A Thesis Without a Moral: Regarding Plum Bun and Quicksand

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A THESIS WITHOUT A MORAL:
REGARDING PLUM BUN AND QUICKSAND

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: BREAKING THE MOLD

This project developed as an attempt to understand the scholarly neglect of two Harlem Renaissance novels, Jesse Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, that are only now being rediscovered. This oversight devolves to a critical misunderstanding of genre, style, and conventions, as well as a more profound myopia regarding race and gender. Fauset and Larsen create heroines arrayed along a continuum of skin colors and ranges of sexual behaviors, to expose the concepts of gender and race as sexual determinants. By developing protagonists ranging from light to dark, all of whom would be considered African American, they cast doubt on the notion of race as a viable category. And by allowing each of these characters to experiment with different sexual behaviors, they break the stereotypes dictating that a combination of race and gender dictates sexuality. They undermine they myths of the loose black woman, tragic mulatto, and pure white woman. To demonstrate how this subtle refiguration of stock characters deconstructs racialist and sexist paradigms, this project will apply close reading and genre analysis, as well as briefly contextualizing these works thematically. Simultaneously, it will question earlier readings that dismissed works prioritizing gender over
race. Finally, it will explicate the conventions and stylistic encodings by which Fauset and Larsen undermine social and sexual stereotypes of African American women.

Because Fauset's and Larsen's works do not seem to conform to conventions of "race novels," their initial popularity has been eclipsed. Critical reaction to these works has appeared in three waves: immediate positive reception in the early 1930s, dismissal by critics during the Black Arts movement of the mid 1960s and early 1970s, and recent re-emergence. Understanding the changing dynamics of each era underscores the crucial importance of contextual analysis to works by African American women. Discovering *Plum Bun* is a case in point. Though most notable assessments of the Harlem Renaissance allude to Fauset, her inclusion is generally limited to acknowledgment of her role as "midwife to the Harlem Renaissance" (a typically feminized role) and editor of the influential journal *Crisis: A Magazine for the Darker Races*. She counseled Jean Toomer on his writing style (Lewis 122), "discovered" poet Langston Hughes (Sato 218), and did "a yeoman's work for the Harlem Renaissance" (Bone 58). Her contemporaries received her work with approbation. George Schuyler wrote of her first novel *There Is Confusion* (1924), "If it is a financial success, there will be a widening field of opportunity for our rising group of young writers" (Lewis 124), demonstrating that Fauset was in the vanguard of carving a niche for
Harlem authors. Respected critics Benjamin Brawley and William Braithewaite both praised her, and her friend W.E.B. Du Bois wrote that her work would "not attract those looking for the filth in Negro life, but will attract those looking for the truth" (Wintz 134, 146).

The optimism of uplift and widening opportunities for African Americans seemed to encourage tolerance of differences among Harlem writers (as the development of two diverse movements and the proliferation of literary magazines during this period attest). While McKay and Hurston employed lower class settings, Fauset’s preference for the middle class firmly ensconced her among her contemporaries of the "Talented Tenth." Their use of mainstream stylistic devices and settings was considered somewhat surprising in black authors.

With the advent of the Stock Market Crash of 1929 and the Harlem Riots of 1935, the Harlem Renaissance in which Jessie Fauset was so prominent ended (Wintz 1), and her works were consigned to temporary obscurity by a white readership no longer interested in "Negritude." When the Black Arts movement emerged in the 1960s, with such authors as Amiri Baraka and Larry Neal, writing about race came to be viewed as a male province, and rediscovering writers of the Harlem Renaissance followed that bias. While Claude McKay, Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Jean Toomer, Wallace Thurman and a host of other male writers enjoyed a renewed vogue, Fauset’s short fiction, four novels, two
collections of children's stories, and scores of poems were ignored. Hiroko Sato, long considered an authority on Fauset, dismissed her as not a great "or even a good writer" (82), and though Amritjit Singh's index in Novels of the Harlem Renaissance carries more than forty entries after Fauset's name, they all focus on her powers as a hostess, counselor, or "midwife," all stereotypically feminine roles. Fauset was also viewed as syncretist and bourgeois, and dismissed as not dynamic enough to warrant attention. David Littlejohn damns her works by calling them "vapidly genteel lace curtain romances" (50), and summarizes the critical party line of that era:

One of the surest proofs of the maturity of Negro fiction since the 1940s is the ... supplanting of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen and Wallace Thurman ... The newer writers are obviously writing as men, for men. (49)

How has Fauset been transformed from the vanguard to what Deborah McDowell sarcastically calls the rearguard? Though style definitely plays a role in her devaluation, appreciation of Fauset's work through reissues of her novels with critical introductions indicates that style alone cannot account for her neglect. Instead, recent theorists like McDowell and Hazel Carby expose the cultural impact of binary oppositions that previously structured discourse about African American women's texts. Carby's seminal work Reconstructing Womanhood, examines writing by African American women not only as literary tradition, but
also as cultural encodings. Rather than positing a self-conscious and indentifiable genre, she seeks to "produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood" (6), tracing how ideologies encoded in literature affect the lives and attitudes of black women. Instead of focusing on how accurately literary conventions represent African American women, she seeks to examine them as symbols of social perceptions, affecting African American women in material ways. Her contextualizing and politicizing the debate over development of a black feminist literary theory have informed my own discussion of Plum Bun and Quicksand.

Another critic responsible for the renewed vigor of the Harlem Renaissance is Deborah McDowell, whose exhaustive research both analyzes previously forgotten texts, and cautions against a trend to subsuming writings by women of color into androcentric or white feminist agendas. Her attention to conventions and subtexts of these two works has aided in their re-evaluation as texts deconstructing traditional stereotypes of African American women as debased and amoral.

Both Plum Bun and Quicksand upset stock configurations of African American women by examining homologies linking race and gender with sexuality. Traditional constructions of women of color constitute them as voraciously sexual and amoral, a stereotype that Fauset and Larsen work hard to undermine. For purposes of this discussion, a brief examination of gender and race as
social constructions is necessary. The initial question of race is how to define it. Race lacks biological origin, and can encompass culture, geography, nationality, behavior, religion, class, and physical characteristics. Where does it reside? In culture, the individual, or some amorphous area where the two interact? The tradition of blacks "passing" for whites (as in *Plum Bun* and Larsen's *Passing*) presupposes that race is static, and changing one's own racial definition is a form of trickery or disloyalty. Because of its indeterminacy, race defines primarily by difference, and therefore is unreliable as a classifier. Yet even as we acknowledge race as a figuration, we must simultaneously engage how the reification of race configures social discourse, as both Larsen and Fauset do. Larsen's Helga Crane wonders, "Why must race always creep in?" (*Quicksand* 52), and Jessie Fauset calls whiteness "a badge of power" (*Plum Bun* 73). Her heroine Angela Murray experiments with this power by crossing the color line and representing (re-presenting) herself as white rather than African American. She explains, "It isn't being colored that makes the difference; it's letting it be known" (78).

Larsen and Fauset presciently distinguish between skin hue or color and race, understanding the latter as a fluid social sign. Skin color is the physical manifestation of the sign of race, and can be perceived differently, depending on racial identification. A person
of mixed race can call herself white and be perceived to have a dark complexion; or she can call herself black, and suddenly be perceived as fair. This demonstrates the mutability of a supposedly static characteristic. Itaberi Njeri gives the example of her apparently white cousin Jeffrey, who "demanded the racial classification in his records be changed to reflect his preferred racial status." The judge at his trial responded, "'I'm looking right at you and you look white to me,'" but obliged, "changed the racial designation [to African American], and added a year to his sentence" (377). This shows the performative impact of race, which never maps on to any specific characteristic, yet is generally viewed as a physical fact.

Gender is yet another trope, a symbolic social construction defining difference. The dictionary conflates sex and gender, defining sex as "the physiological, functional and psychological differences that distinguish the male and female" (American Heritage Dictionary 1123), and gender as "a classification of sex" (551). As the dominant gender has long been male, woman is perpetually the "opposite sex." Race and gender are social constructions, but rather than ossified binary oppositions, Fauset and Larsen represent race and gender along a continuum. Fauset's heroines assert that one adopts a racial designation, adding a more active, optional element to this identifying process. (Of course, this is a luxury
enjoyed only by lighter-skinned African Americans.) Though this may seem only to confirm awareness that race is in the eye of the beholder, Fauset makes a more subtle and powerful point. In creating heroines ranging from light-skinned to dark and then superimposing diverse sexual behavior on those characters, she deconstructs two stereotypes. First, she demonstrates that race is not a static, biological determinant; and second, she severs the connection between race and sexual behavior. To understand how radical that notion is, one must read *Plum Bun* and *Quicksand* in relation to the racial and gender expectations they undermine, by considering earlier slave narratives and other literature of the Harlem Renaissance.

Socially-perceived race, gender, and sexuality determine one's access to power and status in the social milieu, and serve as provocative tools for understanding black women's writing. Access to economic and social power is linked to one's placement along a continuum of these interrelationships. Fauset's contemporary Zora Neale Hurston explains the hierarchy of race, gender, and power through the character of Janie's grandmother in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. ... So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He had it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see. (29)
Obviously Larsen and Fauset were not alone in their exploration of women’s sexuality at that time. Hurston brilliantly foregrounded the debate about women’s roles in the novel *Their Eyes*, which has become almost a staple in the college canon. (Harold Bloom even edited one of his "Characters in Fiction" series about Janie Crawford.) Hurston’s successful reemergence suggests that theme alone cannot account for Larsen’s and Fauset’s eclipse, and I propose to examine not only these authors’ treatment of women’s sexuality and race, but also those aspects of audience and genre which impinge on the reading process. Though Fauset and Larsen valorize gender over race, both are subsumed in examination of black women’s sexuality. Perhaps their works were consigned to temporary obscurity because unlike their more famous contemporary Hurston, they explored women’s sexuality in a middle class milieu, which confused their critics by defying racial expectations.

But before analyzing their works, some attention to style, genre, and the conventions against which these authors write is necessary. Two slave narratives trace the yoking of racial and sexual stereotypes, and simultaneously outline the constructions of the tragic mulatto, "loose black woman," and the cult of true womanhood. A brief discussion of the genres of sentimental fiction and the novel of manners completes the background fundamental to uncovering Fauset’s and Larsen’s subtle reconstructions of African American women.
READING WOMANIST FICTION

The novels of Fauset, Larsen and Hurston are not the earliest feminist texts written by black women. Much critical misunderstanding can be traced to the tendency to read these works independent of conventions and traditions which predate them. Attention to earlier narratives by African Americans not only contextualizes works of the Harlem Renaissance, but establishes figurations and symbols which later authors undercut and interrogate. Without locating the origins of these images, it is easy to miss the subtle nuances by which Fauset and Larsen refigure the tropes of race and gender.

Written more than sixty years after the Emancipation Proclamation, Larsen's and Fauset's works forge a connection between nineteenth century slave narrative and twentieth century African American fiction. Tracing this tradition reveals conventions of African American writing that have developed and still exist in modern fiction. Before analyzing *Plum Bun* and *Quicksand*, it is therefore useful to explain and contextualize some of these elements. Images of women which inform these writings are the cult of true womanhood, the myth of the loose black woman, and the figure of the tragic mulatto. Stylistic elements which round out the discussion derive from slave narratives, sentimental novels, and the novel of manners; therefore some consideration of genre is also germane.
American slave narratives developed in the mid-nineteenth century to address the racialist assumption that blackness precluded intellect, and to disprove the notion that slavery was justified because of black inferiority. Narratives also allowed early writers to construct identities for themselves; denied surnames, families, literacy, property, legal rights, and even control over their own bodies, slaves could not define themselves through traditional social means. Writing their autobiographies addressed that need, allowing them to create a persona through words. From the earliest "as told to" tracts circulated at anti-slavery meetings, through Frederick Douglass’ remarkable eloquence in his Narrative of an American Slave, black autobiography has been a source not only of artistic expression, but also self-definition and validation. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., writes that "the will to power for black Americans was the will to write" (Bearing Witness 4); autobiography, especially among former slaves, became the assertion of personhood denied them as blacks. Gates continues:

Deprived of access to literacy, the tools of citizenship, denied the rights of selfhood by law, philosophy, and even pseudo-science, and denied as well the possibility, even, of possessing a collective history as a people, black Americans -- commencing with the slave narratives in 1760 -- published their individual histories in astonishing numbers, in a larger attempt to narrate a collective history of "the race." (4)

Thus slave narratives became an authentication strategy of sorts, a declaration of personhood independent of social
prejudice. They simultaneously exposed and questioned the binary oppositions that allowed oppression to function: black/white, slave/master, freedom/bondage, literate/illiterate, subject/object.

The importance of slave narratives to understanding Harlem Renaissance literature is twofold: first, they established a connection between writing and creation of identity, and interrogated the means of their own subjugation. Second, these narratives established their own set of conventions, many of which are restructured in later fictional works. The motif of the journey north is recast as a trip across the ocean to Europe; the recognition scene (where the slave first realizes his or her status as chattel) survives in the confrontation of racism in society; and the acquisition of literacy is refigured in later works into the acquisition of a place in society and economic independence.

Slave narratives sought to destroy the cultural myths that enslaved blacks securely as laws. The most virulent affront to attaining equality was the perception of African Americans as bestial, somehow less intellectually developed than whites. This manifested itself in a white fascination with black sexuality, which became a means of asserting difference. Black men were alleged to be virile, heroically proportioned, and extremely libidinous. And black women "presented almost intolerable contradictions for the white male": as women, they were sexually
attractive, but as African Americans, they need not be respected (Dearborn 135). Nineteenth century society used binary oppositions to construct a homology equating blackness with sexuality and whiteness with purity. In order to rationalize white men's predation upon their black female slaves, society also created the myth of the "loose black woman," a creature "who ensnares men with her body rather than uplifting them with her beauty" (as plantation owners' wives allegedly did) (Christian, BWN 15).

Former slaves Harriet Tubman, Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and Frederick Douglass all confronted this myth and decried its use to justify the rape and sexual abuse of black women under slavery. A brief analysis of two of the more famous slave narratives serves to illuminate the interrelationship of racial and sexual oppression. In Douglass' Narrative, the first awareness of his own status as slave occurs simultaneously with his realization of the sexual abuse of a woman. He describes the brutal whipping of his Aunt Hester, "a woman of noble form, and of graceful proportions" (6), who was absent one night when their master desired her sexually. After stripping off her blouse and tying her arms above her head to a hook, he flogged her until "the warm, red blood (amid heart-rending screams from her and horrid oaths from him) came dripping to the floor" (6). Douglass relates that many slave owners served in "the double relation of master and father" (3) to many of their slaves, as was probably
true in his own case. Thus a recurrent motif in slave narratives is the plea for consideration as human beings through rejection of a strictly physical identity. By exposing the sexual degeneration of white slave owners, these narratives hoped to break the identification of slaves with their sexuality.

In her *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), Harriet Jacobs is even more articulate in exposing the "double bind" facing women of color, condemned by both socially ascribed gender and race as inferior. She serves as an early exemplar of what Carby calls a reconstruction of "the sexual ideologies of the nineteenth century to produce an alternative discourse of black womanhood" (RW 6). She seeks to discredit the image of the "loose black woman" even as she seemingly conforms to it by bearing two illegitimate children. She issues this poignant appeal to her readers:

> And now, reader, I come to a period in my unhappy life, which I would gladly forget if I could. The remembrance fills me with sorrow and shame. It pains me to tell you of it ... But o, ye happy women, whose purity has been sheltered from childhood, who have been free to choose the objects of your affection, whose homes are protected by law, do not judge the poor desolate slave girl too severely! If slavery had been abolished, I, also, could have married the man of my choice; I could have had a home shielded by laws; and I should have been spared the painful task of confessing what I am now about to relate; but all my prospects had been blighted by slavery.

> (Jacobs 54)

This chapter of her narrative, entitled, "A Perilous Passage in the Slave Girl's Life," confirms the regularity
of this oppression; note the definite article ("the slave girl" rather than "a slave girl"), which demonstrates the inescapability of this sexual domination. Also, the use of the word "passage" indicates a transitory stage, one which can be overcome. Ironically, the immense courage of African American women that allowed them to endure rape and forced childbearing was another factor in denying their status as idealized women; if they really were as sensitive as women should be according to 19th century ideology, they should either kill themselves or die of shame in such circumstances. Thus the ability of slave women to survive brutalization further contributed to their social degradation.

