sanction of marriage; already evident in the satirical name, MacGooden “epitomizes what Ann duCille terms the female ‘literary passionlessness’” and “embodies Larsen’s critique” of “virtue raised to the level of sexual ideology” of the “late nineteenth-century African American women’s literary production” and “its inscription of female self-hood within the narrow parameters of a hypostasized goodness” (Brickhouse 538). As the matron “exposes the destructiveness and absurdity of internalizations of racist ideas about black people’s sexuality” (Monda 26) by embodying sexual repression, it is interesting to notice that her role is to surveil the girls’ dormitory, virtually monitoring girls’ behavior so that their sexuality stays repressed. If Miss MacGooden works for Larsen as a critique of the literature by African-American women that denied Black women’s sexuality, Helga Crane is a critique of the “white racist constructions of black women’s allegedly inherent lasciviousness” that had “cut black women off from experiencing their legitimate sexual desires” (Monda 23).

In the Naxos politics, Larsen presents Helga's struggle "against a conventional, unimaginative society that suppresses individualism" (McLendon 93). The "dean of women" promotes "[b]lack, brown, and gray" as the best colors to wear, colors that Helga considers "ruinous to them, actually destroy[ing] the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins" (Larsen 17); trying to domesticate the too "primitive" characteristics of their students and teachers, Naxos policies mute blackness into a sad grayness, an imitation of the white bourgeoisie. This "acceptance" and promotion "of white, middle-class dress codes reveals, Helga thinks, a dangerous form of self-hate" (Monda 26-7), and this preoccupation frustrates her. As the oppressive environment, flooded with moral policing, bourgeois hypocrisy, and sexual repression, becomes too suffocating for Helga, she decides to leave. Ultimately, the criticism Helga directs at Naxos is directed at the Black bourgeoisie as a whole, acting as "a critique of the policy of racial uplift and of black intellectual leadership" (Carby 170); the Black elite, whether at Naxos or not, held itself up high on white bourgeois values. This emulation has Black communities consequentially assimilating racist ideas and discriminating politics. Although often ruled by personal desires, Helga Crane is also guided by strong racial pride and an anti-institutional sentiment. She is non-conforming by definition as she is a "despised mulatto" (Larsen 18): born out of wedlock and miscegenation, her "very bod[y] exist[s] as a paradox," and therefore, she can never experience "wholeness" (Scheper 685). Despite often being silent and perceived as an immobile decoration, she is not disciplined enough to obey white-conforming Black society, and the controlling and oppressing policies of Naxos frustrate her.

Before leaving the school, Helga meets with the principal, Dr. Robert Anderson. There, he tries to understand her reasons for leaving and attempts to convince her that her voice can be heard and taken into account at Naxos; he almost succeeds, until he tells her, "You're a lady. You have dignity and breeding" (Larsen 21). The very phrase "lacerate[s her] pride" (Larsen 21) and she reveals to him her racial identity and her 'un-proper' family status. Helga rejects the label of "lady" as it entails proper conduct and a respectable background. In Naxos, Helga is "trapped by the need to repress her sexuality, to assume the ornamental, acquiescent role of 'lady,' which not only Vaile but the entire Naxos community expects" (Wall, "Passing" 97). Helga's struggle with her identity, given her sexual desire, is doubled by the novel's "struggle with representing textual desire within the confines of bourgeois feminine propriety" (Tate, "Desire and Death" 239-240). However, although Helga engages with the Black bourgeoisie, she "deliberately [and repeatedly] places herself outside

the trope of womanhood by announcing herself as the product of miscegenation and outside the social sanction of marriage by announcing her illegitimacy” (Barnett 594). Thus, placing herself outside the “trope of womanhood” she places herself outside of “lady-hood.”

Interestingly, when, later in the novel she is proposed to by the Olsen, Helga’s refusal of his marriage proposal seems to “[parallel] her resignation from the college: both actions seek a way out the stifling social roles defined for women, particularly black or mulatta women” (Dawahare 27-8). In one instance she rejects being defined as a proper “lady” by Vayle, Anderson, and the college, and in the other being defined as an exotic and sexually charged possession. Although she does not recognize herself in the definition of “lady-hood” she is forced to act as such by proper conduct in respectable African-American environments, she also does not recognize herself in Olsen’s portrait and virtually in the Danes’ image of her. In Copenhagen, no one defines Helga as a lady, but rather, she is “made into an exotic female Other — symbol of the unconscious, the unknowable, the erotic, and the passive” (Wall, “Passing” 101). Although Helga is not a lady, she is not a Jezebel either: she is a “decent girl” (Larsen 86). Helga rejects “lady-hood” as it is a concept that the Black elite internalizes in their wish to emulate the White bourgeoisie. Ironically, the turning event that ultimately leads Helga to marry the Reverend is Anderson’s rejection; it is, in fact, Anderson to whom Helga had “turned for [sexual] release” but who had “already designed [her] a ‘lady,’ and therefore a nonsexual being” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIX). The definition of “lady” is too oppressive for Helga, who believes she cannot fit in regardless because of her parentage, and the label of Jezebel is far too shameful for her to accept; the only way out of her sexual and shame conundrum is marriage, the institution that legitimizes sexual release.

After she leaves Naxos, Helga goes back to Chicago, where she was born, but her stay is brief: when she finds work with a race woman, Mrs. Hayes-Rore, as editor for her speeches, she brings Helga to New York with her, where she will then decide to stay. Significantly, when Helga tells Mrs. Hayes-Rore the story of her parentage, she is told that her story, as it deals with “race intermingling and possibly adultery,” cannot be discussed: “For among black people, as among white people, it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned – and therefore they do not exist” (Larsen 39). In fact, in the codes of latent Victorian respectability and racist beliefs against miscegenation stories like Helga’s are unacceptable; therefore, as Helga’s story *cannot* not exist, neither can she: Helga refusing to conform and lie about her parentage becomes herself an uncomfortable truth that cannot be discussed and therefore does not exist. Thus, Helga’s innate contradictions make her

existence paradoxical (Scheper 685) and impossible, “beyond definite discussion” (Larsen 39). Mrs. Hayes-Rore tells her, “I wouldn’t mention that my people are white, if I were you. Colored people won’t understand [...] what others don’t know can’t hurt you” (Larsen 41), and by suggesting her to lie by omission, she is pushing her to pass as “fully” Black among the Harlemites so as not to confront them with the contradictory impossibility of her truth. As she is about to be a guest at the house of Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s friend, Anne Grey, Helga complies, but when she meets Anne, she “feel[s] like a criminal” (Larsen 42). Helga is not technically earning more freedom by passing, but she is earning a community, something that would usually require authenticity, but that is made impossible by her very existence being unacceptable. As the hypocrisies of Harlem require mixed people or Black folks who engage willingly with white people to be excluded, they seemingly apply their own version of the “one drop rule.” Helga’s reality of family and community before moving to Harlem is one of rejection and absence — her mother is dead, her father has left them, and the rest of her family rejects her, as do the Black people she meets at school. Virtually then, if being an uncomfortable truth makes her non-existent, then it is only by being a “criminal,” lying by omission and denying her truth, that she can overcome her impossibility and come into existence into a community.

