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**The Body in the Text: Female Engagements With Black Identity**

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This work is dedicated to all the Black women, real and fictional, whose flexibility, strength, and creativity have been, to me, life-long inspirations.

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## **The Body in the Text: Female Engagements With Black Identity**

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This dissertation examines novels by Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, Jamaica Kincaid, and Edwidge Danticat, focusing on their treatment of the gendered component of racial identity formation through the figure of the female body, which operates as a marker of female social experience. In each case, the female body is the sign by which we read female exclusion from discursive constructions of Black identity in literature and society. While the texts are rooted in their individual Diasporic locations, the themes they encode, like Black female sexual desire, the political functions of consumption, and patriarchal constructions of femininity and the strategies they employ derive from a Black female aesthetic that privileges the incorporation of multiple subject positions through innovative narrative approaches. Tracing the emergence of a feminist narrative aesthetic from the synthesis of existing genres in the United States in the early twentieth century to the innovation of new structuring principles rooted in Caribbean literary practice in the latter part of the century, I draw the conclusion that taking a trans-historical and trans-regional approach demonstrates that in their attempts to formulate strategies of approach to the project of revising Black male articulations of Black identity Black women have formed

a separate and distinctive writing community that draws on a gendered, rather than national language, to delineate their distinctive Black identities.

## Table of Contents

Introduction.....	1
1. Jessie Redmon Fauset’s <i>Plum Bun</i> and the Black Women’s Tradition .....	15
2. Fashionable Bodies: The Black Woman as National Other in Nella Larsen’s <i>Quicksand and Passing</i> .....	46
3. Locating the Language of Sycorax in Jamaica Kincaid’s <i>The Autobiography of My Mother</i> .....	85
4. Edwidge Danticat’s <i>Breath, Eyes, Memory</i> : Historicizing the Colonial Woman.....	120
Conclusion.....	152
Bibliography.....	156
Vita.....	161

## **Introduction: (Re)Writing the Nation**

This project began with my effort to understand the centrality of the body in texts by Black women writers in literatures initially defined by the socio-historical contexts of nationalism. In looking at the literature of the Harlem Renaissance and the post-Négritude Caribbean I necessarily limit myself to some very symbolic concepts of nationalism, since in the case of the former we are talking about nationalism in the context of a people without a nation to call their own and in the latter case we are describing a group of individual nations unified by a collective regional and historical experience. Each body of literature, however, clearly reflects nationalism as the exegetical context in their focus on identity as a major theme and their sense of the literature as implicated in concrete political struggles for equality.

The concept of nation, then, refers primarily to the process of identity formation in the analyses that follow. I see race and racial identity as a question inextricably tied to the concept of nation. In the context of the United States, where African-descended people's own sense of self has to some extent been formulated as a reaction against their exclusion from American national identity, any attempt to define Black identity is, to some degree, an attempt to specify a national identity since their exclusion from one nation creates of them a de facto national community. In the context of the Caribbean, where race as the basis for nation across literal national boundaries is most fully articulated in the Négritude movement, race is still centralized but is more proactive than reactive. Négritude, in positing an identity that foregrounded the commonalities among

Black people across cultures, attempted to formulate a concept of Blackness that exceeded the paradigm of Black people as merely the European's racial other.

In each case, however, in the literature most strongly associated with these moments of nationalism, there is a marked gender bias in the construction of the meaning of Blackness. In the Harlem Renaissance context, this has much to do with the discourse of the New Negro and, in the Caribbean, with the need for a unifying symbol of cultural origins to draw together the disparate cultures of the Diaspora under the banner of Blackness. In each of these cases we see an expression of one or both of the two extreme ways that the image of woman can be used to manage the crises of identity that accompany black nationalist projects. She is either erased because of her association with the "backward" and "primitive" aspects of itself that the nation seeks to leave behind or is represented solely as the symbol of transmission of the "original" cultural values to which the nation now returns (McClintock 1997, Kandiyoti 1991).