Yet Jacobs does not beg for her readers' sympathy for bearing her master's children, but for her voluntary sexual intercourse with a white man of her own choosing. It is this sexual self-assertion that so confounds social norms. She writes, "There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, save that which he gains by kindness and attachment" (55). In the depths of her oppression, Linda Brent assumes agency by choosing, literally, the lesser of two evils. Though she doesn't have the option of maintaining celibacy, she nonetheless mitigates her abuse by initiating a less repulsive sexual liaison. Linda Brent, the slave girl, bestows her sexual favors where she chooses. For this incontrovertible affrontery, she pays with seven years of self-imposed
solitary confinement which is her only means of escaping
the consequences of her "presumption."

Contradicting this form of Social Darwinism became a
motif in African American narratives. Unable to meet a
standard equating fairness with beauty, black women were
rejected as impure (sexually voracious). Yet when as a
result of miscegenation some women of color did happen to
attain that standard, they were sexually coerced even more
brutally because of it. Thus Frances Harper writes
about fair African American women, "If God has bestowed
beauty upon her, it will prove her greatest curse" (27).
After discovering that the beautiful and accomplished Iola
Leroy has "black blood," another slave describes her fate:
"... she's putty. Boo'ful long hair comes way down her
back, putty blue eyes, and jis' ez white ez anybody's in
dis place ... I heerd Marse Tom talkin' 'bout her las'
night to his brudder; tellin' him she was mighty airish,
but he meant to break her in" (38). The same chaste
demeanor which protects a white woman invites rape for an
African American. Thus sex was enjoyable because of the
commonality between black and white, but permissable
outside marriage because of socially constructed
difference. Combating this stereotype was another motif in
slave narratives, because the identification with virility
also forced a denigration to the status of beasts. For
women of the Harlem Renaissance, exploring female sexuality
in their novels could potentially exacerbate racism, so
they disguised their sexual subtexts through subtle refigurations of stock characters.

To understand the subtle and subversive relationship of sexuality and color to class, economics, education, and dynamics of power, one must view it in the context of mainstream women's fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This is the final consideration in cementing the link between slave narratives and the fiction of Larsen and Fauset.

TRAGIC MULATTOES AND THE CULT OF TRUE WOMANHOOD

Integrating the "innate frigidity of light-skinned women" (McLendon 154) with the ostensible sexual voracity of black women, mulattoes constitute a problematic nexus of social and sexual expectations. The conflict between black and white sexuality occurs, literally and figuratively, in heroines of mixed racial parentage. They appear in many texts as the stock "tragic mulatta" (BWN 16). Mixed race heroines function as characterizations of illicit sexuality, while paradoxically offering an alternative to the "loose black woman" because of the supposed effect of their infusions of white blood. Both Larsen and Fauset employ mixed race heroines, interrogating the relationship between the mythic "tragic mulatto" and the libidinous loose black woman. Since a majority of African Americans have some white ancestry (Njeri 376), "mulatto" is an abstraction, a tag for a social obsession with racial identity. Vashti Lewis adds that "The near-white female
had become a tragic archetype by the turn of the twentieth century" (375), representing a trope of irreconcilable difference. Michelle Cliff confirms the use of the mulatto figure as a signal disjunction between ideology and practice:

Mulatto, as the word has come down to us, is a term charged by myth and formed by a false sense of history. Mulatto may embrace -- at one time -- the clandestine, inauthentic, secret, devious, tragic, promiscuous, subversive, confused, irrational. The word refers to an identity, born in the historical and literary imagination of white America; the actual mulatto, the person who carries the Black and white, is found elsewhere.

("Black Woman as Mulatto" 12)

Cliff points to the function of the mulatto figure as ideology, a configuration that allows society to reconcile the supposed differences between black and white without acceding their artificiality. Supposedly, despite the ability to look like white Americans, mulattoes can never really act like white Americans, because "blood will out" -- their "true," black, primitive natures will manifest and confirm the alleged innate superiority of the dominant class. Mulattoes are powerful emblems of miscegenation, and serve as a trope for the connection between color and sex. Hazel Carby calls use of mulatto protagonists "a narrative device of mediation" (RW 89), signalling that this trope of difference deconstructs the binary opposites of black and white by positing a third alternative.

The three most prominent women writing in the Harlem Renaissance -- Hurston, Larsen, and Fauset -- all create
mulatto protagonists in texts limning female sexuality, thereby exposing the fallacy of race as a determinant of sexuality and undercutting the myths of loose black and pure white women. In so doing, they invert the equation between light skin and purity, because usually their darker counterparts are more sexually conservative. In all three of the women’s most prominent novels -- *Quicksand*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Plum Bun* -- the mulattos’ white heritage objectifies them, while their blackness humanizes them. The use of mulattos serves two purposes. On the most pragmatic level, white readers may be more sympathetic to mulatto heroines, who serve as crossovers between the two cultures. But on a deeper level, the authors use them parodically; knowing the mulatto figure to be a cynical strategy for reinscribing oppression, they instead use them as tools to interrogate that prejudice. Unfortunately, many critics see what they perceive as the stock tragic mulatto and look no further.

Since their works are so often read out of the context of African American conventions, it is easy to understand why Fauset and Larsen have been misunderstood for so many years. In addition to refiguring stock abstractions like the tragic mulatto and the pure white woman, another factor in their critical misreading is genre. To perceive the delicate mask which disguises these authors’ radicalism, it is necessary to peek into nineteenth century parlors, attending to "those silly
women's books," the sentimental novel and the novel of manners.

PREJUDICE AND PRIDE: Or, That Novel Made Me So Mad
I Want to Go Out and Vote

Eight years ago, Jane Tompkins reassessed Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by reinterpreting the genre of sentimental fiction. She defines it as popular, targeted to a female audience, dominated by high emotions and the opposition between powerful villains and vulnerable, pure heroines. She complains that "a male-dominated scholarly tradition ... prevented even committed feminists from recognizing and asserting the value of a powerful and specifically female novelistic tradition" (*Designs* 123). Of course, this is not news to many feminists, and the same argument can be made for Jessie Fauset that Tompkins makes for Stowe: a certain awareness of conventions of the genre is necessary before her feminism becomes apparent. Tompkins continues: "... twentieth century critics have taught generations of students to equate popularity with debasement, emotionality with ineffectiveness, religiosity with fakery, domesticity with triviality, and all of these, implicitly, with womanly inferiority" (123). These claims have also been levelled against Jessie Fauset, and to some extent, Nella Larsen, precisely because they employ some conventions of the sentimental novel.
Sentimental novels, as defined by Tompkins, originated in the nineteenth century as attempts to ameliorate common cultural problems such as slavery. Given that their target audience, women, was unable to vote until 1920, the social changes authors such as Stowe sought were internal, a "change of heart" rather than a change of law (132). The very conventions which critics cite as grounds for dismissing sentimental fiction from serious critical consideration, actually function on thematic rather than purely stylistic levels. Tompkins writes that one derided convention, the almost absurd manipulations of fate whereby the heroine is cast against insupportable odds, elevates the victim to almost mythic status proportionate to her oppression. An obvious (and factual) example of a heroine's defiance of a hugely unequal oppressor is Linda Brent's manipulation of and triumph over her master, Dr. Flint; indeed, the whole tradition of slave narratives attests to this. By reckoning with powers greater than herself, the heroine paradoxically diminishes her victimization.

Given that Fauset employs the genre of the sentimental novel, critics still decry her use of melodrama as evidence of atavism. Hiroko Sato, long considered an authority on Fauset, describes her novels as "melodrama in which a beautiful heroine and a handsome hero are finally united after overcoming innumerable obstacles" (68). This is a vivid example of mistaking irony for approval,
demonstrating the very prejudices their novels subvert. Both authors question the institution of marriage and a woman's ability to assert her sexuality. In traditional sentimental novels, "the tragic denouements result from a flaw that would not be fatal in a male hero, namely, the desire for sexual fulfillment" (Pratt 73). Fauset is criticized for uniting a hero and heroine, when that is a deconstruction of the traditional punitive ending of most sentimental novels. Ironically, though Larsen does not construct a "happy ending" in either of her novels, she is criticized for conforming to a feminine genre as well.

Yet another convention is the direct address by character to audience, which Tompkins claims reveals "the specific political intent of the novel" (139). Both Larsen and Fauset employ an evolution of this technique, transferring the polemmic from direct address to free indirect discourse, casual apostrophes that seem unconscious and natural rather than forced. For example, Fauset's Angela Murray intones, "I'm sick of this whole race business if you ask me" (PB 53). And Larsen's Helga Crane lashes out against obssession with race in Quicksand: "Why, Helga wondered, with unreasoning exasperation, didn't they find something else to talk of?" (52). In Passing, Irene Redfield chafes her husband, "'Just the same you're not to talk about the race problem. I won't have it'" (232) -- as if not talking about it would ameliorate prejudice. What initially seems a mere
revulsion from serious topics is more profound: these heroines invoke the power of speech to change their worlds. If they banish racism from their dinner tables and not from the entire world, they have achieved at least a minor victory.

Critics often misread such declarations as dismissive of racism, rather than seeing them as foregrounding gender. For example, Cary Wintz simultaneously lambasts Fauset for lack of racial focus and alleges that her novels contain "no overt commitment to feminism" (207). Relegation of race to a frustrating but minor concern could alone account for both authors' neglect. Barbara Christian rebuts the charge of lack of seriousness, noting, "just as Barbara Smith called for criticism that includes race with gender, so critics of Jessie Fauset's time should have included gender with race" ("But What Do We Think ..." 62). Fauset's and Larsen's works continue the tradition of slave narratives associating all forms of oppression, gender, economic, social, and racial. To limit their scope to either/or establishes much the same hierarchy that their novels subvert. It is not important which binary opposition they undermine; these authors seek to destroy the totality of social constructions limiting the individual to a prescribed identity. Valorizing race over gender or vice versa ignores the efficacy of integrating race into a larger discussion of the politics of exclusion in general. Choosing a uniquely feminine genre further
disguises the issues, while allowing the authors to incorporate feminist as well as racial themes. Rather than demonstrating authorial weakness, use of sentimental conventions like direct address, and melding racial with gender concerns, demonstrates consciousness of audience.

Choosing middle class mulatto women as protagonists signals an attempt to broaden the audience for African American fiction beyond the prurient voyeurs attracted to stereotypes of libidinous lower class characters. Adaptation of the sentimental novel further indicates a move beyond the marginal and into the mainstream. The conventions of sentimental novels that initially may be construed as ineptly superficial instead indicate a conscious pairing of medium and message, employing a crossover novelistic style.

Another uniquely feminine genre Larsen and Fauset exploit is the so-called "novel of manners." According to James Tuttleton, the novel of manners if defined by inclusion of "manners, social customs, folkways, conventions, traditions and mores of a given social group at a given time and place" (10). The center of the novel of manners is "an idea or an issue" and is "sociologically oriented" (10-11). It is also "primarily concerned with social conventions as they impinge upon characters" (12). Larsen’s and Fauset’s novels obviously conform to this definition: they focus on a specific locale (Harlem), a class of people (the educated black middle class), and a
series of conventions (women’s club membership, nightclubs, racial uplift). Mary Sisney further refines the traits of the novel of manners to include "a fight for acceptance ... loss of identity ... and a sense of oppression" (172), suiting the genre perfectly for a critique of social constrictions facing women of color in the twenties. Noting that "the only battles are domestic", Sisney also writes that novels of manners tend to be "satirical" (171). The significance of understanding Fauset’s and Larsen’s use of generic conventions changes their attention to homely details from distracting minutiae to an indication of a deeper interrogative process. In a white author like Jane Austen (to whom, rather surprisingly, both authors have been compared), trivia is considered satirical. In an African American author, it is merely not considered.

Deborah McDowell, an eloquent voice in defense of both Larsen and Fauset, calls for a "contextual approach" to their work, and argues that "the dominant social attitudes about Black women were strikingly consistent with traditional middle class expectations of women" ("New Directions" 192). A combination of the sentimental novel and the novel of manners forms a bridge between an unfamiliar culture (middle class Harlem) and a familiar genre (sentimental fiction). When attempting to demonstrate that the restrictions placed on black women
mirror those endured by white women, what better technique than adoption of a traditionally feminine genre?

Both authors use genre as commentary, defining social strictures by their choice of form. Just as Tompkins' re-vision of the sentimental novel has aided scholars' new appreciation of Uncle Tom's Cabin, so the contextual approach McDowell calls for should clarify the artistry and politics of these novels. By linking issues and conventions originating in slave narratives (the myth of the loose black woman, the cult of true womanhood) to a discussion of genre, this project attempts to demonstrate the multifarious considerations in reading works by women of color. Competence in traditional close reading may be insufficient for the demands of analyzing works which purposely operate on several levels. Yet somehow the works of Zora Neale Hurston have managed to negotiate these chasms of misunderstanding and emerge more vital than ever. Examining the factors that led to Hurston's revitalization and left the other two authors unread for so long can perhaps shed some light on some of the processes and biases inherent in canon creation.

OUR EYES WERE WATCHING HURSTON

Hurston's well-deserved contemporary popularity devolves at least partially to her anthropological background, which allows her to write about the "folk" rather than the "people," as Larsen and Fauset do. She "epitomized the intellectual who represented 'the people'
through a reconstruction of 'the folk' and avoided the class confrontation of Northern cities. Fauset and Larsen, however, wrote more directly out of this urban confrontation" (Carby, RW 166). Hurston's use of dialect, derided by her contemporaries, allows superficial readers to conflate race and class, as if (to paraphrase Gloria T. Hull) all blacks were Southerners and all Southerners were agrarian. By detailing a version of the black milieu with which white audiences are familiar, Hurston's work presents less of a challenge. Her characters lead lives physically similar to their grandparents under slavery, save for the important distinction of autonomy.

Her novels, ironically, seem more "real" than Fauset's and Larsen's bourgeois stories, partially because they portray a class of African American protagonists with whom casual readers are familiar, almost to the point of stereotype. *Their Eyes*' Janie Crawford and Teacake playing guitar "on de muck" pose little threat of integration into mainstream white society. This is not to say that Hurston's characters are one dimensional types, but that superficial readers can readily accept them as such. While African Americans live as sharecroppers, picking beans and moving from town to town with the weather, the white bourgeoisie can effectively dismiss them as "Other." But doctors and club women present a more overt challenge, because though black, they seem to embrace values previously identified as white. This introduces the
dimension of class into the race question. If characters also pass for white, which they can and do in these novels, the comfortable distinctions between "us" and "them" disappear. Janie Crawford, though fair enough to pass, is content in a segregated milieu; Larsen's and Fauset's protagonists are not. Stripped of dialect and identifiably African American surroundings, they expose the fallacy of racial determinism more insidiously than Hurston's heroines, and readers' discomfort does not sell books.

Jessie Fauset seeks to introduce her readers to "men and women of the class to which she herself belongs" (Gale viii). Marion L. Starkey remembers that "publishers rejected [Fauset's] manuscripts" because they had no "Harlem dives, no race riots, no picturesque, abject poverty" (Sato 69). And in her "Book Chat" column, syndicated in the African American press, reviewer Mary White Ovington wondered if "... this colored world that Miss Fauset draws" really existed (Lewis 124). Obviously, these novels defy simple categorization as "race novels."

Despite the differences in class and milieu, Hurston also confronts the relationship between coloration and sexuality. She creates a mulatto character seeking sexual satisfaction, just as Fauset and Larsen do. In Their Eyes, a neighbor, Mrs. Turner, objects to Janie's lover Teacake as being "too black" for her" (220). Hurston sees gradations of skin color establishing a hierarchy within black culture (a syndrome now called "colorism") as readily
as within white culture. Mrs. Turner, though black herself, "can't stand black niggers" (210).

But beyond the obviously common subject the three authors share, Larsen and Fauset were dismissed as authoring "these anxious little social novels" (49) -- as if race were anything but as social problem. Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen complicate racial and gender issues in ways Hurston does not. They see access to power less formulaically, comprised not only of race and gender, but of many factors: class, education, gradations of color, and control over sexual desire. These variables coalesce unpredictably, so that a beautiful black woman might have more agency than a white man, depending on which variables are factored in. Thus we find Fauset's light-skinned Angela rejecting a rich, white suitor, and Larsen's dark Felise cautioning a rich white man in her livingroom, "'Careful. You're the only white man here'" (Passing 238).

The last of these variables, women's sexuality, is masked in Fauset's fiction and in one of Larsen's two novels. All their heroines confront their own sexuality and conflicting social expectations. Plum Bun details its protagonist's loveless seduction; The Chinaberry Tree describes love without marriage, adultery, attempted rape, and narrowly averted incest. "In fact, prim and proper Jessie Fauset included a far greater range of sexual activity than did most of Du Bois' debauched Tenth" (Spillers 87). In so doing, she satirizes the myth of
mulattoes as most analogous in color, and therefore purity, to "true white" womanhood. Larsen's Irene Redfield in *Passing* has a sexless marriage and implications of lesbianism; *Quicksand* is frank in its depiction of a woman's surrender to physical passion. All four novels confront the matrix between sexuality and color, parodying social stereotypes equating fairness with sexual purity. Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen confront gradations of color, not simply race, and women's sexuality, not merely their gender, in an effort to explode racism and sexism simultaneously.