3.3.1 Oppression and Hypocrisy in Harlem

Living permanently in Anne’s home, Helga enjoys her life in Harlem: “Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and content” and the Harlemite’s “sophisticated cynical talk, their elaborate parties, the unobtrusive correctness of their clothes and homes, all appealed to her craving for smartness, for enjoyment” (Larsen 43). However, as spring comes, she becomes restless. Helga resists another categorization, this time that of the discordant duality of Black womanhood in Harlem, which requires respectable behavior and proper dresses but total abandon in the nightclubs; terrified of primitive blackness, “Helga resists categorization as a typical ‘savage,’ over-sexed black woman; her total abandon in the dance would only reinscribe that sensationalized, exoticized stereotype of the black female primitive” (Hinnov 58). The nightclub scene, almost ever-present in Harlem novels, is used by Larsen to “examine the packaging of manufactured blackness” (Wall, “Passing” 98-9). Furthermore, this scene “dramatize[s]” Helga’s “internalization of stereotypes about black sexuality” and “expose the

way in which stereotypes about black peoples' so-called savagery have permeated Helga's consciousness" (Monda 27-8). In fact, as the music stops "she drag[s] herself to the present," and the "shameful feeling" that "she [had] been to the jungle" and "she had enjoyed it" (Larsen 59) begins to taunt her. Nevertheless, Helga does not believe she is a jungle creature and "then neither [are] any of the club's other patrons. This image was nonetheless foisted on blacks as Harlem barrooms were refurbished to resemble African jungles" (Wall, "Passing" 99). Fearing too close proximity to primitivism, Helga becomes more determined to leave Harlem. In this sense, the nightclub scene in New York mirrors the later minstrel show scene in Copenhagen: both "invoke a critique of primitivism while also engaging in a discourse of racialized aversion to the black body" (Scheper 691).

Anne Grey's character is the symbol of the overall general hypocrisy of imitating white behavior while proclaiming racial pride: she "hated white people with a deep and burning hatred, with the kind of hatred which, finding itself held in a sufficiently numerous groups, was capable some day, on some great provocation, of bursting into dangerously malignant flames," while, however, "ap[ing] their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living" (Larsen 48). Eventually, Harlemites' "constant prattling of the incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white people" (Larsen 49) wears Helga down, "corrod[ing] the fabric of her quietism" (Larsen 49); Anne's racial prejudice "probe[s] at Helga's] hidden wounds" (Larsen 49) caused by the isolation suffered in the school for Blacks she was sent to as a child. When Anderson brings Audrey Denney to the nightclub, Anne is indignant: "she goes about with white people [...] and they know she's colored [...] She certainly ought to be ostracized. I've nothing but contempt for her, as has every other self-respecting Negro" (Larsen 60-1). If Anne is hypercritical and hateful, Helga feels "envious admiration" (Larsen 62) for Miss Denney's carefree attitude to the race problem, but she does not feel like her opinion of her would be appreciated by Anne and their friends.

As she experiences Harlem's hypocrisy, Helga becomes critical of the Harlemites, who while proclaiming their love of blackness, "condemned the white racism while imitating white middle-class behavior and adopting their values and moral codes" (Carby 168). The more Helga experiences life with the Black bourgeoisie, the more Larsen is "critical in her depiction of talented-tenth elitism" (Brickhouse 549). Set on leaving Harlem, on her last night, Helga decides to wear "the black net," a dress she and Anne had previously considered "too *décolleté*, and too *outré*" (Larsen 56). Wearing a dress that would put her outside the Black elite's standards for ladyhood, she rejects their hypocrisy. Helga realizes their

hypocritical attitude and rejects the uplift ideology that has Black folks proudly speak of race while “in their hearts they repudiated it. In their lives too. They didn’t want to be like themselves. What they wanted, asked for, begged for, was to be like their white overlords. They were ashamed of being Negroes, but not ashamed to beg to be something else. Something inferior. Not quite genuine” (Larsen 74-5). Thus, at “the heart of New Negro discourses of the 1920s lies a crucial contradiction” these “are caught between two poles: a notion of a premodern racial identity whose origins lie in ancient Africa and a concept of a modern self not exclusive to black Americans” (Dawahare 23). Eventually, then, “Harlem becomes as oppressive an environment as Naxos” (Wall, “Passing” 100); life in Harlem is “too cramped, too uncertain, too cruel” (Larsen 96), and “Helga’s Harlemites are possessed of a race consciousness at once consuming and superficial, proud and ineffectual” (Wall, “Passing” 98).

Anderson is seemingly a key point to Helga’s sexual repression and expression. After he drunkenly kisses her when she comes back from Denmark, Helga fantasizes about possible sexual encounters and an affair, but he rejects her. As Anderson is disgusted by his own action — “I can’t forgive myself for acting such a swine” (Larsen 107) — he unknowingly reinforces Helga’s belief that sexuality is something that has to be repressed. Anderson awakens and legitimizes sexual desire in Helga, who lets herself feel it in a positive and exciting train of thoughts — “All night, all day, she had mentally prepared herself for the coming consummation; physically too, spending hours before the mirror” (Larsen 107). Although the affair never happens, before she is rejected, Helga thinks of the consequences that could be for her: “a feeling of fear for possible exposure [came upon her]. For Helga Crane wasn’t, after all, a rebel from society, Negro society” (Larsen 107). As Helga ponders the weights of respectability and desire — and decides that “these late fears” had nothing on the “hardiness of insistent desire” (Larsen 107) —, Larsen explores the destructive consequences of the new female sexuality, as “the sexual permissiveness of the 1920s had spelled new freedoms for white women [but] had more ambiguous implications for black women” (Monda 24). His rejection, however, “drives her into a self-destructive rage” that is the “mirror image of her profound longing for connection and understanding” (24) and that “culminates in her marriage” (Monda 34).

In her introduction to the novel, Deborah McDowell speculates on why Helga does not marry either Anderson or Vayle; she concludes that “one explanation is that the James Vayles and the Robert Andersons are largely responsible for constructing and upholding the

contradictory sexual images of women which Helga has resisted throughout the novel” (XX). Thus, by standing for the repressive values that Helga tries to resist, they not only assimilate them, but as men, they perpetuate their oppressive qualities. Furthermore, their own internal conflict acts as “mirror images of Helga’s own internal attitudes that Larsen’s echoing descriptions reinforce” (McDowell, “Introduction” XX), and therefore, their own repulsion and shame for their sexual desires exacerbate Helga’s. Anderson and Vayle are oppressed by their race and class the same way the Reverend is oppressed by race and religion, mirroring the way Helga herself is oppressed by gender, race, and class.