While much recent scholarship, including Venetria Patton and Maureen Honey's *Double-Take: A Revisionist Harlem Renaissance Anthology*, Marcy Knopf's *The Sleeper Wakes*, and Lorraine Roses and Ruth Randolph's *Harlem's Glory*, has revealed the extent to which African-American women participated in the Harlem Renaissance, that movement has more traditionally been associated with a narrow range of artists comprised mainly of men. Most important to my discussion, however, is the way that women's positions in the canon of Harlem Renaissance writing have been influenced by a single, early, thread of discourse about Black identity, the ideology of the New Negro.

While the discourse of the New Negro is but one among many streams of thought that contributed to the artistic outpouring that was the Harlem Renaissance, it is

significant because it was the ideology of the most visible and influential public figures of the time and because elements of its ideology filtered more readily into the consciousnesses of the masses than the radicalism of other ideologies (Lewis, 1994). Modernity was a hallmark feature of the New Negro movement. The figure of the New Negro was defined against that of the Old Negro, who was associated with slavery and the rural South and had been depicted in the popular cultural artifacts of the late nineteenth century as a stooped, head-ragged, mumble-mouthed buffoon who was unable to resist the brutal repression of the South. Most importantly, then, the New Negro ideology figured the urban North as the engendering site of racial progress. It is the space where the southern blacks could break with a past that had politically and culturally emasculated them and become active in fashioning themselves in the mold of “American-ness.” Central to signifying this new enfranchised status was a self-presentation that bore no relation to the Southern rural past. The sense that the old Negro was passive leads to a kind of feminization of the past and a masculinization of the present through its emphasis on activity—self-definition, self-improvement, and self-defense. Because much of black women’s writing of the period was concerned with the effects of the recent past in the present, their work very often was not seen as central to the movement.

In the context of the Caribbean, there was little female participation in the production of literature until the 1970’s, but there was a significant presence of women within the literature. This presence, though, tended to be highly symbolic and focused on the strong self-sacrificing black woman as a figure who enabled the ascension of the male protagonist who, himself, symbolized the emergent national self. Confirming the socio-reality of the function of femininity that was captured in the literature, M. Jacqui

Alexander argues that in the Caribbean post-independence efforts at solidifying national images were heavily gendered and sexualized; the evidence of the newly independent nation's rectitude of rule rested in the ability to demonstrate respectable masculinity and control over profligate working-class female sexuality. Ironically, the nationalist project called on women to "defend the nation by protecting their honour, by guarding the nuclear, conjugal family, 'the fundamental institution of society', by guarding 'culture' defined as the transmission of a fixed set of proper values to children of the nation..."

(13). Similarly, in a discussion of Haitian literature, Regine Latortue describes the symbolic function of woman by examining the presence of the Amazon figure in works by Jacques Roumain and Jacques Alexis, among others. In the "imaginative landscape" charted by the male writer, the Amazon is a type who represents a kind of cultural authenticity—she is associated with the physical and moral strength of the laboring proletariat and the world of nature and is most frequently imaged as dark-skinned—that is "the projection of an ideology created by male bourgeois society" (Latoure, 182).

Given the limitations of these approaches, my task in this work has been to identify what women's writing of their experiences as women and as racial subjects contributes to our understanding of Blackness as a racial experience and what is distinctive about their approaches to the project. Central to the strategies of Black women writers is their engagement with the Black female body, which, because it is twice constructed—as both raced and gendered—enables a multi-faceted approach to the representation of Blackness in their works. The shared ground of racial experience means that many Black women writers find value in the works of the male predecessors despite the fact of their absence or objectification in those texts. Their gender

experiences, however, affirm the sense of the specificity of the condition of being both black and a woman, which produces in their work a kind of dialogic engagement with other black texts. This dialogic approach is distinguished from the reactive stance of nationalism in that it sees itself as writing within a tradition rather than against one. These tendencies in Black women's writing have, alternately, been described as expansionary or versioning (Awkward 1989, O'Callaghan 1993). In either case, the point is that rather than merely place themselves in opposition to the canons these women seek to avoid the re-inscription of the very dichotomous thinking and binarism that forms the basis of their exclusion. Instead, they enact what Evelyn O'Callaghan describes as a "dub versioning," an analogy drawn from reggae musical practice in which elements from an "original" are emended, transformed and reconstituted to produce a new entity, which nonetheless, remains connected to the prior version. O'Callaghan finds this a useful analogy for the impulse toward collectivity that critics have noted in both Afro-American and Afro-Caribbean women's texts, that results in works that reflect the multiple consciousnesses of black women which emerge from the body as the locus of experience.