Both novelists ask radical questions: how can women freely express their sexual natures? What role does eros play in determining social status? How does race configure identity? Which is more definitive, skin coloration or race? Yet at least partially because of their challenging choice of genre, and their privileging gender over race, they suffer scholarly neglect. To appreciate these seemingly conventional works, readers must step outside of the binary oppositions which limit the range of authorial expression. In the penultimate line of *Plum Bun*, a character says, "'There ought to be a tag on me somewhere'" (379). Employing an integrative approach to reading African American feminist works should preclude the need for any such categorization.
Notes

1. Her influence and stature were such that David L. Lewis writes, "Had she not been a 'a colored woman,' she might have started work in a New York publishing house ... There is no telling what she would have done if she had been a man" (When Harlem Was in Vogue 121). Of course, such speculation is always idle, but does highlight the extreme prejudice against which women of color writing in the twenties labored.

2. Toni Cade Bambara (in The Salt Eaters) and Barbara Christian (in her article "Race for Theory") lambast the Black Arts Movement of the 1960s for being similarly sexist in its agenda and work distribution.

3. An indication that reading these works has more than literary implications is the case of Anita Hill, whose testimony against Supreme Court Justice Clarence Thomas brought a firestorm of criticism. She was viewed by some as a racial apostate because in prioritizing gender over race in her allegations of sexual harassment. While the public judges people according to an arbitrary hierarchy of oppression, reading works which interrogate this hierarchy is both important and necessary.

4. Nell Irwin Painter points out that "The figure of the over-sexed Jezebel has amazing longevity. She is to found in the movies made in the 1980s and 1990s -- 'She's Gotta Have It,' 'Jungle Fever,' 'City of Hope,' -- in which [black] female characters are still likely to be shown unclothed, in bed, and in the midst of coitus" ("Hill, Thomas, and the Use of Racial Stereotypes" 210). And one of the most popular movies last year, "The Crying Game," plays with this stereotype by casting a transvestite as the seductive black woman.

5. This issue still resonates in late twentieth century fiction. In Sula, Toni Morrison writes about a female character: "Had she been any lighter-skinned, she would have needed either her mother's protection on the way to school of a streak of mean to defend herself" (Sula 52).

6. Jane Tompkins is not without a certain myopia herself; while championing Stowe, she neglects the work of Harriet Jacobs and other African Americans writing during this same period, whose experience was factual and therefore more powerful testimony to the evils of slavery. (Stowe herself tried to appropriate Jacobs' story, but the latter wanted to be the author of her own biography.)
7. A main criticism of *The Chinaberry Tree* was its melodramatic unreality. Interestingly enough, it was based on an actual incident in 1897 (Sylvander 208).
CHAPTER TWO

A NOVEL WITHOUT A MORAL?

Jessie Redmon Fauset's first novel There Is Confusion (1924) was heralded as the "dress rehearsal for the Harlem Renaissance" (Wintz 81) because of its serious engagement with issues of bigotry and sexism. Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen published eight of the twenty-three novels commonly designated as Harlem Renaissance works, and addressed prejudice not only against African Americans, but also against women. One must not forget that the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 gave women the vote, and ground-breaking black feminists like Ida B. Wells and Jane Edna Hunter continued to link women's issues with race issues. The "New Negro" as promulgated by Alain Locke was predominantly but not exclusively male, though later critics would have us think so. W.E.B. DuBois' "Talented Tenth" devoted themselves to racial uplift and elimination of class and economic impediments to black Americans, including women. The black women's club movement, numbering 50,000 members (Amott 164), committed itself to eradicating the image of black women as amoral and promiscuous.

Contrasting with this moralism were the cabaret scene, where women like Ethel Waters and Bessie Smith sang licentious and provocative blues songs, and the development
of the so-called Harlem School of literature, which promoted black exoticism rather than downplaying it. Carl Van Vechten’s *Nigger Heaven*, published in 1926, followed by the equally evocative *Home to Harlem* (Claude McKay, 1928) typified the primitivism and sexual abandon publishers sought in novels of the period. They included obligatory night club scenes, drunkenness, sexual indulgence, and "jungle rhythms." Catering to this white voyeurism, Claude McKay wrote that "Negroes are never so beautiful and magical as when they do that gorgeous sublimation of the primitive African sex feeling" (Singh 41). Writer Wallace Thurman, member of the latter movement, laughingly dubbed the Tenth "the niggerati" (Hughes 238) in a bitter acknowledgement that their erudition would never fully eclipse racism. (This self-applied epithet presages Malcolm X’s famous query, "What do you call a Negro with a PhD? A nigger.")

Hurston herself, in an ambiguously playful essay, glorifies the exotic in a description of her reaction to a nightclub:

> This orchestra grows rambunctious, rears on its hind legs and attacks the tonal veil with primitive fury, rending it, clawing it until it breaks through to the jungle beyond. I follow those heathen -- follow them exultingly. I dance wildly inside myself; I yell within, I whoop; I shake my assegai above my head, I hurl it true to the mark *veeeeeeoww*! I am in the jungle and living in the jungle way ... I am *so* colored.

("How It Feels" 36).

In actuality, the bourgeois lifestyle of the average
Harlem resident was "the best kept secret in the world" ("I Love Myself" 173) -- a secret which publishers were unwilling to expose.

Black women during this period faced a conundrum: how to bely the myth of the "loose black woman" by maintaining literary reticence on the subject of sexuality, while concommitantly pleasing publishers who preferred portrayals of primitivism and colorful lasciviousness. It was within this atmosphere that Fauset published her second novel *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* in 1929. Critics have long believed that Jessie Fauset writes "in contrast to McKay's use of sexuality to sketch the contours of black experience" (Singh 59), ignoring the subtexts of her novels which explore women's sexuality. Because her heroines explore their sexuality in well-furnished apartments and at social teas rather than in smoky nightclubs, many critics have missed the subversive sexuality in Fauset's novels. They read *Plum Bun* as the struggle of a fair-skinned mulatto to accept her racial heritage, ignoring its sexual politics. Yet today Elaine Showalter notes that "Fauset's novels were as deeply conscious of the problems of feminine sexual identity as with racial conflicts; they show how race and gender together create permutations of power and powerlessness" (*Sister's* 121).

While Hurston exulted in print and public in the primitivism of the Harlem School, Jessie Fauset worked on her degree in French at the Sorbonne (Dearborn 50).
Returning to New York, she became literary editor on Du Bois' *Crisis* between 1919 and 1926. After reading T.S. Stribling's *Birthright*, the tale of a mulatto coming to terms with his racial identity, she decided she could "do it better" (Bone 101). Critics like Robert Bone assume that Fauset meant she could write a better "passing" novel because she was black, but miss her refiguration of the mulatto character from a male to a female, which adds the dimension of gender.

Though all four of Fauset's novels examine how race and gender structure power relations, I choose to focus on *Plum Bun* as the most eloquent text elucidating Fauset's interrogation of coloration and sexuality, because both stylistically and thematically it represents what critic William Braithwaite calls "her most perfect artistic achievement" (Sato 72). The novel's relative obscurity warrants a brief plot overview. Angela Murray, the heroine, is born to a light-skinned mother and a dark father, who live in cramped though happy circumstances for the first quarter of the novel. After their deaths, Angela abandons her loving, darker-skinned sister Virginia (Jinny) and passes as white to gain economic mobility and social status. While dabbling at art, Angela meets a white millionaire who conveniently falls in love with her. He tries to seduce her without marriage, while she tries to elicit a marriage proposal without seduction. After consummating and eventually ending the affair, Angela
embraces her art and her status as an African American, but not before falling in love with another mulatto, Anthony Cross. Complications ensue, but at novel's end the couple is reunited.

Except for the seduction, the plot barely hints at sex. Fauset's is conscious of the affrontery of overt portrayals of passion, and subtly encodes her sexual subtext, beginning with her choice of title. Critics debate the precise significance of the "plum bun." One suggests that it symbolizes whiteness and its supposed rewards (Feeney 368). His interpretation seems superficial, given his acknowledgement of "the counterstructure suggested by [the] title" (368). More perceptively, Deborah McDowell reads the plum bun of the title as a sweet reward, the "power and influence attainable only through marriage to a wealthy white man" ("Regulating" xiv). She also points to the "sexual winks and innuendoes" (xx) of the word "bun," and its vernacular associations with buttocks in particular and female sexuality in general. While McDowell seems more on target, she notes the sexual definition without fully exploring it as a consumable object. If the plum bun indeed represents Angela Murray's sexuality (her "bun"), then it functions as synecdoche, in which case she too is consumable, a commodity to be bought and sold for physical gratification. The plum bun is both tool and trap: the sweet used to entice a man, and the woman's digestion by the man.
Yet for all the discussion of the title, the subtitle goes unremarked. Why does Jessie Fauset call *Plum Bun* "a novel without a moral"? Is this some sort of immediate disclaimer, meant to offset charges of didacticism? Since critics have missed the novel’s sexual symbolism for the past sixty-four years, I think not. If we are to believe that she consciously interrogates sexual and racial expectations, why undermine her novel by saying it has no moral? Maybe she is simply being ironic, as if to say, "Of course there’s a moral here -- get it?" Instead, I believe that Fauset’s cleverness transcends the topical and questions not only social expectations within the novel, but expectations of the genre itself. Is the goal of literature ethical didacticism? Is moral instruction a prerequisite of "good literature"? In stating that hers is "a novel without a moral," Fauset undermines the monolithic cultural expectations that impose "morals," object lessons, upon women as a means of social control. Fauset is aware of the process of acculturation by which women are inveigled into self-censorship. Perhaps her choice of subtitle is her nod to this insidious means of oppression, and parodies the word "moral" in both its senses: as object lesson, and as good versus evil. In-depth analysis of this title demonstrates the layers of meaning Fauset obscures beneath her seemingly conventional exterior, and the subtle implications such analysis may uncover.

Fauset further hints at her subtext by using the nursery rhyme "Plum Bun" as an epigraph to the novel, lest
her readers miss the link between sex and economics:

To Market, To Market
To buy a Plum Bun;
Home again, Home again,2
Market is done.

Section titles correspond to its lines: "Home," "Market," "Plum Bun," "Home Again," and "Market Is Done." This structure serves not only as an organizing principle, but also sets the tone for each incident, cluing the alert reader to parody lurking beneath conventional plot. Thus in "Home," the prose waxes eloquent about the comforts of their household, but Angela can't wait to leave. In "Market," Angela seeks a husband (a buyer for her only marketable commodity, her virginity). "Plum Bun" explores the sweet rewards of male-female relationships (as Angela goes broke, is seduced and abandoned, and denies her family). "Home Again" describes the alienation Angela feels in her old neighborhood after readopting her racial identity, and "Market Is Done" sends Angela across the ocean away from the marriage market. Fauset uses conventions of the sentimental novel so convincingly that readers have long ignored the self-parody inherent in the section titles, just as they have ignored the title's sexual innuendoes and the subtitle's irony.

One must read between the lines to analyze how Jessie Fauset dismantles stereotypes while maintaining romantic conventions. Her treatment of Angela's seduction is an example. Though she does not emerge from that intrigue
unscathed, the damage is to her illusions, not her body, morals, or reputation, as is the more traditional outcome. She suffers offended pride rather than retribution for her "sin" as is more common. A scene from the immensely popular *Marjorie Morningstar* thirty years later demonstrates the traditional penalty for women who discard their virginity before marriage:

He never said a word about [her lost virginity] there- after; nor for the rest of their lives. But she never again saw on his face the pure happiness that had shone there ... He took her as she was, with her deformity, despite it. For that was what it amounted to, in his eyes and in hers -- a deformity; a deformity that could no longer be helped; a permanent crippling, like a crooked arm. (Wouk 553)

Contrast those lines with this assessment of Angela's affair: "Angela's brief episode with Roger had left no trace on her moral nature" (245). Surprisingly, although her affair is sexually consummated and endures over more than six months, no pregnancy results, nor is there any hint that such an obvious consequence might occur. Fauset implies that a woman's sexuality is subject to her own discretion, and there is no inherent damage in exercising it. Yet her prim novel of manners style disguises this subversive message. In *Plum Bun*, Jessie Fauset interrogates how coloration and sexuality effect power dynamics within the home, and gradually expands her focus until she exposes their effect on economics, class, and career opportunities. At this point, close attention to the text is warranted to demonstrate her polemic intent.
THE COMMODIFICATION OF WOMEN

Fauset signals her subversiveness by linking sexuality and economics, demonstrating that women's economic security is dependent on their status as commodities for men. Mattie is lovely enough to turn heads at tea in the Bellevue-Stratford, and enjoys "the possibilities for joy and freedom which seemed to her inherent in mere whiteness" (14). But her white skin will not exempt her from the handicap of gender. Before marriage, she is repeatedly propositioned by a white man, valued for her properties of adornment and sexual attractiveness. Her complaints elicit the response that Mattie is "a perfectly white nigger if there ever was one" and her "mother wasn't any better than she should be" (29). A light-skinned black woman must seek economic advantages through sexual alliances, but has no status on her own. Mattie's would-be seducer, too, alludes to her coloration and ancestry as evidence of sexual availability and dependence on men. He sees her fairness as evidence of an earlier generation's promiscuity. "'Are you really coloured? You know, I've seen lots of white girls not as pretty as you. Sit here and tell me about your mother, -- and your father. Do -- do you remember him?'" (30). Because she has fair skin, Mattie's mother must have been "no better than she should be" -- an interesting play on words implying the disparity between what a person can do and what she should do in society's perception. The reference to her father ("Do you remember
him?" implies her mother's sexual misconduct. By extension, Mattie would then be an easy sexual target. But the chauffeur (Junius Murray) functions metonymically for Mattie in this case, acting as her vehicle to a new life through marriage rather than sexual exploitation. As an African American woman, this is the best economic opportunity Mattie can hope for.

Important here is her daughter Angela's dismissal of her mother's life, and determination to be agent rather than object. The seeming happiness of the Murray's home is riddled with economic tension: it is on second rate Opal Street, "no jewel of the first water" (11). The image of an opal also suggests a milky white surface beneath which color is hidden, much like mother Mattie and eldest daughter Angela. Angela wants to avoid a life like her mother's "at any cost" (12), seeking the "rewards of life -- riches, glamour, pleasure" (17). As a result of her work as a teacher, she is able to provide her mother with a washerwoman and a car, luxuries her father could not afford. (These are also very revealing improvements in Mattie's life: rather than the lovely clothes of which she is so fond, Angela provides her with an escape from domesticity, deciding that is the greater luxury.) She rejects commodification, resolving to be financially independent, and by association sexually independent, equating earning a livelihood with life itself (51). Viewed with this perspective, the first chapters in the
"Home" section become ironic, imbued with financial terminology and, more damning still, consisting of scenes where Mattie is propositioned and passes for white. With such a home as one's only haven, it is no wonder that Angela seeks a "market" for her talents.

Fauset contrasts Mattie's commodification with the limited professional options available to black women of her day. Deborah McDowell notes that Fauset herself encountered "occupational barriers" because of race ("Regulating" xv), and the author explores this theme in each of her four novels. In her first, *There Is Confusion*, the heroine prefers a role on the stage, but instead finds herself relegated to "a household of children, the getting of a thousand meals, picking up laundry, no time to herself for meditation or reading" (TIC 95). In her final novel, *Comedy: American Style*, her heroine is groomed for a successful marriage, which culminates in isolation and abuse at the hands of her white husband. Only in *Plum Bun* and *The Chinaberry Tree* do women realize their professional potential. In *The Chinaberry Tree*, Laurentine Strange is the first black modiste in Red Brook (97), known for her "genuine creations" (56) and said to have "a positive genius for design" (79). She supports herself and her cousin with her fashions, as well as employing two other black women. Mary Jane Lupton claims that "clothing is the [novel's] economic center" ("Bad Blood" 390). Laurentine manifests financial and economic independence,
as opposed to another Harlem Renaissance creation, Hurston's Janie Crawford, who receives her validation and financial support from men. Yet typically, this ground-breaking role model of financial and artistic independence goes unremarked.

In *Plum Bun*, Fauset explores other occupational alternatives facing black women through Mattie, Angela and Jinny's mother. "She was old enough to remember a day when poverty for a coloured girl meant one of three things: going out to service, working as a ladies' maid, or taking a genteel but poorly paid position as seamstress with one of the families of the rich and great ..." (27). All three placed a young woman in jeopardy of unwanted sexual advances by men in the households where they worked. Indeed, domestic service seemed to imply that workers were meant to "service" the males of the household as well as the domestic chores.