As a racialized woman, Helga is repeatedly sexualized by men, both Black and white, as the “construction of the black woman as sexual object is not peculiar to white men” (McLendon 74). Moreover, in Chicago, she is mistaken for a prostitute — “a few men, both white and black, offered her money, but the price of the money was too dear. Helga Crane did not feel inclined to pay” (Larsen 34). The price would be her body, and virtually her pride and her respectability. She will be mistaken again for being “sexually immoral” in the storefront church where she is converted; the women of the congregation will recognize in her Jezebel, the fallen woman. Throughout the novel, “Helga is alternatively defined by others (primarily men), as a ‘lady’ or a ‘Jezebel’,” and the Danes’ “transformation of Helga into a sexual object [only] continues the familiar pattern” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIX). However, “[n]either designation captures her as a sexual subject, but simply as an object of sexual desire” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIX). Anderson, however, is the “only man Helga associates with feelings of love” and with whom she does not deny her sexuality (McLendon 83). With the other men she interacts with, “Larsen stresses Helga’s strong resistance to these men’s perception of her only as sexual object” (McLendon 83). However, when Anderson rejects her she “savagely” (Larsen 108) slaps him, punishing him — for having awakened her and rejected her — and herself — for embracing her sexual feelings and putting herself in the position of being rejected — effectively cutting off all possibilities of them ever having any kind of relationship. Although she is the subject of the sexual desire of the men she has relationships with, they all seem to be repressed, too; sexual desire is deemed both “unladylike” and “ungentlemanly” (Larsen 4).

3.4 Sexual And Exotic: The White Gaze On Blackness

In *Reconstructing Womanhood*, scholar Hazel Carby argues that Helga is the “first truly sexual female protagonist in Afro-American fiction,” as Larsen recognized the repression and denial of “[Black] female sexuality and desire” in fiction and attempted to “embody” them in Helga (174); however, the result of the confrontation of the systematic denial and repression of sexual desires is a tragedy. Thus, Larsen creates a character that feels desire as “a sexual being” but is thought to repress it and deny it by both her personal history and her racial history (Carby 174). Helga’s sexual repression is “understandable, given her ‘illegitimate’ origins and her proper upbringing” (McDowell, “Introduction” XVII). Being herself the result of forbidden sexual expression between the races, she is haunted by shame that only doubles when she perceives in herself sexual desire; but, her denial and repression are so strong she often does not recognize her own feelings. As a desiring subject, Helga wishes for a community as well as satisfaction, so on one hand, Helga longs for “sexual fulfillment,” and on the other, she longs for “social respectability” (McDowell, “Introduction” XVII). However, having watched “the destruction of her own mother,” Helga believes “that society punishes passion” (McLendon 76), and this belief pushes her to deny her sexuality. In her mother’s death being “[a] cruel sacrifice” (Larsen 23), Larsen is careful to establish “the idea that the white mother was as much a victim of Jim Crow racism as she was but less tragically,” therefore, painting “Negro society as shallow and imitative and the white public as guilty of childhood larceny” (Moore 123).

Helga’s dissatisfaction with Harlem’s hypocritical attitude towards the uplift ideology is exacerbated as “[l]ittle by little the signs of spring appeared,” rendering Helga with a sense of “restlessness” (Larsen 47). Spring, often a metaphor for sexual awakening, brings Helga restlessness and discontent, and as she feels awakened in Harlem’s warmth, she understands she needs to flee the “mecca of the exotic” (McDowell, “Introduction” XVIII). In order to escape the oppressive heat and hypocrisy of Harlem, Helga goes to live among her mother’s relatives in Copenhagen. As she leaves New York, night is falling – “The western sky was a pink and mauve light, which faded gradually into a soft gray-blue obscurity” (63) —, and when she arrives in Copenhagen, the sun is rising – she watches as “the purple gray sky change to opal, to gold, to pale, to blue” (Larsen 64); this exchange of night and day is a reflection of the “split between black and Scandinavian,” that is then further shown in “an extreme duality of hot/cold, dark/light, south/north, resonating with and reflecting the divisions in Helga” (McDowell, “Introduction” XVIII). On the ship from New York to Denmark, Helga is the subject of curiosity rather than racism or judgment and is transformed

into an exotic museum piece brought over from the New World. While in Copenhagen, Aunt Katrina, her mother's sister, chooses Helga's dresses as if Helga were a collection doll: dressing her in "something lively, something bright," and "[s]triking things, exotic things," she means to stress that Helga's "foreign[ness]" in order to "make an impression" (Larsen 68). For the Dahls, Helga is an art piece that allows them upward social mobility — advancing their "social fortunes" (Larsen 68). During her stay, Helga fully performs her role of foreign and exotic: "Incited. That was it, the guiding principle of her life in Copenhagen. She was incited to make an impression, a voluptuous impression. She was incited to inflame attention and admiration. She was dressed for it, subtly schooled for it. And after a little while she gave herself up wholly to the fascinating business of being seen, gaped at, desired" (Larsen 74). As the Dahls dress, instruct, and take her to social gatherings, they train Helga to be a good show piece; in Copenhagen, Helga "does not perform her notion of herself; she masquerades as the exotic other" (Barnett 584).

Further stressing the theme of performance, Larsen has Helga and her Danish company go to the Circus, where "upon the stage pranced two black men, American Negroes undoubtedly, for as they danced and cavorted, they sang in the English of America an old ragtime song that Helga remembered hearing as a child" (Larsen 82). Helga is shocked and as she watches "silent, motionless" (82) the performance, she recognizes herself on stage, being paraded for the pleasure and delight of the white crowd of Copenhagen. The minstrel show is a breaking point and "foregrounds the theme of identity and performance that was initiated in the treatment of Helga's portrayal of exotic other for the Danish audience" (Barnett 586). As Helga "motionless[ly]" watches the show she is not "amused," filled with "hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage," feeling "ashamed" and "betrayed" (Larsen 83); what troubles her is that she "feels some connection between herself and the stereotyped portrayals on the stage" as the "minstrel performers and Helga are both enacting what a white audience wants" (Barnett 587). As she watches the performers she is embarrassed as if the civilized Danish folks among whom she was living "had been suddenly invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget" (Larsen 83). What she wanted to forget was the exoticization of Blackness; however, coming to awareness, she realized she had been performing it for them the whole time. She goes back to the Circus again and again, a "silent speculative spectator" (Larsen 83), to watch the performance and virtually see herself, to study and understand. However, when she cannot recognize herself in the portrait, it becomes clear that although she is aware of performing for the white crowd,

Helga cannot reconcile her image of herself with her performance of the exotic Other and other people's perception of such performance. Ultimately, Helga is "both spectator and performer" (Wall, "Passing" 121).

During her stay in Copenhagen, Helga is chosen by the artist Axel Olsen as a subject for a portrait. As the painting is arranged, she is not involved in the decisional process, stressing how little agency Helga has in Denmark: the dynamic "convey[s] to Helga her exact status in her new environment. A decoration. A curio. A peacock" (Larsen 73). Herr Olsen is fascinated with her, as many Danes are, and the first time they meet, he does not even directly address her, rather talking to her aunt and uncle about her appearance. Olsen first stares at her — "he looked intently at her for what seemed to her an incredibly rude length of time" (71) — and then categorizes her features like describing a piece of art in a museum: "Superb eyes...color...neck column...yellow...hair...alive...wonderful..." (Larsen 71). Under his scrutiny, she is a thing, a piece of art, and he, the "great man" (Larsen 72) acts as the art expert, the evaluator, and the buyer.