The multiple subjective positions occupied by the Black female body help to establish the necessity of a complex discourse of identity in both of the periods that I examine. In the first two chapters my approach to analyzing the texts of the Harlem Renaissance is deeply informed by contemporary feminist criticism that posits 1) the body as a locus of experience and 2) attention to multiple facets of identity as hallmarks of feminist theorizing. Of particular significance to me are the insights of Mae Gwen Henderson's "Speaking in Tongues: Dialogics, Dialectics, and the Black Woman

Writer's Literary Tradition." Henderson notes that recently black women writers have begun to receive more critical attention than in the past but that they "are subsumed under the category of woman in the feminist critique and the category of black in the racial critique" (16-17). This, according to Henderson, entails the danger of privileging one kind of critical reading over another and, thereby, creating blind spots. She implies that the unique subjectivity of black women/writers necessitates an equally distinctive critical approach. Henderson characterizes black women's writing and experience as dialogic, expressing the multi-relational nature of their subjectivity, which is formed in response to a generalized other as well as to "aspects of 'otherness' within the self" (18). For understanding the impact of this dialogism on the work of the black woman writer, she proposes the notion of black women writers "speaking in tongues," which provides a framework for understanding the simultaneous discourse of their work as it articulates relationships of difference and mutuality. Speaking in tongues captures the dimensions of both division and unity since in the biblical source it is associated with the division of people at the tower of Babel as well as with the unifying language of the spirit that Jesus' apostles used to witness to the people. She claims, that is, that "through their intimacy with the discourse of the other(s), black women writers weave into their work competing and complementary discourses—discourses that seek both to adjudicate competing claims and witness common concerns" that exemplify the dynamic of division and unification both (23). This two-pronged relationship leads to an interventionist approach to the canonical tradition in the writings of black women that is the focus of my inquiries here.

I have selected the novels *Quicksand*, *Passing* and *Plum Bun* to represent the Harlem Renaissance period because they constitute some of the earliest examples of the dialogic approach of black women's writing. While some of the slave narratives and the nineteenth century protest fiction of Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper did represent female sexual victimization—ostensibly a gender concern—they tended to frame the experience solely as an aspect of racial oppression. In that way they do not exhibit the multiple positions of otherness that are associated with the black woman's dialogic subjectivity. The Harlem Renaissance material, however, is distinctive in its exhibition of both the dialogic and dialectic aspects of black women's writing, working within the recognizable contours of that movement while at the same time offering an expanded and specifically female perspective. Set in the North, they are consistent with the Harlem Renaissance's general sense that the New Negro was northern and urban, they engage the question of middle-class black leadership, and link creative expression to self-definition. While they do not fully reject the dominant concerns of the Renaissance, they do expand those concerns in a way that is characteristic of black women's writing.

The notion of black women's writing as dialogical in nature structures my discussion of Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* in Chapter 1, where I suggest the ways that Fauset's work may have suffered from being read solely as a black text, rather than a black woman's text. I create a purposefully revisionist reading of the text that highlights the function of the black female body as a productive site for examining the interstices of black identity and constructions of femininity. I identify a narrative structure that engages the past and present at once and define this as a characteristic that arises from Fauset's specifically black female approach. I argue that Fauset blends the passing story

and elements of sentimental fiction in order to integrate into the discourse of racial identity the question of gender identity, reading it as an early expression of Black women's narrative innovation. The passing motif, in its relation to performance and masking, makes possible subtle critiques of various relations of power. The passing motif is particularly enabling for a discussion of black women's sexuality because it directs our attention to the body as a locus of conflicting ideology (McDowell, 1995). Its emphasis on the ambiguous physical self forces us to complicate notions of identity based on the biological and helps us to recognize and challenge static constructions of identity (Ginsburg 1996). My discussion of *Plum Bun* focuses on the way that the intertwining of the passing narrative with the conventions of sentimental fiction establishes an important bridge between nineteenth-century black women's writing and the concerns that occupy black women writers of the twentieth century. By validating, through its narrative structure, some elements of the black liberationist thinking of an earlier generation and illuminating its limitations, *Plum Bun* engages in the kind of simultaneous discourse of difference and mutuality that Henderson attributes to black women writers.