In contrast, Angela becomes a schoolteacher, a job for which she has emotional antipathy but economic motivation. (Fauset was herself denied a position as a teacher in Philadelphia because of her race.) Paula Giddings points out that "the status of teaching provided an escape from the limitations that the society imposed on [black] women" (*When and Where I Enter* 101). Additionally, "... an education not only had a dramatic impact on their status and quality of life, but often shielded women from the sexual harassment that many of them confronted in White
homes" (101). Again, Fauset links economics and sexuality, and expresses the frustration black women feel at their professional limitations in these lines: "It is true that neither [Angela nor Jinny] felt any special leaning toward this calling. Angela frankly despised it, but she supposed she must make her living some way" (34). Fauset reveals the extra care which women of color must take to provide for themselves economically, and by linking racial prejudice to economic opportunities, foreshadows Angela's later use of her body as a means to attaining financial and social security.

Angela complains, "'If I were a man, ' she said, 'I could be president,' and laughed at herself for the 'if' itself proclaimed a limitation" (88). But Fauset is unwilling to relegate women to positions of powerlessness, despite social and economic handicaps. She structures a growing awareness in her character: first, Angela glories in the revelation that women do have a sort of power themselves. In an oft-quoted passage indicative of the first stage of Angela's development, she muses: "Power, greatness, authority, these were fitting and proper gifts for men; but there were sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too" (88). Initially this appears to be an acceptance of women's traditional acquisition of power through alliances with men, but Fauset subtly subverts those ideals by situating them in the context of a section titled "Market," emphasizing that the
"sweeter gifts" are actually bought and paid for. Pairing the title's sexual implications with the section titles' mercantilism reveals that Angela's plan to marry is not a capitulation to a righteous hierarchy, but rather the subversion of that sexist hegemony to market a power of her own. In making the character conscious of her will to power, Fauset undercuts the binary opposition between power and manhood, and subservience and womanhood.

In that revealing passage, Fauset exposes what Gabrielle Foreman calls "typical conjugal rhetoric" (654). Foreman argues that Fauset deliberately exposes Angela's simplistic belief of obtaining influence by marrying a powerful man, and then foreshadows how the power struggle will overwhelm Angela if she relies on sexuality alone. Foreman explains this foreshadowing, ominously apparent on the second reading of the novel, by deconstructing the following sentence: "Only it would be fun, great fun, to capture power and protection in addition to the freedom and independence she had so long coveted ..." (88-9). She writes that pairing "capture" with "freedom" and "protection" with "independence" cancels them all out, forming an equation the sum of which must be zero (654). As Angela consciously accepts the limits of her power in this first stage of awareness, Fauset sets her up for a predictable fall that exposes, not the absurdity of her calculations and ambitions, but the cynicism of a society within which a woman's ambition can only extend so far.
Angela must realize that her sexuality is both a means of acquiring influence, and a source of objectification.

In Angela's second stage of development, she realizes that "... she must have money and influence; indeed since she was so young she would even need protection; perhaps it would be better to marry" (88) -- she sees that her power is secondary, and still requires a form of subjugation to a man. Angela must explore this power dynamic in all its permutations, exploding each of the conventions that support it -- from rejection of race, to denial of family, through loss of personal dignity and sacrifice of her honor (read that "chastity") -- before she reaches the third stage of awareness of the power structure. What may be superficially read as mere exigencies of plot are actually purposeful explorations of the conventions which acculturate women to positions of secondary importance. Her character must experience all the cliches, from the storm which renders her seduction irresistible, to the common excuse of "I'll call you" (meaning "Good-by"). Only after subjecting each of these cultural myths to interrogation and finally rejecting each as contributors to her oppression, can Angela reach the third stage of awareness, in which she accepts that the truest form of power is independence.

"PASSING" AND THE TROPE OF COLOR

Though growing in awareness of her sexuality, Angela does not rely on it alone to acquire power. Her experience
passing with Mattie teach her that color is in the eye of the beholder, so she reflects on "the social system which stretched appearance so far beyond being" (58) and decides that she must "pass" for white. (This passage exemplifies Fauset's use of the casual apostrophe, an adaptation of the sentimental novel's authorial intrusion.) Angela's sister Jinny serves as her foil, her alter ego and better part. By defining herself as white, Angela rejects Jinny and denies a part of herself. Each occasion where Angela rejects her sister culminates in severe repercussions for Angela. Contrasting Angela's acceptance by society with her darker sister's rejection, Fauset comments not only on the capricious deceptiveness of skin coloration, but also on the cost of defining oneself by a fiction such as race. Fauset foregrounds the irrationality of social constructs as behavioral determinants. If Angela defines herself as black, she maintains her familial heritage, but has few economic options. If she defines herself as white, she can access a larger world, but only at the expense of her personal history, her heritage. Fauset understands that race is a purely social construct, and can only be accepted as definitive only at great personal expense.

Angela chooses the apparently lesser sacrifice, giving up her racial heritage. Sitting at ease in the restaurant, Angela reflects, "'And if Jinny were here,' she thought, slowly selecting another cake, 'she really would be just as capable of fitting into all this as mother and I; but they
wouldn’t let her light’" (58). Her selection of another

... cake as she muses on discrimination symbolizes Angela’s
decision to be part of "the feast of life," to

... metaphorically sit at the big table and dine on cakes

... rather than the scraps of white male power (unlike

... Hurston’s Granny, "who loved to deal in scraps" [Eyes

... 138]). The deaths of her parents in that chapter liberate

... Angela to recreate herself as a new, more powerful entity.

... She inherits enough money to guarantee at least temporary

... independence, and symbolically seeks "a room of her own" by

... severing ties to her sister. Fauset does not criticise

... Angela for her perceived abandonment of her race, but uses

... the device of passing to question how race confers meaning

... and value. Fauset’s designation of whiteness as "a badge

... of power" implies that it is not inherent in the

... individual, but rather a socially constructed performance.

... Angela can pass for white because she is white if she so

... designates herself. This radical refiguration of the trope

... of passing is so firmly embedded in plot however, that it

... is easy to miss.

... After assuming the more powerful but equally

... superficial veneer of whiteness, Angela realizes another

... level of oppression, women’s dependence on men. Angela’s

... decision to maximize her opportunities by "passing" for

... white solidifies after a particularly numbing example of
discrimination at a movie theater. Her escort had been

... there three weeks before to test its acceptance of black
patrons, but the theater's ownership has changed hands in the interim and now they're "not selling tickets to coloured people" (75). The racial prejudice itself bothers Angela less than her dependence on her date and his inability to guarantee her the protection a man supposedly provides. "... she was so sorry for him, suddenly conscious of the pain which must be his at being stripped before the girl he loved of the masculine right to protect, to appear the hero" (76). Here Fauset describes how racism emasculates men by denying them their "right" to protect women. The cult of true womanhood defines females as weak and needing male protection, as Harriet Jacobs confirms when she decries the lack of protection of slave women. While acknowledging that such patriarchal ideology oppresses all women, definitions of African American women as "other" constituted them as beyond the need for protection, while simultaneously exploiting their marginal status. Paradoxically, vulnerability elicits respect and protection for white women, and abuse and rape for black women.

Angela changes the dynamic by assuming rights of protection for herself, moving herself up a notch in the hierarchy of power. Society traditionally constitutes white men as the most powerful, white women as subservient to them but still dominant over black men, and black men as dominating black women. In this equation, black women are, as Granny narrated earlier, "de mules uh de world": Angela
thinks to herself that men had a better time of it than women, coloured men than coloured women, white men than white women" (88). Angela refuses to accept her role as low woman on the totem pole. Angela says this incident "showed [her] the way" (78); she had sacrificed her autonomy to the social perquisite of black male authority, only to find there was a greater authority (white males). She decides that she, with her light skin and fine hair, could access power more directly. Again, Fauset links coloration and gender relations to show how social constructions influence personal identity. Passing is not racial treachery, but a rejection of sexism as well as racial prejudice.

Angela’s decision to pass is really her only option to enlarge her world. Religion, the traditional refuge of the oppressed, is no more an option for Fauset than it is for Larsen’s Helga Crane in Quicksand. Fauset’s upbringing in poverty as the daughter of a minister of the African Methodist Evangelical Church confirmed her scepticism about other-worldly consolations (Shockley 416). Though early in the novel she paints scenes of domestic tranquillity in which hymns figure prominently, she undermines the power of religion to do anything more than simply comfort the downtrodden. The Murray family’s favorite song is "The Dying Christian," a lugubrious consolation for final defeat. For Angela, the hymn’s emotion is "almost palpable" (25), hinting that whatever power religion exerts
over her is almost sensual in nature (as it is for Helga Crane in *Quicksand*).

Rejecting both religion and marriage within her race as options for her heroine, Fauset must proceed cautiously to avoid alienating conservative readers. She practices self-censorship, unlike her characters who "object to yielding to an invisible censorship" (69) of racial expectations. Just as Angela deceives other characters into thinking she's white, so Fauset deceives her readers into accepting her veiled feminist message. In this way she employs what Mae Henderson calls "heteroglossia," or the ability to practice "multiple languages of public discourse" (22). Henderson points to the long tradition in black women's writing of authors writing on a superficial level of literary convention and plot for their white, middle class readers, and a more subtle, "signifying" level for any black reader who understands the tradition of multiple meanings. She reminds us that black women's writing is "interlocutory or dialogic" (17), constantly referring back to popular slave narratives, folktales, and conventions within the black subculture; it cannot be viewed in isolation. In Fauset's case, one must examine her refiguration of conventions -- religious devotion, passing, rejection of kin -- to understand how she subverts them.

Reading *Plum Bun* without such background obscures levels of meaning and "an internal dialogue [that]
constitute[s] the matrix of black female subjectivity" (Henderson 18). Seeing *Plum Bun* as a middle-class novel about passing privileges race over gender and sexuality, and occludes other, less obvious interpretations. Fauset writes a feminist novel that "passes" as a race novel, just as her heroine Angela "passes" for white. Deborah McDowell writes that *Plum Bun*, "like the protagonist whose story it tells, is passing. It "passes" for just another novel of passing ... and for the age old fairy tale and romance" (*Plum Bun* intro xvii). Fauset again speaks to the reader when Angela complains that she can’t label herself. "What’s the matter? You certainly don’t think I ought to say first thing: ‘I’m Angela Murray. I know I look white but I’m coloured and expect to be treated accordingly!’" (79). Thus one finds what Deborah McDowell calls "a signal disjunction between surface plots" and submerged messages ("Regulating" xxi).

Just as Fauset’s protagonist rebels against labeling as a form of censorship (labelled as a black woman, she has limited options), so Fauset herself challenges the reader to take exception to the most obvious interpretation of *Plum Bun* as a romantic yarn about a beautiful mulatto. This incongruity between content and context exposes the character within the novel and the novel itself to misinterpretation, because what’s appropriate changes with each definition. If the novel is about passing, then why include interracial love, attempted rape, and extramarital
sex? And if this is a "typical" Harlem Renaissance novel with a political subtext, then why the sentimental conventions, contrivances, and melodramatic denouement?

MARRIAGE AS PROTECTION

As an example of how Fauset integrates two divergent genres -- feminist polemic and sentimental novel -- examination of her treatment of marriage is informative. Superficially, Fauset presents marriage as protection, the culmination of a woman's aspirations. This conforms to the tradition of the cult of true womanhood, mentioned earlier, in which marriage is viewed as "an increase in authority for women" (Welter 171). We have the example of Mattie Murray, Angela and Jinny's mother, who finds shelter from unwanted sexual advances and penury in marriage to Junius. Their marriage conforms to the stereotype of sentimental fiction. "Mattie her husband considered a perfect woman, sweet, industrious, affectionate and illogical. But to her [Junius] was God" (32-3). If their marriage indeed epitomizes happiness, it is an outmoded and repressive ideal. Fauset contrasts Mattie's acceptance of her life with Angela's desire for greater things: "To Junius and Mattie Murray, the little house on Opal Street represented the ne plus ultra of ambition; to their daughter Angela it seemed the dingiest, drabbest chrysalis that had ever fettered the wings of a brilliant butterfly" (12). Mattie functions as her husband's chattel, ("He possessed a charming wife" [22]), so devoid of individuality after his
death that she loses her will to live, refusing sustenance and crying out, "'Oh Jinny, do you think I can make myself ill enough to follow him soon?'" (62). This woman, barely in her forties and elegant enough to turn heads at tea in the Belleview Stratford, spends her days in household drudgery, the only compensation for which seems to be her adventures with passing, which "cast a glamour over Monday's washing and Tuesday's ironing, the scrubbing of kitchen and bathroom and the fashioning of children's clothes" (16).

Here the ambiguity of Fauset's narrative is underscored. While Mattie appears to be happy, she has only transcended one prejudice, that of race; she is still restrained by sexism. Ironically, Fauset writes that "Mrs. Murray did not attribute what she considered her happy, sheltered life on tiny Opal Street to the accident of her color; she attributed it to her black husband" (14). "Happy" and "sheltered" are mutually exclusive in this sentence, given the protagonist's disgust with her limitations and the authorial sanction of Opal Street as "no jewel of the first water" (11). On one level, this reveals the interesting power dynamic operating between light-skin and a successful marriage, while on a deeper level it simultaneously undercuts the idea that Mattie's is indeed a successful marriage. Note the qualifiers in the sentence: Mattie's life is not happy, but "considered" to be happy; she lives not merely on Opal Street but on tiny
Opal Street, indicating the diminution of her achievement. It is also revealing that Mattie and not her husband is light-skinned; as Hurston points out, a dark-skinned man marrying a lighter woman indicates upward social mobility (Church 64), and symbolizes women's decorative natures.

In *Plum Bun*, marriage is transformed through subtle cues from a haven to a prison. Angela must learn that annexing power will change her in the process, and that the only true authority is self-generated. Rather than advocating marriage as a fitting culmination for women's ambition -- Fauset herself did not marry until she was in her forties (Wintz 211) -- she implies "that marriage is not an exclusive or even satisfactory means of economic survival for women, unless women are already self-reliant" (Lupton 40). Even more indicative of Fauset's challenge to traditional stereotypes of marriage is the title of the middle section of the novel, "Market," wherein Angela seeks to marry. Her idea of marriage is not based on love but on financial viability. For women, especially black women, marriage is an economic and social necessity. Mary Sisney confirms that "... for all black society women of the twenties, marriage was a necessity" (173).

Angela Murray's desire to marry for power and money is neither unusual nor unacceptable for a woman of her era, but the forthright manner with which she employs her sexuality to advance her prospects is. The earlier
quotation about women’s "sweeter gifts" hints at the connection between Angela’s desire to marry well and her budding knowledge of sexuality as a tool to achieve that result. Fauset introduces a foil in the character of Paulette, a white art student Angela encounters. Paulette is as knowing as Angela is innocent, frankly confessing to affairs. She lives on Bank Street, the monetary connotations of which should not be overlooked, for it is she who introduces Angela to the rich Roger Fielding. She says that men are "nearly all animals" (103), but later is herself described as masculine (104), which implies syllogistically that she is also an animal. As an animal, she expresses her sexual nature, unlike the more ladylike Angela. There is a hint of lesbian attachment between the two women. Angela describes her as "a beautiful, even a fascinating, girl" (99), and watches her intently, almost jealously, whenever one of Paulette’s male conquests is around. From Paulette Angela learns to experiment with stereotypical gender roles. When Paulette invites Angela for dinner and cooks for her in show of mock domesticity, she acts the part of a woman, serving her man. Yet she couples this traditionally female role with the exclamation that "a woman is a fool who lets her femininity stand in the way of what she wants. I’ve made a philosophy of it. I see what I want; I use my wiles as a woman to get it, and I employ the qualities of men, tenacity and ruthlessness, to keep it" (105). The two
women play-act gender roles, exchanging from moment to moment the passivity of the traditional woman and the more active, traditionally male role. In this way, Paulette models a new mode of feminine behavior, combining a superficially feminine passivity with assertiveness. For instance, Paulette takes Angela "out on a date" explaining, "I have money" (127), thereby demonstrating her social and financial independence of men. Heeding Paulette's fearless example, Angela determines to aggressively pursue the wealthy Roger Fielding. She understands the incredible power money brings and acknowledges she will have to sublimate her personality if she uses marriage to attain that power. "... she was ashamed, for she knew that for the vanities and gewgaws of a leisurely and irresponsible existence she would sacrifice her own talent, the integrity of her ability to interpret life, to write down a history with her brush" (112). Fauset does not censure her character's mercenary motives so much as hint that, for Angela at least, there are alternatives to that compromise. She does have the talent and intelligence to change her pursuit of art from a hobby to an avocation, a lesson she learns after her affair with Fielding deteriorates.