Significantly, Helga is narrated through aesthetics, "described inside frames, against color-constraining backgrounds" (Barnett 582). From the opening of the novel, the narrator immediately positions Helga as a still and silent subject of observation, "[a]n observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade" (Larsen 2). Immobile and silent, she recalls a statue or a painting; further, her face is "sharply cut" and "distinctly outlined" as if her likeness was carved out or drawn. In positioning Helga as the subject of artistic depiction, Larsen "critiques a tradition of representation that purports to be mimetic but actually reproduces stereotypes of the black female" (Barnett 577). Being a "thing" to look at, Helga is a symbol of objectification of the Black woman's body; in fact, the "lack of agency in [the] first pages is essential for Larsen's depiction of visual and sexual objectification" (Barnett 583). When Helga's state as a museum piece becomes literal in Alex Olsen's portrait, he accompanies her shopping, therefore stressing the "relationship between stereotypical iconography and the construction of identity" (Barnett 585).

Olsen's choice of painting Helga is "reminiscent of a tradition of European art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in which black women (and men) were depicted in paintings in order to sexualize the paintings," and the portrait, and Helga herself, have the same function in the white picture of "highly civilized Danish society" (McLendon 73). Moreover, "sexuality seems to accrue its deviance through miscegenation. The danger of

black sexuality for the white imagination has never been one of licentiousness itself but, rather, of black sexuality as potentially seductive to white men or women” (Barnett 588). Therefore, Helga stands as signifier and signified: not only does she represent danger in her allure of seduction for white men and possible miscegenation, but she is already the result of said danger.

Although it is supposed to be a realistic portrait, the “aesthetic renderings show traces of preexisting ideological basis,” therefore in Olsen’s painting, “the white imagination’s fantasy of the black woman’s sexual voraciousness lies below the surface” (Barnett 577-8); thus, the painting illustrates not Helga’s “soul” but the white gaze on blackness. Larsen’s challenge becomes, then, to separate Helga from her image and the “stereotypical assignments of the novel’s many observers” (Barnett 578); attempting the separation results impossible: Helga cannot be understood as an individual rather than a “spectacle,” a performer (Barnett 578). The “finished portrait itself” ends up making literal “her status as a thing admired for its foreignness and sexual appeal,” therefore suggesting that “the male gaze continually places women’s bodies on display, subjecting them to sexualization and manipulation” (Hinnov 58-9). Alex Olsen’s gaze — white and male — sexualizes and objectifies the real Helga, puts her on display as the subject of his art, and manipulates her reality by creating a sexualized primitive version of her that is, however, domesticated and tamed by his brush strokes. Her final dislike for the picture for which she cannot forgive him demonstrates that “[c]learly there is a difference between Helga’s view of herself and the way she is viewed under the [white/male] gaze” (McLendon 73). Throughout the novel, Helga confuses being looked at with being seen, and she enjoys the attention of the curious Danes; however, as the portrait embodies the difference between seeing and looking, she seems to understand her status as a non-person in Danish society: “It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual *creature* with her features” (*emphasis added*, Larsen 89). As she watches the portrait, she remains, while watching the minstrel show, a “silent speculative spectator” (Larsen 83). In the not-Helga figure of the portrait, the fascination of the white Danish people, and the Circus performance, Larsen “displace[s] to Europe an issue of central concern to the intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance: white fascination with the ‘exotic’ and the ‘primitive.’ Outside the black community, Helga [becomes] a mere object for white consumption” (Carby 172). Therefore, *Quicksand* works as an “extended exploration of the limitations of two modes of representation that framed the construction of black female sexuality: racist depictions of primitive sexuality and reactionary portraits of desexualized

bourgeois black women” (Barnett 580). Although “Helga may experience authentic desire, there is no mode of representation or any legitimate space within society in which black woman’s sexuality can be expressed” (Barnett 580). As her existence is impossible, so is her expression and liberation.

Olsen’s marriage proposal seems to be the end of Helga’s stay in Denmark. When he first voices it, Helga is confused about whether he is proposing or propositioning her. Moreover, he speaks to the painted image rather than her: “he had made [...] one admirably draped suggestion, speaking seemingly to the pictured face. He had insinuated marriage, or something less – and easier?” (Larsen 84). Olsen addresses the painting because he “cannot tell the difference between the two; he speaks to her image as if it is Helga herself. He believes he has captured Helga in his depiction of her surfaces. But Helga is confused as to whether a suggestion has been made to her because she does not identify herself with the image” (Barnett 589). However, it becomes clear that her confusion is not “ill-founded” and that “the isomorphism of proposal and proposition is an indication of the way in which the female racialized body is viewed under the white/male gaze” (McLendon 73). Olsen seems to be proposing to Helga and propositioning her image at the same time — if she is a sexual object to be acquired, he believes the price is marriage: “Now you have your reward. Now I offer you marriage” (Larsen 86). Since he recognizes a “virtuous” resistance to his sexual advances, he “rewards” her with marriage, but he is actually “buying” her. He has to *possess* her as she is a dark, somewhat magical, non-person, – a *creature* – whose “deliberate lure” he cannot resist, who “disturb[s]” him, and “creep[s] into [his] brain to madden [him]” (Larsen 86). Ultimately, having her will work a spell on him and his legacy, making him “great. Immortal” (Larsen 87). Thus, Helga, with her lure, would be his talisman, a thing; ultimately, “[o]nly the spell of racial mythology could lead a man to mistake such insults for gallantry” (Wall, “Passing” 102-3). The proposal scene, then, “shows how inextricably bound sexual and racial identity are” (Wall, “Passing” 102).

Helga understands Olsen is projecting his own belief on blackness onto her — “You have the warm impulsive nature of the women from Africa” (Larsen 87) —, and she rejects him because of “deeper, broader than [personal]” reasons “racial” reasons (Larsen 88). In doing so, she shows “an awareness of her legacy if race and concubinage at the hands of white men” (McDowell, “Introduction” XIX): “I’m not for sale. Not to you. Not to any white man. I don’t care at all to be owned. Even by you” (Larsen 87). Paralleling the relationship between master and slave, Larsen historicizes the proposal scene, spelling out even more

clearly Helga's inherent link as a Black woman to the "history of being the sexual property of white men" (Barnett 589). Furthermore, in arguing her rejection of Olsen's proposal with "deeper, broader" racial motivations, she tells him: "You might come to be ashamed of me, to hate me, to hate all dark people. My mother did that" (Larsen 88). In identifying Olsen with her mother, "while simultaneously rejecting him, she acts out her unexpressed rage at her mother for this profound betrayal" and identifies herself with her father, whom "she never knew" (Monda 33). Ultimately, her "identification with her father frees Helga from her self-destructive need for recognition from her distant mother, allowing her to gain temporary access to a sense of agency and therefore to her repressed sexuality" (Monda 33). The proposal scene, then, acts as a "catalyst for Helga's resolution to reconcile the 'suspensive conflict[s]' of her life and to release her pent-up desires for sexual freedom" (McDowell, "Introduction" XIX). Realizing her status as a non-person, Helga flees Europe and goes back to the U.S., although, she tells herself, only temporarily. Helga then, transforms from "pursued" to "pursuer" and "the field of her pursuits [becomes] Harlem where sexual freedom and unrestraint ostensibly abound" (McDowell, "Introduction" XIX). Once back in Harlem for Robert Anderson and Anne Grey's marriage, Helga rejects Vayle's hints at a new proposal, and gets kissed by Anderson, with whom she imagines an affair; however, he rejects her.