In the subsequent chapter, which discusses both of Nella Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*, I focus on the dialectical function of the body to expose the proscriptive constructions of race and gender in the context of nationalism. My understanding of the body is again influenced by Henderson's notions of dialogism as reflecting the interrelationship of various social selves and an understanding of individual consciousness as determined by social positioning. My focus on the black female body, in this chapter and throughout the rest of this project, as an epistemological figure is

deeply rooted in Henderson's analysis since it is primarily the biological "facts" of race and gender that determine the social experiences of black women.

By concentrating on the dressed body in both texts, I reveal the degree to which both racial and gender identifications engender a number of contradictions and instabilities in various historical locations. Beginning with a discussion of *Passing* first, though it comes second in the chronology of Larsen's work, I argue that the emphasis on shopping, dress, and visual appearance in these two texts helps to establish a clear articulation of the multiple subject positions occupied by black women. I begin with *Passing* first because it seems to me to best exemplify the several tensions associated with the more generalized aspects of nationalist formulations of identity in the early twentieth-century United States. The shift from a society organized primarily by sacral imperatives to a more overtly money-driven culture increasingly organized by the visual culture of advertising, interestingly, creates a kind of interface between the consolidation of a generalized American identity and a specifically black American identity. In fact, the two are inextricably linked in that it is the shift from agrarianism to industrialism that creates the mass movement of black people from South to North, which in turn propels the emergence of a New Negro presence. Southerners, in the South and North both, are seen to have particularly adopted the rhetoric of transformation through dress. The black woman as a consumer of fashion signifies the parallel but distinct processes of transformation of American identity, Black identity and social constructions of (white) femininity.

Larsen's rendering of black female consciousness, I argue, reveals the tensions and contradictions that accompany black attempts to join the mainstream of America

through consumption. The experiences of *Passing*'s Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, in particular, reflect the experience of the black woman in her position as racial other.

Though both attempt in various ways to join the category of American—Clare by racial passing, and Irene through class passing—both fail. Clare is killed as a consequence of her failure to fully reject Blackness and Irene's American-ness is predicated on her acceptance of a racial status quo that devalues Blackness. The two experiences together reveal the ways in which incorporation into the national body, through the mastery of its visual codes, rests on a kind of objectification that is at odds with the project of racial subjectification. In this way it presents a radical critique of those aspects of New Negro ideology that promoted a politics of assimilation based on the adoption of a normative "American" identity.

My discussion of *Quicksand* shifts our attention to another aspect of black female otherness, the element of the self as other. In this case, I focus on the mulatto Helga Crane's quest to construct an identity that encompasses all aspects of self, including her sexuality and her mixed-race heritage. The clothes, in this case, function to mark the tension between her self-fashioning and the meanings assigned to her by others as they impose their own readings of her identity. Though I do not employ the language of performance directly, the claims that I make about clothing being used to mark various positionalities are clearly influenced by the notion of gender as performed first articulated by Judith Butler, and subsequently extended to other aspects of human identity. In both texts the consumption and display of clothing are perceived to mark very specific race and class positions and histories. For *Passing*'s Irene Redfield, the display of a "properly" dressed self is directly linked to the transcendence of racial specificity and

history. On the other hand, in *Quicksand*, Helga Crane finds that clothing often functions to reinscribe her within the troubling matrices of black female sexual objectification.