As a black woman, Angela feels that her own talent and integrity are inadequate, and has graphic proof when she witnesses Roger's rage as two black men and a woman enter a restaurant where he and Angela are eating. Roger
offers to pay the restaurant's legal costs as long as they evict the "coons" (133). This scene is pivotal because it reveals Angela's growing understanding of her own powerlessness, with or without the protective cloak of whiteness. She realizes the immense influence Roger has as a rich white man. "What could one do against a man, against a group of men such as he and his kind represented, who would spend time and money to maintain a prejudice based on a silly, time-worn tradition?" (138-9). Just as Roger will pay the costs of an anti-discrimination lawsuit to maintain the status quo, he will also pay whatever is necessary to attain a woman sexually. Paulette tells Angela that she should be careful of Roger's advances, for "he doesn't care what he says or spends to get his ends" (128). (Interestingly enough, Angela herself later spends money [on clothes] in order to solicit his proposal, demonstrating how power and money can elicit desired sexual behavior, as well as the reverse.)

SEXUAL AWARENESS AND A VOICE OF ONE'S OWN

Having established the connection between money and sex, what Deborah McDowell calls "social instruments of power" ("Regulating" xiv), Fauset reduces the relationship between Angela and her lover to terms of material gain. Angela evaluates Roger's affection based on what he spends on her, and the give and take of merchandise functions as a sexual substitute. To further cement the connection between sex and power, Fauset introduces imagery of war and
the roles of hunter/prey, victor/ victim that permeate sexual relationships. This yoking of sexuality to violence or battle as a means of exerting political power is not new to black feminism. Mary Helen Washington reminds us that in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "...[black] female sexuality [was] always associated with violence" (37), harkening back to the rape of female slaves, as does Frederick Douglass' scene of "the bloodstained gate." These sexual dynamics should not be viewed as the enactment of biological forces, but as ideologies through which power is formulated. The erotic functions as an allegory for ascendancy and power. Sexuality can be used as both motivation and reward, a means of social control and objectification exerted by a dominant group (usually white males). Rape symbolizes sex as domination. It is no accident that sexual intercourse between white men and slave women produced not heirs but property, demonstrating the power of sexuality to construct identity and power relations.

Thus sexuality can substitute for violence as a socially acceptable means of psychological economic control. Hazel Carby argues that there is "a dialectical relationship between economic/political power and economic/sexual power in the battle for control of women's bodies" ("Threshold" 276). Sexual attractiveness maintains some of its power through construction and violation of taboos, especially those prohibiting miscegenation, which
delineate licit and illicit alliances. What this means in terms of Fauset's novel is that her characters must use sex in the licit, socially sanctioned manner in order to access power. Black women, as historical victims of "illicit" sexuality, cannot change the dialectic, but Fauset's mulatto heroine can. She signals her character's struggle to legitimize her sexuality as a strength rather than a weakness with her use of game and battle imagery. Fauset's biographer, Carolyn Sylvander, believes that "looking carefully at game and battle imagery in Plum Bun helps expose some of the rather skillfully disguised feminist critique of male and female roles operating in the book" (182). McDowell confirms, "Angela's game play for marriage is Roger's foreplay for sex" ("Regulating" xiv). Angela initially believes that she is playing "the hardest game in the world for a woman, and the most fascinating" (145); "the stakes were happiness and excitement, and almost anyone looking at the tricks which she had already taken would prophesy that she would be a winner" (146). Her friend counsels her, "... you have to be very careful not to withhold too much and yet give very little. If we don't give enough, we lose them. If we give too much, we lose ourselves" (145). Angela accepts this advice, believing "men paid a big price for their desires. Her price would be marriage" although "it was a dangerous game at which some women burned their fingers" (183).
To thoroughly undercut the frivolity of this imagery, Fauset contrasts biological and sociological sexuality. Having decided to "play the game" of sexual power, Angela finds another level of sexuality, the subconscious, physiological drive. By differentiating between sex as biology and sex as power, Fauset signals a disjunction in our perception of sexuality as a monolithic entity. Angela can control "the battle between the sexes," but she cannot battle her own sexuality. Here the battle metaphor is unmistakable:

But there was one enemy with whom she had never thought to reckon, she had never counted on the treachery of the forces of nature; she had never dreamed of the unaccountable weakening of those forces within. Her weapons were those furnished by the convention but her fight was against conditions; impulses, yearnings which antedated both those weapons and the conventions which furnished them (198-9). By acknowledging women's sexual drives, Fauset undermines yet another sociological construct, that of women as innocent and sexually passive. Fauset pulls in earlier references to the stereotypical fairytale of woman's redemption by a provident male, pointedly emphasizing women's acculturation to patriarchal domination. Angela considers her life "rounding out like a fairytale" (131), and wishes "she could be a girl in a book" (183). When she finally accedes to her seduction, the scene employs classic romantic conventions such as the violent storm outside, Roger's carrying Angela into the bedroom in his arms, and the use of stock phrases like "we were meant
for each other" (202). Deborah McDowell explains that "if read closely, the novel's evocation of the fairy tale and the romance will inevitably seem designed for satiric purposes" ("Regulating" xxi). Her castle of protection deteriorates into a "love nest;" her protector is a philandering cad; their romance is based upon the expenditure of money. Fauset employs this conventional seduction to expose its efficacy as an opiate in women's lives: the acceptance of their lives as following a fairytale pattern assuages yearnings for greater social, economic and sexual equality. McDowell writes further that "Fauset was aware of how folk literature -- particularly fairy tales -- serves to initiate the acculturation of children to traditional social roles, expectations, and behaviors, based on their sex" ("Dimension" 88-9). Sylvander believes that Fauset uses romance "as a convention satirized" (183), and the eponymous plum symbolizes women's sexuality sublimated to men: it "is like a poison apple -- eat it, fall asleep, lose your identity" (185). Just as Larsen's Helga Crane finds consolation for her dreary days in amorous nights, so Angela finds sexual love a temporary panacea: "forgotten were her ideals about her Art; her ambition to hold a salon; her desire to help other people; even her intention of marrying in order to secure her future" (204).

Paradoxically, Angela's biological treachery becomes a sort of freedom. Rather than what some critics read as her
falling "prey to her own sexuality" (Sylvander 173), consummating her affair liberates Angela from social conventions, giving her a power over herself that leads to self knowledge. Angela’s virginity had been a commodity to be bartered for marriage, but instead of a proposal, she received a proposition. While adhering to traditional mores, Angela had been the intended victim of Roger’s lust, her only weapon the power to say no. When Angela violates the taboo of sexual relations between unmarried individuals (and moreover, between interracial couples), she empowers herself and turns from prey to predator. Contrary to the conventional view of seduced woman as victim, Angela shifts the balance of power. She behaves as an equal in the relationship, calling Roger just as he called her in the past. Such assertiveness offends him; he explains he has different perogatives because he is a man (228). Angela’s sexuality challenges the stereotype of moral purity that supposedly divides the mulatta from her darker sisters. Fauset inverts the ideal of pallor as indicative of chastity by arranging women of differing shades on a moral continuum, from dark to light. Jinny and Miss Henderson (the art student), the darkest major female characters, remain virgins throughout the novel. Angela, light enough to pass for white, takes a single lover. But Paulette, Angela’s obviously white friend (blue eyes and chestnut hair, [94]), has had several lovers and takes another by novel’s end. Fauset satirically indicates this
reversed dynamic through phrases such as "beyond the pale" (205), with its double meaning of color and morality. Sadly, one of Jessie Fauset's most virulent critics, David Littlejohn cites "the limitations of the 'fallen woman' morality" (35) as one of her weaknesses, without ever realizing how she deconstructs that very tradition. He demonstrates the limitations of a critical paradigm prioritizing racial politics over sexual politics.

Characterizing Angela as a sexually active heroine risks identifying her with what Carby calls "racist sexual ideologies proclaim[ing] the black woman to be a rampant sexual being" (RW 174). Perhaps this accounts for the melodramatic turn her novel takes in the final two sections, "Home Again" and "Market Is Done." Having integrated her sexuality and learned that love, not sex, is "the golden key" (232), she must return home again to become an artist. In this section, Angela returns briefly to her former home, but more importantly, she becomes comfortable with herself, realizing "she might marry some day but all that was still in the dim future. Meanwhile the present beckoned; materially she was once more secure, her itching ambition was temporarily lulled; she had a friend" (245). Angela befriends women, makes peace with her estranged sister, and paints a prize-winning picture as a result of her sexual consciousness. She promises "she would never break faith with Jinny again; nor with herself" (317), which gives her the strength and
courage to refuse the recalcitrant Roger's offer of marriage. She finally confronts the fairy tale which narcotized her, accusing Roger of talking in a "theatrical manner" when he tries to reinitiate their former intimacy (318), and admitting her cynicism about "grand gestures" (333).

In this section, the implausible coincidences which critics deride surface. Angela realizes she loves the man who loves her sister (who in turn loves another). I offer several explanations for Fauset's inclusion of melodrama at this point. Obviously, the romantic rectangle fits in the tradition of the sentimental novel, functioning as the "plum" to sweeten her feminist message, making it palatable for mainstream readers on the level of plot. Too, it serves to reinforce the ideal of self-realization: only after Angela experiences betrayal, loss, redemption, and finally selfless devotion to another (she sacrifices her lover for her sister's happiness) can she cross the ocean and become the painter she aspires to be. This is not strictly sentimental fiction. It is outright rejection of the idea that sex, race, money, or even love of a good man can define a woman. Also, Fauset seems to be playing with the absurdities that conforming to social expectations imposes. As long as Angela believes that a man is central to her happiness, her life will get more and more complicated. Only as she understands the beauty of her autonomy and rejects sexuality and color as fallacies of
social control, can she escape these needless complications.

Finally, the last explanation I offer for Fauset's inclusion of melodrama is rooted in her awareness of the historical legacy of slavery. Her deepest meaning can be derived by the section title, "Home Again," which resonates with increased significance for African Americans only thirty six years after the Civil War. Both Hazel Carby and Barbara Christian describe the disruption caused by slave owners' casual separation of family members. Also, "miscegenation disrupted the idea of family, which is, after all, the stuff of fiction" (Dearborn 139). In later years, lighter kin passing for white also undermined families, and Fauset acknowledges her awareness of the familial toll individual expression exacts in a racist society. Hazel Carby writes, "Fauset represented this new history [of the black middle class] through a generational difference, a difference figured as a recognition of the need for the protagonists to revise the irrelevant history of their parents, a history tied to the consequences of slavery" (RW 167). In order to return "home," Angela must recreate her broken family by making peace with her sister, her origins, and her sexual identity. Without the convolutions, neither her reconciliation with Jinny nor her "confession" of race would require enough catharsis, and the return would seem a concession of defeat (full circle) rather than an evolution.
In the final section, "Market Is Done," Angela reconciles herself to an independent life. She finally realizes her own power when she admits her racial heritage to champion another black woman denied an art scholarship. The efforts of Miss Henderson's white female friends and mulatto male friend (Anthony Cross) fail to ameliorate the prejudice against her. But rather than retreating to her original solution, sexual alliance with a white man, the new Angela finally discovers her strength, acknowledgement of her own voice. In a room of white, mostly male reporters, she proclaims her heritage and is empowered. She is described after her confession as having "the manner of someone who's just found a million dollars" (349), her sense of identity being more valuable than actual money, and what she was shopping for all along. She is finished with "marketing" herself as a commodity: white, female, marriageable. Only after she finds herself in Europe, "engrossed in her work", "her one ambition ... to become an acknowledged, significant painter of portraits" (375) does her love interest, Anthony Cross, appear. His delivery ("Virginia and Matthew sent me with their love" [379]) marks him as her gift or possession; she, as a woman, is no longer a chattel. As a self-sufficient, professional, sexually aware and racially reconciled woman, Jessie Fauset's Angela Murray can now have her sweet reward, a plum bun of her own.
Notes

1. In his chilling book, *Difference and Pathology*, Sander Gilman reveals the Victorian identification of dark skin with brute physicality as exemplified in their fascination with steatopygia, or enlarged buttocks, among African and African American women. He writes that "the buttocks, a secondary sexual characteristic, function as the semantic signs of 'primitive' sexual appetite and activity" (90).

2. An alternative to this nursery rhyme is: "To market, to market/ To buy a fat pig/ Home again, home again/ Jiggedy jig." Whether Fauset was aware of this variant or not, it is useful to note because of the rural tone of going to buy a pig, rather than the urbanity of going to market for a delicacy. Even her epigraph locates the novel in a middle class milieu.

3. One might speculate that as an educated New Yorker who did not marry until her forties, Jessie Fauset might know about birth control. There are documented instances of slaves practising birth control as early as 1860, and Margaret Sanger actively and very publically promulgated her theories of contraception in the 1920s, especially in New York City (Giddings 46). In *Plum Bun*, Angela has every assurance that she won't get pregnant, not because she refrains from sex -- but because she has access to birth control. Though one might argue that Fauset's delicacy would not allow her to imply anything so radical as the practice of contraception by her heroine, adherence to conventions of the sentimental novel would seem to dictate that any "fallen woman" (like Angela after she has sex with Roger Fielding) should suffer debilitating physical and emotional consequences. That she doesn't is credit to Fauset's intelligence and insurgence.

4. Hazel Carby degrades Fauset for what she terms "a movement away from figures of isolated unmarried mothers and daughters supporting themselves through their own labor, toward the articulation of a new morality and community in which black women were ... dependent wives" (RW 167). However, I think Carby is being willfully myopic: unmarried women in the 1920s and 1930s were not socially viable, and by allowing these pariahs reintegration into "polite society," Fauset validates their struggles and sexuality with a "reward" (marriage) readers of her time might understand.
5. Vashti Crutcher Lewis writes that "Laurentine Strange represents a goodly number, but yet a select group, of black women during the first half of the twentieth century who earned a comfortable living designing clothes for white patrons" ("Mulatto Hegemony" 382).

6. The use of developmental stages is another convention of the sentimental novel which Fauset employs. In a novel that's been referred to as a bildungsroman (McDowell "Regulating" xv), one expects such development, yet Fauset's clever use of plot devices masks her strategy. Claudia Tate writes that "sentimental novels "generally appropriate the conventions of sentimentality to mask the heroine's growing self-consciousness, rationality, and ultimately her desire to redefine feminine propriety" ("Allegories of Black Female Desire" 103). I would argue that Angela Murray, in her evolution from daughter to lover to painter, reveals those stages of growth.

7. In giving up her cultural identity, Angela also changes her name to "Angele." This conforms not only with the tradition of self-naming in slave narratives, but also with the rebirth motif one finds in Larsen's Quicksand, wherein a heroine tries to recreate herself outside of prejudice.

8. To show the intransigence of prejudice, a similar scene occurs in a movie theater in Gwendolyn Brooks' Maud Martha, written thirty years later, and the tension is no less bitter. Brooks is more overt in writing that Maud's humiliation is due as much to sexism (her dependence on a man for protection) as to to racism.

9. This configuration owes much to Barbara Johnson's diagram in A World of Difference (169).

10. The difficulties of racial self-labelling persist today. Artist Adrian Piper distributes a card at the Santa Barbara University Art Museum as part of his show, "Mistaken Identities." It reads (in part): "I am black. I am sure you did not realize this ... In the past, I have attempted to alert white people to my racial identity in advance. Unfortunately, this invariably causes them to react to me as pushy, manipulative, or socially inappropriate."

11. In Fauset's third novel, The Chinaberry Tree, Aunt Sal represents another example of the ostensible rewards that accrue a loyal mate: she inherits a house and an annuity from her white lover and serves as his "living monument" (72). Her isolation and unhappiness make it clear that Fauset does not hold her up as a paragon of women's proper roles in life.
12. The use of restaurants as metaphorical cues (especially in works of the Harlem Renaissance, when eating was still a segregated activity) occurs in Nella Larsen’s Passing and Fauset’s own Chinaberry Tree (and at least three others, if one counts the sandwich shop in Hurston’s Eyes). Restaurants metaphorically suggest culture, refinement, the step above poverty that allows one to spend money in a somewhat luxurious manner on service as well as food. More importantly for our purposes, however, restaurants again emphasize the interplay between the physical and the social aspects of culture. Since meals have a financial price, whoever pays establishes a degree of power by demonstrating financial autonomy. A man treating a woman to dinner assumes some leverage over her, having in a sense “bought” her by buying that which sustains her. And in Larsen’s novel where two women have tea together, the ability of each to pay for themselves demonstrates their autonomy.