3.5 Buried in the Deep South: Helga's Transformation in the Old Negro Woman

After she is rejected by Anderson, Helga stumbles into a religious congregation in a storefront church. This scene dramatizes the "central motif of entrapment embodied in the title *Quicksand*" (McLendon 86). Wet from the rain and hysterical, she becomes the center of attention, prayed for with "Bacchic vehemence" by the congregation of "foul, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in wild appeal for [her] single soul" and ultimately, "closing her in at all sides" (Larsen 113). As her last effort to escape her "brutal desire to shout and sling herself about" fails, she is "maddened" and finally, "lost — or saved" (Larsen 113). In the church scene, Helga is mistaken for "A scarlet 'oman" and a "pore los' Jezebel" (Larsen 112). Identified as a fallen woman, she needs to be saved, and Helga, who at the start of the novel expressed her contempt for the hypocrisy of black people worshipping the "white man's God" (the Christian God) and "was not religious," is converted (Larsen 34). Her conversion happens as

a result of what seems a primitive orgasmic release in the orgy-like group in the storefront church; the whole “bizarre episode and Reverend Green himself are uncanny,” and the “horrified fascination that Helga assumes is external to herself in this weird performance is actually a part of her being” (Tate, “Desire and Death” 251). Interestingly, the women of the congregation are described as “crawl[ing] over the floor like reptiles” (Larsen 114); as reptiles do not have positive connotations in the Bible, then these women foreshadow the tragic outcome of her conversion; moreover, as they “[drop] hot tears and beads of sweat upon her bear arms and neck” (Larsen 114), effectively baptizing Helga, their newly fellow convert, the association made with Helga’s conversion, already horrifying and uncanny, is strikingly negative: Helga is lost.

The rising tension of Helga’s sexual desire and “fried nerves” (Larsen 111) finally breaks, and “explode[s] in Helga’s primitive, passionate religious conversion,” dramatizing the “fine line between sexual and religious ecstasy in fundamentalist religion” (McDowell, “Introduction” XX). In the church scene, “Larsen more deliberately stresses something terrifying rather than pleasurable,” although the “characters enact a drama evocative of a sexual orgy” (McLendon 87). Seducing and then marrying the Reverend is inevitable as it is “a continuation of the pattern that runs through the entire novel, capsulized here in the church scene – the frustration, the frenzy, and then the temporary calm” (McLendon 87). As she overcomes the climax of the conversion, “[a] miraculous calm [comes] upon her” and feels “within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known” (Larsen 114). Religion brings Helga a “soothing haziness” (Larsen 116), like a drug. Particularly, Helga’s belief works as an “anaesthetic satisfaction for her senses” (Larsen 118), numbing her in her un-aesthetic surroundings, where, especially when pregnant and suffering, she is “sure that the greatest kindness that God could ever show to her would be to free her forever from the sight and smell of food” effectively, freeing her of her senses (Larsen 125). As Helga hangs on to this new-found figure of God, the white man God, Helga finds a sort of surrogate parent; somebody to love her, care for her, on whom to rely, who “would perhaps make it come out all right” (Larsen 117). But there is no force, especially if white and male by association, that will save her from her tragic end.

Still heartbroken by Anderson’s rejection and newly converted to religion, Helga briefly wields agency: as the Reverend is walking her back to the hotel, she looks “into his mind” (114), where she sees a “longing for ecstasy” (Larsen 115) and silently seduces him.

Her choice, although driven by lust and desire, seems punitive: there is “nothing to hold her back” and “nobody to care” (Larsen 116). She cannot go back to Denmark, where the illusion of civilization is lost and where she has disappointed her relatives by not marrying Olsen; she has rejected Vayle’s hinted-at proposal; she is not close with Anne anymore, and she has been rejected by Anderson. Although these are all consequences of her own actions, there did not seem to be other real choices: marrying Olsen would have meant being bought and living a life as a piece of sexualized art; Vayle’s proposal implied that marriage is the cause of uplift that clinically transforms Blackness in subdued behavioral conduct referring to Victorian ideals; and staying in Harlem with Anne and their friends entailed a life of lying by omission and hypocrisy. None of the possible alternatives, then, would have given her the happiness she has been chasing. Longing for the legitimization of her release and impatient to leave New York behind and not face her reality, she decides to marry Green in a feverish frenzy, and the reader can predict, long before Helga realizes it, that this choice will not bring her happiness either. When she ponders the possibility of being rejected by the Reverend, she finally understands sexuality is power, “He couldn’t [resist her]. It would be useless for him to even try. She screwed up her face into a little grin, remembering that even if protestations were to fail, there were other ways. And, too, there was God” (Larsen 117); in these reflections, as she “plans to trap her man with devilish calculation,” the “conventional marriage solution is mocked,” and so is the “man-trapping marriage plot convention” (Barnett 598). As Helga reflects on her newfound power, she becomes a temptress, a Jezebel; her body, which has been exoticized and eroticized by others until this moment, becomes a power for her to wield; her body becomes a purposefully erotic weapon.

Ultimately, the “tortuous, contradictory reasoning that leads Helga to become Mrs. Green smothers what appears to be a brief moment of experiencing herself as a desiring subject” (Monda 34). As she gets married and moves South, she believes she is stepping towards an oasis of “pleasant green” where she can be “saved” — through religion, sexual release, and community — from the desert-like isolation and alienation she is in. However, she actually steps foot in a quicksand, where she is deadly stuck. By the end of the novel, death seems a consequence of legitimized sexual expression: when a woman feels lust and chases it instead of repressing it, she is bound to the biological consequences. Reverend Green’s name “also implies symbolic meaning associated with death — pleasant green as the peaceful site of one’s finale repose” (Tate, “Desire and Death” 244).

Helga's decision to marry the Reverend comes abruptly, as many of her choices throughout the novel; while considering the marriage and her newfound spirituality she "takes comfort in the thought that she has found both sexual outlet and spiritual salvation, for she is convinced that marriage to a minister must bring with it a double blessing" (duCille 111). In making the decision, she is once again possessed by the intense "wish to give herself" that had taken over her in her fantasies of an affair with Anderson (Larsen 109); however, with Green, once married, the expression of her sexual desires would be double legitimate, double approved, double sanctioned. Through marriage to the Reverend, Helga is saved from her scarlet woman/Jezebel state and turned into a "lady" of the South, shifting from bourgeoisie to working-class; however, the impossibility of resolution of her ambivalence brings her to death. Interestingly, what Helga feels for Green, however, is never love, "but lust, a feeling that has been the exclusive privilege of men" (McLendon 90). Assigning this feeling "to a woman who has been labeled a 'lady,' demonstrates Larsen's attempt to move beyond the limiting constructs of black female sexuality" (McLendon 90). However, the attempt of this articulation seems to bring unavoidable death, perhaps demonstrating the impossibility of having a space for the inconsequential liberation of Black women's sexuality. In marrying Reverend Green and legitimizing the existence and the expression of her sexual desire — that "nameless, shameful impulse" — Helga "condemns herself to the consequences of female biology – too frequent pregnancies" (Tate, "Desire and Death" 252).