The second section of this work, which examines examples of contemporary Caribbean women's literature, continues to position black women's writing as a unique and distinctive body of writing but dwells more significantly on how their works intervene in the larger discourse of contemporary Caribbean literature. I read the engagement with questions of female sexuality in the colonial context as significant responses to recently emerged critical calls for the abandonment of Caliban as a symbol of Caribbean identity and a redirection of our attention toward Sycorax. Shakespeare's play, *The Tempest*, and the Prospero/Caliban dyad have been potent images in the literatures of the Spanish, French and English speaking Caribbean (as well as parts of Africa) since the early twentieth century. While the uses of this image has varied over time and in relation to place, in the context of the Anglophone Caribbean its centrality has rested a good deal on the primacy of British literature in the educational experience of the colonized subject and the neat way that the play captures the dimension of language as a tool of ideology (Bruner 1976). Many Caribbean authors consciously assumed the mantle of Caliban when they took up writing. Several texts, including George Lamming's *The Pleasures of Exile* and Aimé Césaire's *A Tempest*, engaged Shakespeare's play directly, revising it in ways that centralize Caliban's resistant consciousness. Where initially many Caribbean writers felt enabled by the example of Caliban, who used Prospero's language to curse Prospero, it became increasingly obvious that there was limited value in mere condemnation and that the mastery of Prospero's language was not without costs. Having correlated the mastery of language to the

attainment of a European education either at home or in Europe in the metaphorical applications of Caliban, the Caribbean writer quickly had to recognize the ways in which that language shaped his consciousness. Many articulate the experience of alienation, being cut off from their native culture, as a result of having adopted the values and customs of the colonizer. While this critique began to emerge early in the literature of the Caribbean, it was not until very recently, with the development of a body of black feminist criticism, that any attention was paid to another glaring limitation of the Caliban paradigm—its transmission of a patriarchal gender ideology. In 1989, for instance, Abena Busia noted that females are largely physically absent from the play, and that female subjectivity is entirely absent and silenced. The recognition of this omission in both the original play and subsequent engagements with it in Caribbean literature has led critics and artists alike to call for the unearthing or un-silencing of Sycorax. The Sycoraxian has been formulated both as attention to female subjectivity and as a return to the native “languages” of the Caribbean subject. This call is significant because it addresses the limitations of nationalist formulations of identity in two ways. First it demands an accounting of the particularities of female experience and, second, it insists on innovating new linguistic and structural approaches that move beyond the reactive stance that defined an earlier moment in the literature. The forms employed by Kincaid and Danticat typify this kind of Sycoraxian, or “native” approach to literature.

In Chapter 3 I argue that Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* employs a narrative strategy that emphasizes the politics of black women’s writing in its representation of an individual figure whose experiences represent those of the collective and in its positioning of the body as central to the development of female subjectivity.

Together these elements comprise what has been called “Creole” writing, a literature that purposefully attempts to reflect a mixed consciousness or multiple subjectivities.

Additionally, its use of the mother figure as a symbol of the potential for female community, agency, and self-definition rescues the female figure of Caribbean literature from her ensnarement in the nationalist trap of woman as conduit.

Edwidge Danticat’s *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the subject of Chapter 4, also participates in the Sycoraxian project by focusing on female experience and, equally significant, through its use of native cultural forms to structure the narrative. I argue that her work is deeply structured by the figures and philosophy of Haitian Vodou. Danticat uses the figure of the *marasa*, the divine twins of Vodou who are associated with the protection of socially vulnerable groups, to structure the relationship between the protagonist, Sophie, and her two mother figures. Additionally, Sophie, herself, is associated with the goddess Erzulie, whose functions include protecting the creative power of artists and whose origins also point to the specificities of race and gender in the colonial context. However, Danticat doesn’t just simply refer to the culture of Haitian Vodou, she makes practice of its healing philosophy when she offers a ritual articulation of community instabilities. In this way, the text’s use of native cultural forms to articulate Caribbean experience exemplifies that turn toward the Sycoraxian.