13. Fauset acknowledges her awareness of the connection between sexuality and violence in naming Anthony Cross, perhaps hinting at a connection with the cross-burning Ku Klux Klan. His heritage is itself instructive of Fauset’s design. He too is a mulatto passing for white, son of a black man murdered for defending his white wife against a would-be rapist. The connection of sexuality and violence culminates in the tragic rape/murder scenario too common in real life in the 1920s and 30s.


15. Larsen also challenges this stereotype of salacious black women patronized by lecherous white men in Helga’s parenthood: her mother was white, not her father, indicating that whiteness is no assurance of purity in women. Also, Larsen’s configuration women are victimized period, regardless of skin coloration.

16. Fauset herself was a frequent traveller to France, and sends characters in two of her novels to Europe to escape racism. In Plum Bun, Angela doesn’t return; and in her final and most satirical novel, Comedy: American Style, Theresa is abandoned in a loveless marriage in France. Given the repatriation of several notable black American artists to France (Josephine Baker, Richard Wright), it must be remarked that this is not a wholly literary device.
CHAPTER THREE

SEXUALITY AND COLOR IN QUICKSAND

Though Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset pair off naturally as two middle class female writers in the Harlem Renaissance, Larsen’s works are much more accessible than Fauset’s for two reasons. First, her style is more contemporary than Fauset’s. She employs the traditional novel of manners format, replacing Fauset’s melodrama with spare symbolism and internal monologue. Second, her message is more overt. She openly interrogates the binary oppositions inherent in genderal and racial stereotypes, rather than veiling her politics in plot twists as Fauset does. Her works’ sexual subtexts question the social and economic price a woman pays for her sexual freedom, but can be misread as a focus on racism. Of her two novels, one (Quicksand) treats the sexual objectification of women, and the other, Passing, hints at lesbianism. Yet Passing has been traditionally read as a critique of the artificialities of race and coloration, while Quicksand links her protagonist’s struggles with sex to her struggles with race. Larsen’s use of a poetic excerpt by Langston Hughes as an epigraph foregrounds the issue of miscegenation, the ultimate yoking of sexuality and coloration:

My old man died in a big fine house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I’m gonna die,
Being neither white nor black?
being "neither white nor black" establishes the oppositional pulls facing Larsen’s protagonist, not only as a mulatta, but as one who is neither pure ("white") nor sinful ("black"). While many critics feel they’ve explored Larsen’s message adequately by reading the novel either as a feminist or a racial text, I feel that Quicksand’s importance lies in the yoking of those two interrelated issues. Thus Larsen’s novels, like Fauset’s, "pass" as race novels, while cleverly undermining sexual stereotypes. This section of the paper will focus on Quicksand, Larsen’s most fully developed work, and one about which there seems to be little critical disagreement. It follows the peregrinations of an orphaned mulatto woman, Helga Crane, who seeks surcease from restlessness, first at a Southern black college, then in Harlem, Copenhagen, and Harlem again. The story culminates when Helga succumbs to her libido, marries a semi-literate preacher, and is brutalized by poverty and childbearing in the deep South. Quicksand ends with the lines, "And hardly had she left her bed and become able to walk again without pain, hardly had the children returned from the homes of the neighbors, when she began to have her fifth child" (135). Though Helga can rail against the unfairness of racial discrimination and seek her own sexual satisfaction outside of social sanction, society does kill her indirectly. By bowing to socially dictated imperatives of behavior (as a single woman or a preacher’s wife), Helga allows her
identity to be preempted by a moral majority which is, as the bumper sticker says, neither moral nor a majority.

There seems to be little question that Larsen scathingly castigates the sexist imposition of dire social consequences upon women who exercise sexual expression. Hazel Carby writes that "Larsen's representation of sexual politics delineated the dilemma of the woman's body as a commercialized object" (RW 173). Jacqueline McLendon would concur, writing that Helga Crane was not conquered by her own lust "but by society's condemnation of it" (156). Critics agree that Larsen deplored women's sexual subjugation. Less obvious, however, is the specificity of Larsen's condemnation: she doesn't necessarily condemn the social and/or biological consequences of sexual activity. Instead, she protests the relegation of women to certain behavioral expectations based on skin color.

As she exposes the high price a woman pays for her sexuality, she also questions the social ramifications of a woman's surrender to her desires, independent of pregnancy as a possible result. Deborah McDowell writes that for Nella Larsen's heroines, sexual indulgence results in "exploitation and loss of status" ("That nameless ..." 143). A woman pays for her sexual freedom with diminished reputation, increased dependence upon her male lover, and a general loss of control. Pregnancy is only one spoke in the wheel of sexual oppression; race, gender, and skin color, which Larsen exposes as not necessarily
interchangeable, are three more spokes. The hub from which these spokes radiate is sexuality. Much as Fauset does, Larsen arrays her heroines on a continuum of coloration and sexual indulgence, confirming and deconstructing traditional stereotypes of women, from the "loose black female" through the virtuous mulatto to the frigid white matron. Along the way, she questions how every aspect of a woman's life ultimately devolves to her sexuality and how neither education, nor color, nor class, nor beauty can ultimately ameliorate sexual inequality. The figure below pairs the spectrum of female characters in *Quicksand*, arrayed from light to dark, with their sexual characterizations, ranging from sexually frigid to almost salacious. (See Figure 1.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character name</th>
<th>Skin color</th>
<th>Sexual behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Miss MacGooden</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>anti-sexual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mrs. Hays-Rore</td>
<td>black</td>
<td>widow (sexually null)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anne Gray</td>
<td>light brown</td>
<td>frigid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Helga Crane</td>
<td>mulatto</td>
<td>passionate/repressed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audrey Denny</td>
<td>&quot;alabaster&quot;</td>
<td>sexually available</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fru Dahl</td>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>sexual solicitor</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1
Stripped of plot devices, it becomes clear that Larsen parodies the stereotypes of color equating dark hue with sexual libido, because her most sexually assertive women are fair or white.

Jessie Fauset employs a similar equation in *Plum Bun*. The darker of the two Murray sisters, Jinny, is so morally pure that even accidentally venturing into a strange man's
room in the middle of the night does not involve her in any sexual imbroglio. However, her lighter sister Angela and her light skinned mother are constantly propositioned and approached in a salacious manner, the implication being that their sensuality can be implied by their lighter skin hue, and that they conform to a standard of "white" beauty. Thus, while superficially the stereotype of the "loose black woman" obtains, both Fauset and Larsen indicate its obverse: that moral purity resides in darker hued women, perhaps in compensation for the social construction of female beauty residing in light colored skin. Larsen and Fauset use the stereotype of the mulatto, whose fairness indicates not only physical but moral beauty according to a white standard, and invert it to represent the challenge of relative acceptance by white society. They expose biological destiny as social determinism, implicating the hypocrisy of constructing identity according to skin color or gender.

In turn, sexuality and coloration impact on social and class issues. Cheryl Wall points out that the black middle-class resents being typified as Other because of race, and that the African American mainstream "despises ethnicity; they are not the colorful jungle creatures" of typical Harlem Renaissance fiction like Claude McKay's Home to Harlem and Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (100). They reject the rampant lubriciousness that white voyeurs condone in the lower class. Though most Harlem Renaissance
writers "came from middle-class backgrounds, and most of them received college and graduate school educations" (Singh 72), they realized the marketability of black exoticism, and often wrote about lower-class characters.

Not only were such manuscripts more marketable, but establishing class distinctions distances the black intelligentsia from their libidinous creations. As Hurston's comment about the typical Harlem resident's unexceptional life as "the best kept secret" implies, lower-class characters were as exotic to many Harlem Renaissance writers as they were to their white readers. Too often, mainstream readers conflated class and race, expecting that darker skin tone implied poverty and lack of education. Nella Larsen's integration of sexuality into a middle class milieu was perhaps a bit too close for comfort, and her exposure of the discrimination among the ranks of the Talented Tenth might have been seen as treason to class and race. Nella Larsen courageously sketches a sexually aware middle class woman of color, despite the fact that, as Barbara Christian writes, "... the uninhibited primitive feminine image was too reminiscent of the loose black woman image for most women novelists to see any glamour in it" (BWN 40). But it was not glamour that Larsen sought.

Certainly class is a central theme in both Quicksand and Passing. McDowell sees sexuality and class in Larsen as "two virtually contradictory impulses" ("That Nameless
..." 146), a stricture supported by the distinction between "ladies" and "women." The black ladies’ club movement of the twenties extolled women’s responsibility to refute the stereotypes of African Americans as amorally sexual, believing that "[b]lack female sexual behavior ... threatens the progress of the race" (Carby, "Policing" 745). Larsen foregrounds the connection between social class and sexuality in *Quicksand* by exploring it in all its permutations.

Simultaneously, Larsen establishes the bifurcation of the individual into inner and outer selves as a metaphor for black feminine sexuality. While refuting the preconception of black women as amorally sexual, she unabashedly acknowledges women’s sexual appetites. Thus her characters, from Helga Crane in *Quicksand* through Irene Renfield to Clare Kendry in *Passing*, suffer from an artificially constructed duality of either social or sexual oppression. Her characters must choose between personal fulfillment either through social status, as Irene Renfield does, or through sexual indulgence, as Helga Crane eventually does. Neither choice satisfies for long. Indeed, the only woman in either novel who seems to integrate status and sexuality is the duplicitous bisexual Clare Kendry, and she is murdered for her audacity. Larsen is not as optimistic as Jessie Fauset: by exploring differences in sexual behavior as well as coloration, she suggests that there is no satisfying modus for a black
woman, and that she must choose between two equally unfulfilling alternatives. Larsen implies that this choice between the lesser of two oppressions is endogenous to women of color, because neither of Helga Crane's white aunts suffers apparent sexual or social alienation. Further, choosing mulattas as protagonists focuses on the matrix between race and sex. Mary Dearborn writes that "... the mulatto condition in Passing is a symbol, in Irene's case, for a female identity in which sexuality is repressed and considered dangerous" (60). Mulattas symbolize interracial sexuality/ miscegenation, and serve as a locus for interrogating this link.

SEXUAL VERSUS SOCIAL BEHAVIOR

When Larsen first introduces Helga in Quicksand, we see her reading. While Barbara Christian and others valorize the image of a black female reading as the conscious construction of an intellectual self, Helga's intellectuality is undermined by her implicit sensualism. Reading Said the Fisherman is an opiate, not a stimulant. "She wanted forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind" (2). Simultaneously, Larsen describes Helga's surroundings: nasturtiums crowding each other in a brass bowl (a metaphor for Helga's internally blossoming libido contained in a shiny, hard external veneer?), a blue Chinese carpet, an oriental silk footstool. The eastern opulence suggests a harem, and serves to distinguish Helga as as "other" even
within the seeming homogeneity of Naxos. Her sensual characteristics segregate her from others more powerfully than her supposed race integrates her, demonstrating that sexuality constructs identity as much as race or gender. Helga's room provides a revealing iconography for her: "books and papers scattered about the floor, fragile stockings and underthings and the startling green and gold negligee" jockey for prominence (9). Their jumbled proximity provides a clue to Helga's own internal dichotomy. In speculating about her fiance James Vayle, she denies her sensual side when she refuses to name the "something against which he was powerless" (7-8), specifically, her sexual attractiveness. As a black woman committed to personal growth and socio-economic stability, self-indulgence in desire is one luxury Helga cannot afford. But the author's condemnation of sexual indulgence is not purely practical. She seems to warn against any loss of control by black women, especially sexual surrender, which relinquishes self-determination to a man, and opens one to social sanction. Thus black women must bifurcate themselves into sexual and social/intellectual entities, presenting, as Carby puts it, "a morally acceptable policing of black female sexuality" ("Policing" 741).

Reinforcing this motif of oppression through bifurcation are both the language and the structure of Quicksand. Helga travels from one geographic extreme to
the other, from the deep South of Naxos to the urban sophistication of Harlem, from arctic Copenhagen back to "hot" Harlem, then to the deep South again. She searches for the tertium quid, the Kierkegaardian alternative to either/or. Pure sensualism, like pure intellect, is a half-truth that Helga tries to escape. Larsen establishes these either (lady) or (whore) extremes in a microcosm, through internal monologues and careful juxtaposition of images in the first five chapters.

At the end of chapter two, Helga rejects the narrow intellectuality of Naxos and asks herself, "Can I get a berth?" (15). The homonym of "birth/berth" underscores the new life she seeks away from school. She hates the examples she sees around her of "ladyness," that virtue espoused by "the lean and dessicated Miss MacGooden," whose "expressed reason for never having married ... [was that] there were things in the matrimonial state that were of necessity entirely too repulsive for a lady of delicate and sensitive nature to submit to" (12). With that paragon of moral chastity before her, Helga's resolve to embrace a less straited life is strengthened after the supervisor, Dr. Anderson, calls her a "lady," subconsciously emphasizing the precise identity she seeks to escape. Larsen carefully constructs their exchange to reveal the unspoken sexual subtext:

She nodded, silent. He had won her. She knew that she would stay. "It's an elusive something," he went on. "Perhaps I can only explain it by the
use of that trite phrase, 'You're a lady.' You have dignity and breeding." At these words, turmoil rose again in Helga Crane. The intricate pattern of the rug which she had been studying escaped her. The shamed feeling which had been her penance evaporated. Only a lacerated pride remained. (21)

Note the double entendres embedded in these lines. The phrase, "He had won her" objectifies her, casting Helga as a prize Anderson can possess. Too, the "intricate pattern of the rug" symbolically represents the detailed social conventions, "patterns," she must master if she is to remain. Her "shamed feeling" pertains as much to her near-surrender to sensualism as it does to her approaching departure from Naxos, prompted by that surrender. She decides to leave. What Larsen accomplishes so subtly in this scene is the inversion of the word "lady" from sobriquet to epithet. It is precisely that suffocatingly "intricate pattern" of behavior that Helga rejects. Ironically, her pride is lacerated as though she had been called a "scarlet woman" (as she later will be) instead. In retrospect, Helga realizes that both her words and Dr. Anderson's are "angry half-truths" (26), a phrase she repeats to herself over and over, again seeking the synthesis of thesis (sexual woman) and antithesis (intellectual lady).

Larsen demonstrates Helga's divergent impulses through juxtaposed incidents. In Chicago after talking to her emotionally distant and insulting aunt, Helga experiences a brief encounter that dramatizes her role as
sexual object now that she has abandoned her desexualized status as "lady teacher" at Naxos. As she stops "to give heed to her disordered appearance" (attending to her physical self), "a man, well-groomed and pleasant-spoken accosted her" (29). Her brief neglect of intellectual reserve exposes her sexuality; Helga is asexual only through conscious effort. The incident allows her to see herself through her aunt's eyes as "an obscene sore," after which frankly venereal image "she remembered the unaccomplished object of her visit. Money" (29). Here Larsen first associates sex and money, though her character doesn't: "characteristically, while admitting its necessity, even its undeniable desirability, she dismissed its importance" (29-30), and Helga's thoughts revert to safe, asexual/intellectual work in a library. Bouncing quickly back from the lady-like vision of the library, Helga feels "an uncontrollable desire to mingle" with "those dark molds of flesh" (30). In the crowd, she experiences the missing sensuality: she feels "a queer feeling of enthusiasm" (much like the nameless desire that attracts James Vayle) "as if she were tasting some agreeable, exotic food" (30), an obvious sublimation of a sexual into an oral metaphor.

Helga Crane's rejection of racial and sexual imperatives dictating style of dress, modes of social interaction, career choice, and sexual behavior reveals her internalization of the link between coloration and sexual
expectations. She feels the secret of her mixed racial parentage "hidden away from black folk in a locked closet, 'never,' she told herself, 'to be reopened'" (45). In much the same way, she cannot admit her repressed sexual urges to herself, and so her conscious mind (the ego) continually reasserts control over her unconscious sexual desires (the Id) by talking to herself. Thus when she again meets Dr. Anderson, the earlier antagonist who elevates (reduces?) her to being a "lady," she feels "a peculiar, not wholly disagreeable, quiver [run] down her spine. She felt an odd little faintness. The blood rushed to her face" (49). The equivocal language Larsen employs to express Helga's sexual feelings approximates her pleasure and pain: pleasure at the sensations themselves, and pain at her inability to reconcile and accept them. "Afterwards, she lay for a long time without undressing, thinking angry self-accusing thoughts, recalling and reconstructing that other explosive contact. That memory filled her with a sort of aching delirium" (51). Larsen's symbolically post-coital language captures the ambivalence Helga feels toward her sexual self: she is in bed but not undressed, thinking but filled with a delirium, desiring yet repulsed. She cannot reconcile her social/intellectual and her sensual selves: just as she is neither black nor white, so she is neither lady nor whore.