Reverend Green stands as a sexual icon for the congregation, where "open adoration was the prerogative, the almost religious duty, of the female portion of the flock" (Larsen 120). This adoration is charged with liberated female sexual energy in the congregation — which is restricted within the limits of the congregation and directed towards the Reverend, whose religious role makes the adoration proper as it is directed towards a god-like figure in the context of the church. The women of the congregation seem to be in a sort of sexual and sensual trance: the more the Reverend's "own sense of superiority" grows, the "more flattered" the women of the congregation become by "his notice and small attentions" "cast[ing] killing glances" and "[hanging] enraptured by his words" (Larsen 120). Helga also seems to be in this enamored trance, and the Reverend becomes the "embodiment" of the "intangible thing" that had made her frustrated until her conversion, "to have a husband – and to be 'right with God' – what pleasure did that other world which she had left contain that could surpass these?" (Larsen 120). Furthermore, "at night" Helga awaits their sexual

encounters “bewildered” by “challenge,” “anticipation,” and “a small fear” (Larsen 120); the primitiveness of their sexual encounters and her sexual desire still make her afraid. However, these nightly encounters make her “serene again,” keeping her in her state of contentment and “utterly filled with the glory and marvel of God” (Larsen 121). The Reverend’s negative characteristics are overwritten by his religious sensuality and their sexual encounters: “And night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason” (Larsen 122). Their liberating sexual encounters are ‘righteous’ as they happen in the sanctity of holy matrimony and at night, however, they have negative consequences, as they sprang like “rank weeds” and “devour all shoots of reason” (Larsen 122). As childbearing gets more and more unbearable Helga starts to come out of the sexual trance that had kept her content: the birth of their fourth child, brings her completely out of her haze, “beat[ing] down the protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy, of God” (Larsen 130). Effectively de-converted, having learned what “passion,” both sexual and religious, and “credulity” can do, Helga concludes: “she knew now. He wasn’t there. Didn’t exist” (Larsen 130). Her rejection of God is personal, but also racial; the Christian God becomes again the “white man’s God” (133): “Life wasn’t a miracle, a wonder. It was, for Negroes at least, only a great disappointment” (Larsen 130).

Thus, the ending of the novel has Helga trapped in “a terrifyingly literal portrait of wifely and motherly self-sacrifice” through which Larsen “condemns the racist and sexist society that allows a woman [even encourages her] to be murdered by her domestic role” (Monda 24). As marriage is the “formulaic resolution to the romance plot,” Larsen has Helga find sexual release in it but still represents it “as a limiting outlet for women, tied to the burdens of reproduction” (Barnett 598). For Helga, and virtually all Black women, “there is no escape, no alternative social landscape where female eroticism goes unpunished” (McLendon 91); the novel, then, functions as “a devastating critique of compulsory heteronormativity, which places women’s sexual expression within the confines of marriage and reproduction” (Scheper 681). Therefore, Larsen “openly castigates the dual price – marriage and pregnancy/childbearing – that women must pay for sexual expression” (McDowell, “Introduction” XXI). As childbearing is the price to pay for legitimized sexual expression, it is also intertwined with sexuality. As she recovers from her fourth child she wears a “nightgown of filmy crêpe, a relic of prematrimonial days” and the sight has the Reverend “flinch” (Larsen 129). Although barely alive, Helga still holds a power her husband

cannot resist — “she well knew that this fresh reminder of her desirability was like a flick of a whip” (Larsen 129). The “temporary calm” Helga experiences in her life with the Reverend reverts back to the expected first part of her pattern: frustration. As her “artificial faith” dissipates she grows increasingly dissatisfied (McLendon 93), and she realizes that in the frenzy of her religious conversion, she had mistaken “God with men, earthly pleasures with heaven bliss” (McLendon 93).

Among the many Victorian ideals assimilated by the Black bourgeoisie is the promotion of the “white cult of True Womanhood” that saw an “emphasis on the importance of motherhood” (Stavney 537). This figure also appeared in Harlem Renaissance literature where “while her political force [was] not directly undermined, her source of power be[came] metaphoric rather than strategic in their texts” (Stavney 543). Larsen then, satirically takes hold of this trope, making Helga into a selfless mother who, although understands that the life she has will mean death, cannot leave her children behind — “her five children tie her permanently to a life she loathes,” a life that will ultimately kill her (Wall, “Passing” 114). Helga is “an artist without an art-form,” so childbirth and motherhood become her art (Wall, “Passing” 109); when describing her children, the twins are “like rare figures carved out of amber, and in whose sleepy and mysterious black eyes all that was puzzling, evasive, and aloof in life seemed to find expression” (Larsen 123). They are, then, art pieces in which she tries to find the meaning of life. Furthermore, in literature and art, twins often represent two halves of the same entity, which symbolizes the opposing forces of good and evil and the duplicate nature of the universe. Thus, while Larsen criticizes the “dual price” of marriage and childbearing, she is unable to condemn motherhood as purely negative. However, Helga does not only die as a mother but dies squashed by the burden of it – as the reader assumes she will die of childbirth. Although she tries to escape, fantasizing about a new life, “[r]eality is too harsh and the confinement of the birthing room is inescapable” (Wall, “Passing” 114). As the narrator shifts and tells the last sentence of Helga’s story, she is stuck to her bed perpetually giving birth.

Helga's desire for “an enchanted and blissful place where peace and incredible quiet encompassed her,” for a place of “forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation, rest from the thought of any kind,” and for “an even more soothing darkness” recalls the maternal womb, “a quiet place that encompass[es] her” where she in a state of “complete mental relaxation” and “soothing darkness” (Larsen 128). Elizabeth Bronfen argues the “feminine Other” – the “Woman” is a “womb-tomb-home:” This “feminine Other as ‘womb-tomb-home’ is the site

of death in an ambivalent way. It is the site from which life as death's antithesis emerges even as it is the site that generates the mortal inscription of the body at birth, the navel's mark" (Bronfen 66). This concept resonated with Helga's end in the final paragraph of the novel: as she dies (tomb) fulfilling the true woman duty go childbearing (womb) in her husband's house (home); Helga's end, then, as she has been throughout the novel displaced by others as lady, Jezebel, and exotic non-person, is that of a feminine Other who is "womb-tomb-home." Even as she wakes up from her coma-like sleep that resembles death, she is "born again," but it is a "mock resurrection, for she rises from the dead only to be entombed once again" (McDowell, "Quicksand" XXI). Indeed, the end implies "that Helga is slowly sinking into the quicksand she has tried so hard to avoid" (McLendon 93). In the end, Helga is "'buried alive' in the South" (McLendon 93).