Finally, in its attention to some of the early expressions of dialogism in black women’s writing, this work contributes to the development of a genealogy of black women’s writing that allows us to trace more fully the socio-historical reality of *black people* as a whole as they are related in the literature by and about black people. It demonstrates the necessity of a specifically black feminist criticism and comparative

scholarly approaches by using those tools to identify the feminist impulses of Fauset's text, to highlight how Larsen's text adds dimension to our historical accounts of the early twentieth century, and by locating some particularly useful narrative strategies for reflecting the multiple dimensions of black experience in *The Autobiography of My Mother* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*. In tracing similar themes and strategies through the writing of the U.S. and the Caribbean I hope to contribute not only to feminist scholarship, but also to the field of Diaspora studies by demonstrating the historical continuities in the two regions.

## 1. Jessie Redmon Fauset's *Plum Bun* and the Black Women's Tradition

Jessie Fauset is an important literary figure whose place in Black letters has been difficult to secure. In critical assessment and political maneuver alike her interests have been repeatedly sacrificed to those of the dominant political ideologies of the day. For instance, on the publication of her first novel, *There is Confusion*, “What started out to be an informal gathering honoring Fauset turned into a well-orchestrated ‘debut of the younger school of Negro writers’” including Countee Cullen, Eric Walrond, Alain Locke, and Langston Hughes, who were presented to notables from various publishing houses and journals—to the significant benefit of their careers (Wall, 69). Fauset graciously accepted her diminished role in the proceedings and vented her spleen only years later in a private correspondence with Locke.

In addition to the more benign neglect described above, Fauset and her work have also been the target of significant critical hostility. In his work *The Negro Novel in America* (1958) Robert Bone conferred on her the status of “Rear Guard” and, in “under the Harlem Shadow,” Hiroko Sato reiterates his dismissal of her work as “uniformly sophomoric, trivial and dull.” As part of a general backlash “against traditional Black middle-class leadership” in the 1960’s and 70’s, her work was dismissed by black cultural nationalists. This dismissal was particularly tragic since, as Wilbert Jenkins notes, her representations of historical black heroes and heroines and the apparent presumption of black moral superiority in her texts resonated with their own political positions (20).

However, recent revisionist criticism has attempted to defend Jessie Redmon Fauset from charges that she was possessed of an elitist myopia that confined her literary vision to black bourgeois respectability courting white approval.<sup>1</sup> Citing her role as one of the midwives to the Harlem Renaissance and some features of her own works, contemporary critics have suggested that some of the misapprehension has been on the part of the critics, rather than Fauset's alone. Abby Johnson notes of Fauset that "While on the staff of *Crisis*, she helped establish a literary climate favorable to Black writers of varying persuasions, even to those who would never have come to her for assistance" (145). Others cite her positive affirmations of a notion of physical beauty that embraced dark skin and valued it over lighter skins. And Wilbert Jenkins notes that "In most of Fauset's novels, Blacks who as a result of their physical appearance could pass for white, usually choose to remain within the Black race, or if they do identify with the white race, generally decide to reclaim their African ancestry," he concludes that through these representations, "Fauset is conveying the message to white America that, in spite of the obstacles imposed on Blacks as a consequence of racial discrimination, Afro-Americans are, on the whole, satisfied with their African heritage, and, thus, do not desire to be white" (17, 18).

While these critics defend Fauset against the charges that her novels validated the racial status quo, the analyses contained in this chapter are born of the supposition that in addition to being committed to black people as a race, Fauset was committed to black women in particular. In her capacity as editor she took great pains to offer support to other women and the social experiences of women constitute the primary interest of all

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<sup>1</sup> For some examples of recent reassessments of Fauset's work see Ann duCille, Jacqueline McClendon, Carolyn Allen, and Kathleen Pfeiffer.

four of her novels.<sup>2</sup> In fact, it seems to me that it is this interest in the experiences of women that, more than her depictions of the middle-class, is at the root of the hostility critics have historically shown to her work and of their failure to position it firmly within the modernist terrain of the Harlem Renaissance. By focusing on Fauset's middle-class background and reading her texts through their limited perception of her interests, early critics laid the groundwork for a short-sighted understanding of the power of her work.<sup>3</sup> That power, in my estimation, lies in the way her texts, especially *Plum Bun*, bridge nineteenth- and twentieth-century representations of black women and Victorian and modern aesthetics.