This inability to prioritize either a sexual or a social prerogative does not indicate Helga's failure;
rather, it signals the mutually exclusive dictates plaguing African American women, especially mulattoes. In rebelling against social norms equating blackness with sensuality, Helga Crane casts herself in an alternative stereotype: that of frigid mulatto lady. She cannot escape rigid categorization because of her socially constructed race and gender. Though this imagery of entrapment hardly originates with Larsen -- Linda Brent bemoaned the same limitations sixty-some years before -- Larsen is one of the first writers to reject the wholesomely repressed lady as a viable alternative for women. If Helga continues to suppress her flamboyance and libido, she will be a perfect demonstration of a "race" woman, as exemplified by the sexless and unattractive Mrs. Hayes-Rore, or the hypocritical and frigid Anne Grey. If she embraces her sexuality, that "disturbing factor" (7) which causes her feelings of restlessness and suffocation, she will be construed as a manifestation of the loose black woman. The outward sign of Helga's polarity between sensuality and conformance is clothing, where her personal style and sexuality come together.

CLOTHING AS A SYMBOLIC SECOND SKIN

The most subtle and telling symbol of Helga's struggle to escape the quicksand of cultural stereotype is her choice of clothing. Ironically, critics misinterpret this symbolism as distracting and unimportant, or at most admit that it reveals "a certain nervous accuracy in ...
dramatizations of a female psychology" (Littlejohn 50). This dismissal of Larsen's symbolic use of clothing reveals critical short-sightedness. In Quicksand and Passing, as in Fauset's novels, clothing reveals a character's mood, social status, and intentions, providing a heuristic for the astute reader. Bernard W. Bell cites the "iconography of women's clothing" as one of the recurrent themes in black women's writing (243); Lawrence Langner, a sociologist whose study of apparel has been through several editions, writes that clothes supply "a regulating mechanism by which sexual intimacy can be turned on or off almost at will" (42), referring of course to a woman's ability to indicate sexual availability through choice of revealing clothing. Paradoxically, clothing can both sexualize (through choice of evocative color and cut) and desexualize (through adherence to prescribed conventions), and functions as a visual indicator in constructing a social identity.

For black women in the 1920s especially, clothing is an assertion of independence, a form of self-presentation or "second skin" (Lupton "Clothes" 411). Conservative dress establishes "decency," membership in the middle class, taste, style, and wealth. Proper clothing "acts as a sign of involvement" (Lurie 13), of participation in the larger culture. Helga notes African Americans' "slavish imitation of traits not their own" (83), their desire to show through similar manners and dress that they are as
much a part of the mainstream of American culture as their white counterparts. Thus Helga's interest in her clothing should not be overlooked. Far from being evidence of Larsen's superficiality, Larsen's use of clothing as a "non-verbal system of communication" (Lurie 3) indicates her ability to write on several levels simultaneously. Helga's dresses can be read as pure entertainment, or as deeply symbolic indications of her psyche; on either level, they add spark and depth to the novel. As kings and ministers of state have long been aware, clothing, like language, is a system of signs that can be read on many levels.

Lurie proposes that clothing is a language with "a vocabulary and a grammar like other languages" with "dialects and accents, some almost unintelligible to members of the mainstream culture" (4). In confirmation of this theory, witness the painful and often expensive process of straightening black hair. "Good" hair is a symbol of status in the black community, as Larsen interjects with her comment through Helga that she doesn't understand "what form of vanity it was that had induced an intelligent girl like Margaret Creighton to turn what was probably nice, live, crinkly hair into a dead straight, greasy, ugly mass" (14). Zora Neale Hurston concedes the cultural appeal of straight hair when she describes her Janie as beautiful because she has "the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like
a plume (Eyes 11). The pressure to assume a Caucasian fashion at great personal discomfort is a subtle form of oppression, yet whites are generally unaware of the price this badge of acceptance costs people of color.

If we believe that "to choose clothes is to define and describe ourselves" (Lurie 5), then we must pay close attention to Helga’s apparel. As mentioned earlier, our first view of Helga is in her delicate green and gold negligee, a garment that "amazed ... the girl who came in the morning to awaken Helga Crane" (9) with its sophistication and sensuality. Helga herself is aware of the "dull attire of the women workers" at Naxos (17), and questions the social strictures dictating that bright colors are vulgar, too sensual, cheap. Color symbolizes life and physicality to Helga, and she feels that "bright colors were fitting and that dark-complexioned people should wear yellow, green and red" (18). She wonders why someone doesn’t write "A Plea for Color" (18), a double entendre that begs consideration of race as well as clothing.

Sadly, she herself will never write that text, for as well as donning ornaments, she is an ornament, a sexual object which can be purchased (as Axel Olsen will try to do in Copenhagen) or used for sensory satisfaction (the object of the despicable Reverend Green). Hazel Carby points out Helga’s dual status as consumer and consumable (RW 173), but I would go even further to posit that Helga’s use of
adornment is a form of self-objectification rather than self expression. Her choice of clothing subconsciously flaunts her sensuality. "Helga's fascination with colors and surfaces, with adorning her body and with being looked at, registers the sensuality she attempts to deny, to disguise" (Hostetler 36).

Clothing carries double freight for Helga: it defines her as a woman, and it categorizes her as a middle-class African American. She is devastatingly aware of the impression her clothing creates. When seeking employment, "she dressed herself carefully, in the plainest garments she possessed, a suit of fine blue twill faultlessly tailored, from whose left pocket peeped a gay handkerchief, an unadorned, heavy silk blouse, a small, smart fawn-colored hat, and slim, brown oxfords, and chose a brown umbrella" (31). Larsen's cataloguing of Helga's outfit is as much her own tour de force as her character's: one must not forget that Larsen writes for a racially mixed audience, many of whom are unfamiliar with the concept of a black middle class. She must therefore not only distinguish Helga as having taste, but must demonstrate exactly what that taste constitutes. An undiscerning male critic might see only an overly-discriminating attention to superficial detail; a female reader might be socially predisposed to visualize the outfit in her mind's eye to decide if it indeed passed muster as stylishly understated (it does). Larsen employs
Helga's clothing to demonstrate that she and her character understand the standard from which Helga's sensuality will depart; otherwise Helga's decline is just another instance of a predictable black/"scarlet woman." (Note how the proximity of "black" and "scarlet" underlines the association of sexuality and color.)

In contrast to Helga's careful toilette, the imminently distinguished Mrs. Hayes-Rore has "badly straightened hair and dirty fingernails" and wears "five-years-behind-the mode garments" (35). Her inattention to sartorial matters defines her as well: omission of attention to dress is as much of a statement as care. She, like the drably-attired women of Naxos, effectively desexualizes herself through adoption of the stereotypical "race woman" attire. The suitably named Anne Grey also dresses to suit her personality in "a cool green tailored frock" (41-2): she is indeed a cool woman, green with latent jealousy (over her future husband's dalliance with Helga) and "tailored" as in "cut to fit." She fits the mode (again, a word from the dialect of fashion) of a modern young woman committed to racial uplift.

Lest we miss the symbolism with which Larsen imbues fashion, she emphasizes it in passages like the following.

Her mind trailed off to the highly important matter of clothes. What should she wear? White? No, everybody would, because it was hot. Green? She shook her head. Anne would be sure to. The blue thing. Reluctantly she decided against it; she loved it, but she had worn it too often.
There was that cobwebby black net touched with orange, which she had bought last spring in a fit of extravagance and never worn, because on getting it home both she and Anne had considered it too décolleté, and too outre. Anne's words: "There's not enough of it, and what there is gives you the air of something about to fly," came back to her, and she smiled as she decided she would certainly wear the black net. For her it would be a symbol. She was about to fly. (56)

Each of the carefully chosen images in this passage represents an aspect of the struggle between social conformity and personal style in Helga's life. Appropriately, Larsen uses color metaphorically. First, Helga rejects wearing white, symbol of virginity in the marriage ceremony, indicating her rejection of socially prescribed sexuality. Next, she considers and rejects green, which evokes jealousy, revealing her awareness of the nascent envy of her friend Anne, and refusal to play that petty "feminine" game. Then she decides against blue, which has more complicated implications. It could indicate her impatience with "the blues" or sadness which has lately plagued her life, especially since at the end of this episode she leaves for Europe and starts a new life. But it could also indicate something more profound: a refusal to "sing the blues," to proclaim her status as a victim of men or society as typical in songs by Bessie Smith and other female singers of the day. Finally, Helga considers "that cobwebby black net touched with orange," which functions on several levels. Its touch of orange is the bait, the hint of color Helga craves in her daily life.
And its "cobwebby" nature reveals it as a trap: "decollete" (too revealing, both physically and psychologically) and too "outre" (literally, too "out," too nonconformist). Anne's opinion that it made her look like "something about to fly" shows the social sanction of revealing too much, and the word "something" objectifies her. After this detailed iconography, Larsen indicates the intentionality of her choice of outfits, by writing that "[f]or her it would be a symbol." Critical failure to attend to such a serious indication of symbolism demonstrates how reading without attention to gender encodings obscures a whole dimension of certain works.

In addition to telegraphing Helga's mental state, this paragraph functions on many levels. At the most superficial, such passages inject the novel with the juicy interest inherent in "a good read;" as with Fauset's use of melodrama, it is the stuff of which pot-boilers are made. Secondly, it reveals Larsen's command of symbolism and language: every word, every nuance counts. She doesn't choose colors or outfits for her heroine summarily, but with the intent that their symbolism be understood by the careful reader. Finally, Larsen's use of clothing functions as an extended metaphor for the bifurcation of Helga's personality into inner and outer selves, a sensual side which she drapes with gorgeous fabrics and revealing garments, and an intellectual side, which she signals by her choice of functional, simple clothes. Attire reveals
helga's mental state, and clothing figures purposefully in the section set in Copenhagen, where Helga is objectified by her color and gender to the reduced status of a store window mannequin.

In surrendering to her physicality in Denmark, Helga essentially becomes another person. Shortly before she boards the liner to Denmark, she is reborn symbolically when she and some friends make a symbolic descent into a Harlem nightclub. There Helga first sees the inimitable Audrey Denney (clothed in apricot -- a sweet fruit ripe for the picking) with Dr. Anderson. Helga sees her as a foil, a "beautiful, cool, calm girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers" (62). Unstated is Helga's admiration also for her sexual self-assurance as a woman who can dance with white men which "can mean only one thing," as Anne says (61). Audrey's defiance of racial and sexual stereotypes prompts Anne to threaten her with the ostracism Helga always fears. In having Anne, another woman of color, express opprobrium for Audrey, Larsen demonstrates that discrimination is not limited to the white community.

By asserting control of her physical self -- both racially and sexually -- Audrey sets a model for Helga. Helga sees her dancing with Anderson, "with grace and abandon, gravely, yet with obvious pleasure, her legs, her hips, her back all swaying gently, swung by that wild music from the heart of the jungle" (62). Audrey's acceptance of
the label "Negro" associates sensuality and race. Larsen cleverly undercuts this pairing by describing Audrey, a mulatta, as having "alabaster skin," thus deconstructing the theory that black skin equals sexual license. While Anne perceives Audrey's acceptance of white escorts as racial disloyalty, Helga understands Anne's hatred for the sexual jealousy it is. Audrey Denny represents the intermingling of the most volatile elements of two powerful stereotypes: the beautiful mulatta and the sensual African American, and demonstrates how uneasy that comixture is. She is definitely sexual and almost a lady (as evidenced by her escort, Dr. Anderson, and Anne's friends' attendance at her parties). Fittingly, Anne says about her that "It's the principle of the thing that I object to" (61) -- even if Helga could integrate both sexual and social satisfaction, she would still be trapped in the quicksand of misinterpretation.

FROM "LADY" TO "WOMAN"

Helga's symbolic rebirth occurs moments later, as she pushes her way through the crowded, dark, endless stairs. "At last, panting confused, but thankful to have escaped, she found herself out in the dark night alone, a small crumpled thing" (62). Here we see evidence of the recurrent image of suffocation, which ties in with the motif of quicksand. Helga regresses to childhood, swiftly recreating herself as she remembers "the forgotten Danish of her childhood" (64) and eats with "the purser ... who
remembered her as the little dark girl" (63). Her aunt Fru Dahl acts as a mother to the newly reborn Helga: "the resemblance to her own mother was unmistakable" (65).

Thus begins Helga's identification with her physical side. The duality which critics have long viewed as located within her racial heritage is actually a "duel" between the "pleasure and danger of feminine experience", between the lady and the whore (McDowell "That Nameless ..." 147). Formerly, she suppressed her sensual side; here in Denmark, it defines her. She is reduced to an equation: blackness + womanhood = exotic sexuality. Helga is completely objectified: a "queer, dark creature," "a veritable savage" (69), "a new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited" (70). She accepts this degradation for several reasons. First, her "perturbation subsided in the unusual pleasure of having so many new and expensive clothes at one time." For the first time in her life, she consciously enjoys the emphasis on her physical person, enjoys "being seen, gaped at, desired" and "feel[s] a little excited, incited" (74). Second, her objectification brings her material gain; in accepting herself as a possession, she attains possessions of her own, which appeals to her materialism. The pendulum has swung to its apogee: rather than the sobriety and decorum of Naxos, she now embodies riotous color and sensuality in Copenhagen. She sheds the "shroud of color" which oppresses African Americans (75), and instead adopts the
equally fatal shroud of sensuality, which will eventually kill her.

Only after her aunt's machinations provoke painter Axel Olsen's marriage proposal does Helga realize the equally damning future awaiting her as a purely physical creature. The proposal scene foregrounds the double bind Helga experiences as a woman and an African American. It is interesting to watch Larsen play with agency and power in this scene. As a white man, Olsen has hegemony on his side. When he tells Helga that she has her "reward" for virtue in his marriage proposal, he confirms the traditional power relationship between the sexes, and the historic exploitation of blacks by whites. Her only commodity is her virtue, her only attraction her physical beauty. But when Olsen accuses her in that line of having the "soul of a prostitute" (87), the social-sexual double bind of a woman of color is revealed. If she sells her body, she is a prostitute; if she maintains her physical chastity, she is equally accused of selling herself "to the highest buyer." Behavior cannot free a woman from the trap of sex as commodity. Just as repressive is the racial dynamic: by indulging her sexuality, she plays true to the image of the loose black woman; in denying it, she denies a valid form of self expression.

Sadly, Helga understands that though she rejects the equation of money = sex, she will be the one to "pay for this hour" (87). She reclaims herself independent of her
sexual identity after "she had time to think" (88), reasserting intellectual self-control. Helga turns the tables on Olsen and transforms herself from object to agent. She chooses (not to have him), instead of being chosen. Her mind again controls her physically, and the two aspects of herself war for power.

Copenhagen acts as a catalyst for her; before her sojourn, she is the "sexual object pursued, while, after Copenhagen, she [becomes] the subject pursuing" (McDowell "That Nameless ..." 149). The balancing act she maintains to reconcile the sensual and social sides of her personality dictates her return to "hot" Harlem, occasioned by Anne's marriage to Dr. Anderson. Anne is the suitable mate for Anderson who, though able to stir Helga sexually, can never liberate her; he functions as one of the oppressors who relegate her to status as a non-sexual "lady," and so force her to ignore a vital portion of herself. Anne, on the other hand, is willing to subjugate herself to a man: she "intended that her husband should be happy. She was sure that it could be managed with a little tact and cleverness on her part" (95). Anne is "almost perfect" (45), a lady committed to keeping her husband "undisturbed" (95) by his sensual impulses.

Too, James Vayle, a former suitor encountered casually at a party in Harlem, expresses the racist equation of coloration and sexuality in his reaction to black hostess Helen Tavenor, "conversing gaily with one of
her white guests: 'And I don't like that sort of thing. In fact I detest it'" (102). Seeing black and white guests mingling at the party, he immediately assumes that their interaction is purely sexual. "You know as well as I do, Helga, that it's the colored girls these men come up here to see'" (103). Vayle's implication that black women are more sexually exciting than white incites Helga's contempt, for since the temporary assertion of will over her libido, she herself has been practicing "her deliberate lure ... because it was somehow a bit more dangerous" (98). Vayle's comment converts her experimentation with sexuality from an expression of individuality and self-determination to a social stereotype of racial lasciviousness. Helga's indignation then, is as much for herself as it is for the unjustly maligned Wentworths, who Vayle mistakenly views as an interracial couple.

Helga exposes Vayle's misapprobation on two scores: the white man has not indeed come to Harlem "for one thing;" he has come with his wife. And his wife, while dark, is still considered white, undermining the notion of race as a category and reasserting the primacy of color over race as a social determinant. By changing the focus from race to skin color, Larsen foregrounds the fallacy of associating dark skin with sexual desire and lighter skin with purity. By using language to reconfigure the olive-skinned woman's identity ("'She isn't colored, as you've probably been thinking'" [103]), Helga exposes the
connection between skin hue and social expectations of sexual behavior: a "black" woman dancing in a white man’s arms is a symbol of miscegenation, racial oppression, and rampant sensuality; the same woman, refigured as "olive-skinned" represents the social norm of marriage.