Towards the end of the novel, when she seems to be recovering from her latest childbirth, she asks the nurse to read — significantly, like a mother would — to her Anatole France's *The Procurator of Judea*, "for his blasphemous, anti-Christian views parallel Helga's own belated insight into the role of Christianity in her oppression" (McDowell, "Introduction" XXII), but she falls asleep before she can listen to the "superbly ironic ending which she had so desired to hear" (Larsen 132): the "'superbly ironic' ending that Helga awaits — Pilate's failure to remember that he had authorized the crucifixion of Jesus — thus parallels the "irony of her own end, her retreat into 'pie in the sky' dreams of luxury, ease, and sophistication" (Monda 37). Helga fully rejects the Christian God as the "white man's God" (Larsen 133), she is seeking peace away from a preacher of said God and seeking comfort in a book. The ending then, recalls the start of the novel, where the book she reads to achieve "forgetfulness" and "complete mental relaxation" (Larsen 2) is Marmaduke Pitckthall's *Saïd the Fisherman*, a novel in which the hero "dies as a martyr of Islam while wearing the clothes of a Christian missionary" (Brickhouse 536). By the end of the novel, Helga is plotting to escape this life, continuing the pattern of "frustration," "frenzy," and "temporary calm" (McLendon 87), and going back to "the sins and temptations of New York behind her" (Larsen 118). Thus, Helga virtually converts from the New Negro Woman into the Old Negro Woman, she tries to resist this change, ironically placing "her[self] in the ill-fitting and doubly ironic role of matron, helpmate, racewoman" (duCille 96); however, she is helpless to the strong societal forces that hold her and wear her down in the "tiny Alabama town" (Larsen 118); as she wakes up from her religious and sensual haze, she realizes she is stuck: "How, then, was she to escape from the oppression, the degradation, that her life had

become?” (Larsen 135). She plans an escape to a big city, where its emancipatory and transformative effect would resuscitate Helga Crane, but it is now too late; she is tied to this Old Negro life, where she will die bearing children. Therefore, it is interesting to notice that perhaps Marmaduke Pitckthall’s novel foreshadows Helga’s death as she, ashamed, regretful, de-converted, disillusioned, and planning to leave to re-join the public space, dies as a New Negro Woman in the clothes of an Old Negro Woman; her social epitaph will recite “Pore Mis’ Green” (Larsen 126).

CONCLUSION

Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* culminates in a European escape and a happy ending. The protagonist, Angela Murray, after passing as white in New York City to escape racial oppression, has come to realize the importance of racial identity. However, in order to completely escape racism, she moves to Paris, where she studies art. Ultimately, Jim Crow America is too taunted by racism and weighed down by its slavery history and racial laws, to make it impossible for Angela or any colored and ambitious person to live there happily. In the novel, Angela at first performs as a New (white) Woman, and she is let into the liberties and expectations of New White Womanhood. Nevertheless, as she restores her racial identity and transforms into a New Negro Woman, she reverts back towards the respectability teachings she had in her Black neighborhood. Susan Tomlinson deems irreconcilable Fauset's union of "the New Negro and the New Woman" (90); however, the novel implies the irreconcilability of the two movements *in* the United States, as Angela in America is a New Negro Woman, independent and standing for racial pride in the public space, but can only exist happily outside American oppressive racism. Such irreconcilability makes Angela's existence as a happy New Negro Woman in America impossible; however, Fauset sees the resolution of her conundrum between racial pride and social mobility in a final European escape, where she would quite literally be escaping racial prejudice. As Angela chooses existence in her most authentic self, embracing her racial identity and renouncing racial passing, she is rewarded with a happy ending in Paris.

Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* tragically sees the attempt to navigate New Negro Womanhood in America of the protagonist, Helga Crane, and culminates in her death during childbirth. The protagonist is divided between the Black middle-class teachings of respectability and overwhelming sexual desires; the dualism of respectability and sexuality translates into social roles, respectively being depicted as both a "lady" and a "Jezebel." Attempting a European escape to elude such social categorizations, Helga moves to Copenhagen. However, white Europeans only manage to classify her in yet another role, that of the exotic Other. In Copenhagen, Helga is painted by Alex Olsen, a Danish artist; his gaze — white and male — sexualizes and objectifies the real Helga, puts her on display as the subject of his art, and manipulates her reality by creating a sexualized primitive "creature" that is, however, *not* Helga (Larsen 89). Thus, Larsen refuses to write a happily-ever-after

European escape for Helga because the eroticization and exoticization of the white gaze on Blackness persecute Helga across continents. Helga's sexual desire could have found expression only in a legitimized encounter, and in 1920s Black America, the only legitimizing institution was marriage. Ultimately, the "impossibility of resolution is the impetus behind the book; Helga's fate is [...] a deliberately constructed failure" (Barnett 599). There could not be a resolution to Helga's existence as a sexual being – her final happiness is impossible to achieve. What Larsen's narrative trajectory demonstrates is that Black female sexual desire cannot be expressed without it being "punished" by social constrictions and biological consequences, such as pregnancy. The ending of the novel is not a "*concessio[n]* to the dominant ideology of romance" but a "radical and original effor[t] to acknowledge [the repressed] female sexual experience" (*emphasis added*, McDowell, "Introduction" XII).

Passing as white, Angela engages in an extramarital sexual relationship with a white man, Roger Fielding. However, when their love affair ends, and neither their physical relationship is legitimized by eventual marriage, nor their encounters result in an unwanted pregnancy, it is clear that Angela will not be biblically punished for her trespassing of the Black bourgeoisie's social codes of respectability. Essentially, the contradictory pulls of respectability and sexual desire do not particularly trouble Angela, whose desires consist of community, social mobility, and happiness, and only secondarily involve men and sexual desires. Helga, instead, is stuck in a nightmarish marriage with a man she finds repulsive as the result of her use of her body as an erotic weapon. Therefore, "[w]hat worked for Fauset is not an option for Larsen" (Barnett 598). Larsen has the reader believe that "marriage will provide the space for a sustained representation of black female desire," however, "this articulation of passion is undermined by some of the rhetoric: [Helga's] desire springs like 'rank weeds;' this is no blooming rose" (Barnett 598). Conversely, Angela experiences a more natural and positive sexual awakening and expression; she turns to Roger "as a flower turning to the sun" (Fauset 148). At its core, their sexual relationship acts as "a replay of the racial prehistory of concubinage and sexual exploitation" (McDowell, "Afterword" 294) and ultimately takes a negative turn.

Ann duCille claims Fauset and Larsen as "the first black writers to explore the dialectic of female desire and to address what having children can mean to a woman's physical and mental health, as well as to her independence" (duCille 87). In the late nineteenth century, "Black people in particular regarded marriage as an important index of their propensity for civilization and as incontestable evidence for their moral commitment to

social progress” (Tate, “Domestic Allegories” 91-2). However, “by the 1920s the allegorical link between idealized domestic tropes, on the one hand, and liberational racial and sexual desire, on the other, had become disengaged” (Tate, “Domestic Allegories” 15-16). Therefore, “far removed from the utopian partnership theorized by nineteenth-century black women novelists, coupling in the modern black feminist text is more often fictionalized as marital horror than as hearthside harmony” (duCille 144-5). Thus, this reflects in the fiction of authors such as Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, that Claudia Tate respectively labels as “tragic satires” and “domestic parodies” (“Domestic Allegories” 15). Larsen’s marriage prospects for Helga include forever exoticization (with Olsen), faux and hypocritical social progress with a member of the elite (with either Vayle or Anderson), or reversion to the Old Negro Woman in the Deep South (with Reverend Green). Thus, Larsen criticizes the ideal of marriage as “incontestable evidence for their moral commitment to social progress” (Tate, “Domestic Allegories” 92). Furthermore, in *Plum Bun*, Fauset satirizes the understanding of marriage as a social, mainly economic, contract: Angela’s social climbing aspirations lead her to wish and pursue a marriage of convenience; however, young and naive, she still aspires to the level of love and respect that she saw growing up between her parents. The union of these unrealistic expectations has Angela daydream of a white fairytale prince who will elevate her socially, finance her, and love her; when she is with Roger Fielding, she rationalizes his blatant racism by promising she will make amends to the Black community.