This bridging approach is essentially an integrative strategy that suggests an incipient feminism in Fauset's work. In her employment of multiple generic conventions she foreshadows what will become a remarkable feature of twentieth century black women's writing structurally and thematically. That integrationist impulse is also reflected in Fauset's representation of identity politics, which fuses race and gender concerns in a way that was unprecedented and challenged the dominant ideology of the day. That is, Fauset's engagement of questions of gender offered a significant challenge to the New Negro discourse of her day. The New Negro ideology marked an important shift in the dominant understanding of Blackness and how it would be acted out. This new theory of black identity was firmly rooted in a set of oppositions—vigorous masculinity over feminized passivity, literacy over orality, racial singularity (if not purity) over plurality, and the ascendance of urban culture over rural—that in some ways

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<sup>2</sup> Wall, "Jessie Redmon Fauset: Traveling in Place."

<sup>3</sup> In her literary biography, *Jessie Redmon Fauset*, Carolyn Sylvander casts significant doubt on the most common characterization of Fauset, questioning the extreme childhood privilege she is reputed to have enjoyed.

limited its functionality. Though within that conception a space for New Negro womanhood had been articulated, it was a circumscribed space in which racial identity dominated. Consequently, women's experiences were significantly marginalized in this discourse.

In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, Cheryl Wall suggests, for instance, that the Renaissance's modernism had a decidedly masculine tint. She notes that the emphasis on progress, mobility and dynamism as the dominant features of the New Negro Movement as described in Locke's essay, "The New Negro," "overstates the case for male writers..." and "contradicts the experience of many women"—even those anthologized in its own pages (5). Wall argues, regarding women of the middle-class (from whose ranks the majority of female authors of the Renaissance sprang), that their experiences could be much more accurately characterized by images of stasis and physical confinement. Wall further argues that while Black women continued to be burdened by racialized stereotypes of their sexuality that were harder to shake than other racial stereotypes so easily dismissed by Locke, they were constrained from engaging them by the fear that "Amid the effort to forge a revised racial identity, a woman who persisted in raising such [gendered] concerns might see them dismissed as irrelevant or trivial; she might herself be perceived as disloyal to the race" (7).

Similarly, Maria Balshaw's observations of the way women writers of the Harlem Renaissance have been perceived generally affirm the claim that women's artistic work was marginalized and explains the basis of their exclusion. Examining some of the short story work of Angelina Weld Grimké and Marita Bonner in which the city (a frequently used symbol of the dynamism, progressiveness and movement to which Wall alludes)

figures prominently, she challenges the prevailing myth that genteel approaches and subjects characterize all of the work by women in the Renaissance. She argues that in their texts representations of the city run counter to the urban optimism projected by Locke. They engage the reality of African-American women in northern cities, exploring their continued experience of the specifically gendered problems they had encountered in the old south. She notes, for instance, Bonner's and Grimké's engagements with themes such as reproduction, maternity, and mixed-raced heritage in the context of ongoing racial and sexual violence. Beyond the themes they engage she cites specific strategies employed by each which belie the notion of the genteel women writers of the Renaissance. Citing Grimké's graphic rendering of racialized violence and Bonner's "fractured modernist style" of writing, as well as her elaboration of the "conflicting demands of femininity and racial identity as it is formulated within and without the African American community," Balshaw concludes that, though they continue to be critically overlooked, these women participated significantly in the discourse on freedom that was centralized in the Harlem Renaissance. However, because it tended to centralize the question of women's freedom, too, women's writing was potentially destabilizing of one of the main discourses of the Renaissance era—a reinvigorated Black masculinity.

Though Fauset had the relative support of her community of contemporaries, those who praised her did so because of what *they* found valuable in her work—her representations of middle-class achievement. These aspects of Fauset's work were consonant with the movement's emphasis on an ideology of "uplift" that positioned the Black elites as the vanguard of New Negro identity. Locke celebrated her portrayal of "the race life higher up the social pyramid and further from the base-line of the peasant

and the soil than is usually taken” and George Schuyler felt it resonated with his own experiences of “our own ‘best’ people who, after all is said, are the inspiration of the rising generation” (quoted in Johnson 143).