Fittingly, for Larsen’s careful juxtaposition of plot elements must never be underestimated, shortly after this discussion with Vayle, Helga meets and kisses Anderson. Vayle’s disturbance of her inchoate sexual and racial beliefs unnerves Helga. If one attends to the function of clothing in this novel, it is not insignificant that the hem of her dress has come down; her garb functions as a form of self-expression, of which Helga is very conscious (earlier, Larsen has described her manner of dress as "courageous" [98]). Her hem’s unravelling approximates the letting down of her guard, and in this undefended state Anderson encounters her as man to woman, not gentleman to lady. Their kiss represents the struggle between Helga’s conscious construction of self, and "a long-hidden, half-understood desire" (104). Her reaction perfectly mimics the bifurcation into social-intellectual and sexual halves. First she fights him, then "with the suddenness of a dream" she surrenders, only to draw away, "consciously confused" (104). As a reassertion of her social-intellectual self, Helga pats her dress and hair (evidence of her conscious social persona), and leaves. Even in bed alone, Helga battles this dichotomy: "colorful
dreams" invade her "prim bed" (105). Larsen’s choice of the words "colorful" to represent the obviously sexual nature of these dreams indicates the degree to which Helga has internalized the equation of sexual freedom with "color." Completing her acknowledgement of incongruity between outer and inner selves, Helga remarks that "outwardly nothing had changed" (105).

The scene following in which she rejects Anderson closely parallels her surrender to the Revered Green and her long suppressed desire. As Helga prepares to confront Anderson, "physical weariness descended on her" (106). Later, with Reverend Green, she is seized with "physical weariness" (115), representative of her tiring against the struggle of bifurcation. Helga "deliberately stopped thinking" (258), relinquishing control over her sensuality, and concommitantly accepting the social construction of a black woman: purely sensual, lower class, dominated by a man. Larsen’s choice of a minister for Helga’s paramour is not accidental. Larsen abhors relinquishing control, whether to sensualism or religion. Perhaps because of the dominant role Christianity has played in black women’s lives, Larsen seems anxious to undermine it as a force for salvation, and expose it as an opiate that palliates black women’s oppression.

Lest we miss Larsen’s point that religion and sensuality are opposite sides of the same coin, she offers the character of Clementine Richards, "a strapping black
beauty of magnificent Amazon proportions and bold shining eyes of jet-like hardness" (119). She is the embodiment of the loose black woman, "all chains, strings of beads, jingling bracelets, flying ribbons, feathery neck-pieces, and flowery hats" (119). Her appropriateness as a mate for Rev. Green reveals the complicity between religion and sensuality, further emphasizing Larsen's opprobrium for any loss of self-determination. After her penultimate debilitating pregnancy, Helga thinks, "Religion had, after all, its uses. It blunted the perceptions" (133), allying it with sex in its effects. Helga melds the two in her own mind: "Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral" (135).

Here Larsen's rhetorical structure functions to reveal her polemic. The circularity of Helga's life is brought home to her as she finally understands "this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen" (134). In each setting, Helga experiments with her sociological determinants (race and gender) and her personal prerogatives (coloration and sensuality). In Naxos, race predominates, determining sexual expression (or lack of it) against a stereotype of lasciviousness that equates blackness with sensuality, and therefore must be repressed.
In New York, Helga studies various permutations of coloration and sensuality, from the alabaster and promiscuous Audrey to the cold, "gray" Anne. Here, gender as a social construction is leavened into the mixture, and Helga realizes that her womanhood consigns her to a bifurcation into social-intellectual and sexual selves, the latter of which she must control. McDowell writes that "Helga is divided psychically between a desire for sexual fulfillment and a longing for social respectability" ("Introduction" xvii). Her flight to Copenhagen is an unconscious attempt to reconcile those halves. But whereas in New York she had expressed her social self, in Copenhagen she becomes a creature almost solely determined by physicality. Here, Helga confronts a duality rather than a continuum of options: she is black or white, lady or whore, without the option of ambiguity she might exercise in New York (witness Audrey Denny). Yet Larsen cannot offer us that easy solution; she is no sensualist lotus eater, and so Helga must return from slow reconstruction by white culture. Her immersion in the poor deep South at novel's end is a surrender not just to sexuality, but also an attempt to adopt the antithesis of Copenhagen: not cold European lady, but hot black woman. In her attempt to reconcile two divergent imperatives -- to be both sexually fulfilled and yet contradict racial and gender stereotypes -- the crushing wheel of prejudice has come full circle. Ironically, during a brief moment of
mental clarity when she finally understands "the oppression, the degradation, that her life had become" (135), biological determinism reasserts itself and she becomes fatally pregnant with her fifth child, an extreme example of sexualized poor black womanhood. Ultimately she realizes that for an educated black woman, dreams of self-determination are all "pie in the sky" (134).

Unlike Fauset's Angela Murray, who achieves artistic fulfillment, independence, and with the arrival of her lover, the implication of sexual satisfaction, Helga Crane will never escape the quicksand of prejudice. That she was never destined to is apparent in the desires she articulates. Prior to her death, she thinks about "freedom and cities, about clothes and books, about the sweet mingled smell of Houbigant and cigarettes in softly lighted rooms filled with inconsequential chatter and laughter and sophisticated tuneless music" (135). These are not transcendental images, but rather evidence of sophistication and social success. The association of the words "freedom" and "Houbigant" (an expensive perfume) in the same sentence reveals a mind which cannot take itself seriously. She knows that even these superficial longings are beyond her power to satisfy. In hurtling between the two extremes of "lady" and "whore," Harlem habitue and Scandinavian oddity, Helga exemplifies the impossibility of maintaining a unified persona amid divergent cultural directives. Her fragmentation and oppression are so
extreme that the only human contact she can handle is "inconsequential chatter;" the only art, "tuneless music." What Helga craves on her deathbed, is not surcease from discrimination, but only the lovely images of a perfume commercial.
Notes

1. Robert Bone reveals common critical misapprehension of Larsen's focus in his comment that novels of passing represent "in psychological terms, a symbolic rejection of the author's unconscious desire to be white" (98). This typifies the privileging of racial over genderal issues Larsen's work encounters. Though *Passing* obviously confronts the concept of race as culturally defined, it also interrogates the role of sexuality in women's lives.

2. If one pursues this symbolism, then the juxtaposition of Helga's desire to leave Naxos, "no, forever!" and the "tingling crash" of "a slender, frail glass vase" from her window (4) might indicate the liberation of her sexual self. Flowers, often a symbol of female sexuality, are freed by her decision to abandon Naxos' "trivial hypocrisy and careless cruelties" (5).

3. Other instances of Helga's conversations with herself, too numerous to mention, demonstrate her dualism. Typical examples include: "She didn't, she told herself, like this Dr. Anderson" (49), and "She was, she told herself, a sentimental fool" (141). As a black woman who must practice self-censorship, she becomes her own audience, talking to the only person who will truly listen to her.

4. Indeed, minstrelsy and the black-face tradition relied heavily upon the incongruous pairing of formal attire and black faces as a visual parody requiring no elaboration. Larsen shows her awareness of this with her quotation of the nursery rhyme in connection with the minstrel show Helga attends, in which she thinks of the performers (and their American black counterparts) as "beggars," "some in rags,/Some in tags,/And some in velvet gowns" (83). Houston Baker comments on the minstrel mask as an expression of "repressed spirits of sexuality, ludic play, id satisfaction, [and] castration anxiety" (*Workings* 17). No wonder Helga was disconcerted when she watched their gambolings in Denmark!

5. Fauset, too, comments upon the "good" hair phenomenon. Her character Matthew Henson, aspirant to Angela's hand in *Plum Bun*, is considered less than handsome because of "his father's thick, tight, 'bad' hair" (49). Another young man, Porter, preens by running "his hand over his beautifully groomed hair. he had worn a stocking cap in his room all the early part of the day to enable him to perform this gesture without disaster" (68). Even in 1989,
5. (cont'd) bell hooks writes about the ritual of hair straightening: "Real good hair is straight hair, hair like white folks' hair. We pretend that the standards we measure our beauty by are our own invention" ("Black Is a Woman’s Color" 339).

6. Deborah McDowell comments on this structural closure too. She writes, "The ending completes the structural opposites on which the novel turns. Whereas it opens with Helga in an elegantly furnished room ... it closes on her trapped in the 'the four rooms of her ugly brown house'" ("Introduction" xxi).
CHAPTER FOUR

HOME AGAIN?

Larsen's and Fauset's heroines conclude in very different homes: one painting portraits in a Parisian atelier, seemingly free of racial and gender prejudice, and the other dying from repeated and brutal childbearing in the poverty and squalor of a four room shack in the deep South. Larsen uses the motifs of claustrophobia and quicksand; Fauset invokes a nursery rhyme which takes us "to market" and then "home again." Yet both novels critique the institutions that inscribe prejudice and constitute identities for women despite personality or preference. By creating heroines ranging from "alabaster" to "ebony," all of whom are considered "black," they expose the fallacy of race, and assert that skin coloration and behavior should not be yoked. Race becomes "a thing which couldn't be registered" (Passing 206).

In creating women who consciously explore their sexuality, they confront the conflict between social and sexual imperatives for African American women. Their heroines are neither the passive constructs of true white women nor tragic mulattoes. Nor are they the voraciously sexual "loose black women." From innocent Jinny in Plum Bun to calculating Fru Dahl in Quicksand, these heroines manifest diverse sexual personas, which don't conform to
social stereotypes. White women are not necessarily pure, dark women are not necessarily promiscuous, and many of them are not passive in their interactions with men. Angela rejects her white lover, Roger Fielding, and Helga rejects Dr. Anderson. Fauset and Larsen explore permutations of race, sexuality, and gendered behaviors in such multiplicity that no definitive correlation can be drawn. Instead of binary oppositions, they create diversity that defies type-casting.

Fauset's and Larsen's interrogation of restrictive ideologies is reason enough to analyze and understand their work. Their understanding of race and gender constitutes a valuable stage in the continuum of African American writing which starts with slave narratives and culminates in the latter twentieth century with post-modern fabulation (Bell 284) and rememory (Christian, "Somebody Forgot" 333). In confronting female sexuality, Larsen and Fauset situate themselves on the barricades with the likes of Frances Harper and Harriet Jacobs, both of whom decry women's lack of autonomy. For two centuries, sex for the black woman meant rape or concubinage, and was "an act of domination rather than sharing" (Christian, BWN 14). The courage of two women writing about feminine sensuality a mere sixty years after the abolition of slavery should not be underrated. Confronting women's sexuality posed a problem for female authors in the twenties, because they were stereotyped by white audiences and censored by black
readers. Hazel Carby cites the "moral panic" that migration of black women to large cities like New York engendered, because they were "characterized as sexually degenerate and, therefore, socially dangerous" ("Policing" 739). As Christian writes, "the garb of uninhibited passion wears better on a male, who after all, does not have to carry the burden of the race's morality or lack of it" (BWN 40).

Despite these handicaps, Larsen and Fauset were popular among their contemporaries; curiously, more than the later validated Zora Neale Hurston, whose work with dialect subjected her to derision. Fauset's first three novels made the bestseller lists, and Larsen's Quicksand netted her a Guggenheim Fellowship. Both Plum Bun and Quicksand were recommended for the William E. Harmon Award for Distinguished Achievement in black literature. However, revisionist classism -- which prioritized "the folk" over "the people" -- misogynist scholarship, and changes in literary fashion from novels of manners to more contemporary styles, have all contributed to the eclipse of these two authors. Now that their novels are again available, where do we go from here?

I believe that Larsen's work, which already enjoys an increased readership (thanks in part to the low priced volumes available from Rutgers University Press), will be included in more and more literary curricula. Perhaps now that scholars like Mary Lupton and Deborah McDowell have
published articles explicating Jessie Redmon Fauset, she too will enjoy a resurgence in popularity, and become more than a footnote in biographies of famous male authors she encouraged, like Jean Toomer and Langston Hughes. But gender prejudice still exists. Best-selling author Terry MacMillan recently complained that black women's writing has to be "finer than fine" to get published ("Interview" 5), exposing the discrimination to which works by women of color are still subjected. Things haven't changed much since Jessie Fauset wrote that "most publishers persist in finding only certain types of Negroes interesting and if an author presents a variant they fear that the public either won't believe it or won't stand for it" (Showalter, Sister's 121).

But even as publishers realize that there is indeed a market for black feminist literature, readers must resist being pre-empted as part of a cultural vogue. Sometimes literature intervenes in a cultural drama, raising more questions than it answers. As Hazel Carby writes, "black feminist criticism [can] be regarded critically as a problem, not a solution, as a sign that should be interrogated, a locus of contradictions" (RW 15). Tempting as it is to look for an authoritative voice, reductivism can result. Notable critic Houston A. Baker is one example. In Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, he applies contemporary theory to works of the Harlem Renaissance to demonstrate their viability seventy years
later. Yet even as he calls for reevaluation of that period, he is blind to works by women (including Fauset and Larsen). Too often, male critics dismiss what they don’t understand, and "for most male academics, the novel is perceived in male terms -- [he] feels he can get away with using feminization as a means of ridicule" (Lupton 389). Examining works outside the canon exposes the apparatus whereby "universals" are proclaimed. For over two centuries, the only universal aspect of black women’s writing has been its neglect.

As Jane Tompkins argues, a text "cannot be understood apart from its results" (Reader Response ix). Fauset’s and Larsen’s novels were successful in their popularity. Their current marginality devolves from one of two factors. Either their message has been absorbed and eclipsed, a premise recent cases like the alleged rape of Tawana Brawley contradict; or they have been subjected to discriminatory critical practices, academic equivalents of the racism and sexism they sought to destroy. By examining stylistic encodings and iconography as well as cultural context, the merit of Plum Bun and other feminist novels can be appreciated, and their questioning of inscribed presumptions realized.

Awareness of the reading process invites interrogation of our socio-political beliefs and expectations. Barbara Christian calls for a new methodology which both applies historical context and "compels you to read
differently" ("Race for Theory" 236). Barbara Smith asks for integration of "figurations of the relationships between race, gender and class, as well as demonstrat[ion of] the contours of the black woman's literary tradition" (Awkward 241). Readers shouldn't denigrate authors simply because they don't possess the literary and cultural competence to read them. Fauset and Nella Larsen have been accused of unquestioning acceptance of bourgeois culture, as if that's reason enough for dismissal (Jenkins 14). Yet if we define black women writers as outside the mainstream as in the case of the Harlem Renaissance, can we then criticize them for adopting mainstream genres like sentimental fiction? Understanding techniques in works like Plum Bun and Quicksand may reveal their cultural impact, and how their refiguration of stock literary characters served the interests of their intended audiences. That could explain why these novels were popular in the Harlem Renaissance and are being rediscovered today: their relevance is culturally embedded, and changing social environments lead to changing critical paradigms.

These novels are not as isolated historical artifacts, but resonate with contemporary significance in questioning racial and sexual standards. Kathy Russell writes that even in 1992, "the color complex is 'the last taboo' among African-Americans" (2). A recent book review in the esteemed journal Melus asks about Nella Larsen,
"What relevance does her 'light-skinned complexion' have?" -- as if coloration could not be a means of social discrimination (Miller 128). Coloration is still an issue, as is sexuality. The success of novels like Toni Morrison's *Sula* and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* demonstrates that women of color are still measuring their own sexuality against norms based on class, race, and gender.

I have attempted to demonstrate that Fauset's and Larsen's works undermine the social constructs of race and gender as determinants of sexual conduct. But this is too reductive; one must reject both categories and instead approach their novels teleologically, not asking whether they are feminist novels "passing" for race novels or the obverse, but what cultural work they accomplish. Rather than seeking to replace one set of cultural paradigms with another, one should examine the process by which standards are established. The ideologies themselves are less informative than awareness of them. To establish gender and race as mutually exclusive categories of discourse is as artificial in literature as it is in life: a black woman's novel can no more separate itself into components than a black woman can (witness Anita Hill). Likewise, to read *Plum Bun* without realizing that its author could not ride in a regular streetcar or drink from a public fountain outside of Harlem is a disingenuous avoidance of political responsibility. While we cannot redress the past, we can
attempt to keep from perpetuating its elitist mistakes. If reading *Plum Bun* and *Quicksand* reveals how concepts of race and gender prescribe acceptable sexual behavior, than they are not, indeed, novels without a moral.
WORKS CITED


VITA

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