Ultimately, both Angela and Helga altogether reject the “cult of domesticity” that Margaret Murray Washington saw as her New Negro Woman’s primary concern (Patterson, “Beyond” 58). Fauset does not reject entirely the “racial uplift within the home” (Patterson, “Beyond” 58), as seen in Angela’s sister’s happy ending with the “homey and comfortable” Matthew Henson (Fauset 274); on the other hand, Nella Larsen’s novel trajectory has to be read as a condemnation of such “cult.” Helga Crane’s tragic death during childbirth stands as criticism of the impossibility of the expression of sexual desire for young Black women outside of marriage, as the combination of marriage and sexual expression culminates in deadly consequences. However, although not wholly rejecting the cult of domesticity in the novel, Fauset’s protagonist still does not consider a life at home. Her place is the public space, as an artist, in social circles. Particularly, Angela rejects the Victorian ideal of womanhood when Anthony first confesses his feelings; she thinks of her mother, and the washdays, the tiredness, the “little, dark, shabby house, of the made-over dresses and the turned coats” (Fauset 102), and she refuses a future life with Anthony which she believes will

mirror her mother's life as an Angel in the House. Therefore, Angela cannot be recognized in Mrs. Washington's New Negro Woman as this model was much closer to the Victorian ideal than to white New Womanhood.

Since a "genealogy of first- and second-generation New [white] Women" (Ledger 1) has been traced (of which "the first living and writing in the 1880s and 1890s, and the second in the 1920s and 1930s," Ledger 1), it is logical to assume that the generational difference stands for New Negro Women as well. Susan Tomlinson argues that *Plum Bun* depicts a conjunction between the New Woman and the New Negro, as Fauset's "synthesis of these personae produces a modern, urban, and bourgeois individual who opposes the 'authentic' figure of the Southern, rural, and hypersexualized African American" (Phipps 230). Even though both Angela and Helga reject the "cult of domesticity" (Patterson, "Beyond" 58), Helga ultimately succumbs to it when she converts Thus, they are part of a second generation of New Negro Women who ultimately reject their private 'place' in favor of standing in the public space.

Helga, in particular, repeatedly rejects the emulation of white values of the Black bourgeoisie, which has her Black elite folks stuck in hypocrisy. Larsen's depiction of the Black bourgeoisie is "keenly aware of its limitations, of the hypocrisy and materialism that too often masked insecurity and self-hatred," making her novel "not a polemic for the cause" (Wall, "Passing" 117). Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Helga's employer and a 'race woman', means very different things to Fauset and Larsen. To Larsen, she embodies the hypocritical attitude of denial in favor of respectability – she is caricatural. Instead, to Fauset, "such a woman would be heroic" (Wall, "Passing" 117). Furthermore, Larsen "did not agree with Fauset that the New Negro woman's freedom to be virtuous was worth celebrating. She recognized, as Zora Hurston would later, that too much respectability was deadning" (Wall, "Passing" 117). As Helga experiences Harlem's hypocrisy, she becomes critical of the Harlemites, who proclaim racial pride while emulating the "white middle-class behavior and adopting their values and moral codes" (Carby 168). However, although anti-patriarchal, Larsen's novel does not draw a wholly positive picture of the men of the Black bourgeoisie Helga encounters; the men Helga interacts with, like Vayle and Anderson, seem sexually repressed as well, mirroring Helga's own struggles: in Larsen's Harlem, sexual desire is deemed both "unladylike" and "ungentlemanly" (Larsen 4). Fauset, instead, "represent[s] in her fiction a middle-class code of morality and behavior that structured the existence of her characters and worked as a code of appropriate social behavior for her readers" (Carby 167). She does not pose any explicit

criticism to the Black elite, but actually depicts quite a joyous image of Harlem, and draws a flattering picture of W.E.B. Du Bois in the fictional Van Meier; interestingly, however, she still does not see fit for ambitious Angela to have a future among her Harlemites.

Furthermore, Fauset's and Larsen's texts,

implicitly explore the ways in which social forces and patriarchal ideology inspire, if not demand, the participation of black women in their own objectification and domination. Characters such as Joanna Marshall in *There Is Confusion* and Helga Crane in *Quicksand* ultimately discover that acceptance as a woman and as an artist means defining themselves by someone else's gaze. (duCille 94)

Interestingly, Helga is the subject of art, while Angela is the artist on the other side of the canvas; This difference of agency in their roles gives the two very different outcomes of the novels' trajectories. Moreover, Angela's specialty is realistic portraits is precisely the style that renders Helga the perpetual sexually exoticized Other in Alex Olsen's legacy: On the one hand, Angela wields her agency to change and transform her life multiple times: her motto of "living for living's sake" (Fauset 281) echoes Aestheticism's *art for art's sake*. Thus, her art is living, and she holds the 'brush' that paints her life. On the other hand, Helga ultimately wields her agency to seduce and marry Reverend Green. She is "an artist without an art-form," so by the end of the novel, childbirth and motherhood become her art (Wall, "Passing" 109). The novel's ending has Helga trapped in "a terrifyingly literal *portrait* of wifely and motherly self-sacrifice" (*emphasis added*, Monda 24). Helga's death sees her delusional and planning an escape from her detrimental life in the Deep South, where ultimately, "the birthing room is inescapable" (Wall, "Passing" 114). In the end, Helga is planning to reenter the public space as a New Negro Woman but dies in the private space of the Old Negro Woman. In this sense, characters like Larsen's Helga Crane are designed to be a failed New Negro Woman to demonstrate the detrimental consequences of patriarchal oppression.

Although the merging of the New Negro movement and the New Woman ideal is an exclusively American phenomenon, neither Helga Crane nor Angela Murray seem to find their places as uncompromising New Negro Women in the context of Jim Crow America. Angela is forced to move to Europe, and Helga 'regresses' into Old Negro Woman and dies from childbirth. Therefore, given that these two 1928 novels were written by Black women authors, this thesis concludes that in the literary form, being a New Negro Woman in America

is not possible and that attempting to depict it remains impossible. Certainly, the New Negro Woman, like the New (white) Woman, is a figure that pushes the limits imposed by patriarchal expectations on women and rejects the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House. However, the added layer of oppression owed to racism impedes the New Negro Woman from existing uncompromisingly in the public space at all. The intersection of patriarchal oppression and racial discrimination faced by the New Negro Woman in America, the systems that make the Black woman into *the mule of the world*, are far too heavy weights for these literary depictions to culminate in happy endings.

Thus, this thesis concludes that the impossibility of the uncompromising existence of these fictional New Negro Women in America is due to the intersection of racist and patriarchal oppression. This conclusion opens the door to further inquiry: at the plot's resolution, as these emancipated women try to hold their public place and take hold of 'happiness,' where do these Black women authors position their New Negro female protagonists? And do these protagonists have a place in their authors' fictional Harlem Renaissance(s)?

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