That many of the female authors of the Harlem Renaissance were “proper” middle-class ladies is undeniable. As such, they would have felt a particular pressure from within (their segment of) the Black community to offer themselves and their heroines as examples of appropriate feminine behavior, a fact that certainly influenced their subjects and style (Wall 1995). Their representations of femininity would, of course, be shaped in relation to those outlined by the preceding generation of Black women novelists. One result of drawing on this tradition is the predominance of the sentimental form and its engagement with genteel life or conventional marriage plots.

Recent (feminist) scholarship, however, provides the tools to identify in Fauset’s work a continuation of Black female literary tradition as well as a radical departure from that tradition. While every critic is, to a great extent, limited to the ideas of her epoch, the feminist or womanist critical approach offers a more generative prism since intrinsic to these approaches is a rejection of the binary oppositions that precluded, in previous readings, engagement with the complexities of Fauset’s texts. A text that, at once, engages the past and present and the interrelationships of race and gender requires a critical framework that accounts for that kind of multiplicity.

### **Passing as a Strategy of Narrative Masking**

One level of the negative criticisms of Fauset’s work has centered on the misrecognition of its class politics. This focus on class was made possible by the critics’

failure to account for *Plum Bun*'s complex structure. Fauset's use of multiple genres opened up the possibility of presenting a double discourse in the text. Critics have characterized this double structure and its aims variously, but all suggest that its use makes possible a more complex engagement with African-American experience than was initially perceived.<sup>4</sup> Just as her politics have been seen as firmly situated in a Victorian ideology of gentility, so has her generic form. Her employment of the sentimental form has traditionally been seen as irrelevant to the modernist concerns of Harlem Renaissance literature. While the representation of the city as a liberating space and the focus on sexuality and individual alienation are certainly evidence of a modernist presence in the text, the Victorian framing of the novel has inhibited recognition of these elements. Previous assessments overlooked the fact that Fauset's deepest engagement with the genre is dialogic. She accepted the fact that a marriage of equals—as it was figured in many nineteenth century African-American women's texts—was an ideal worthy of aspiration, but she also depicted the obstacles that prevented women from achieving that equality in marriage. Feminist criticism, with its insistence on attention to multiplicity

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<sup>4</sup> In the 1979 article, "A Sardonic, Unconventional Jessie Fauset: The Double Structure and Double Vision of Her Novels," Joseph Feeney counters the prevailing notions of Fauset's writing as trite and sophomoric by describing the novel's complex double structure and vision. The two visions alluded to in his title encompass what he calls the upper world and the underworld. The upper world is associated with that for which Fauset has been criticized—the middle-class Black social world of talented and successful professionals comfortable on almost equal footing with whites and comfortable with themselves as Black people. The under world, however, is associated with painful racial memories of a past dominated by horrifying and confusing experiences. The encoding of this complex racial history he locates in the double structure Fauset employs in all but one of her novels. He argues that except for *There is Confusion*, the conventional romances that form the most obvious structures of the novels are undercut by the employment of other structures that are used to represent the experiences of the underworld.

Similarly, in her study of the works of Fauset and Nella Larsen, Jacquelyn McClendon has identified Fauset as employing multiple narrative structures, linking Fauset's use of the fairy tale motif to an ironic critique of social conventions of race and gender and a revision of the tragic mulatta tradition. Paying attention to the fairy-tale dimensions of the novel yields a richer reading of the problems of female dependency and reveals the degree to which the narrative is concerned with the female figure coming to psychological and sexual consciousness.

rather than duality, provides the tools necessary to reassess earlier assumptions regarding Fauset's work. Paying attention to Fauset's multiple narrative strategies illuminates the way her work actually reflects the struggle waged by nearly all black artists of her day to represent black experience in new ways.

Through this strategy of double structures she is able to exceed the boundaries of "acceptable" representations of black femininity of her era and express "views regarding Black/female sexuality, extramarital sex, and women's rights [which] do not fall within the received definition of gentility" (McClendon, 47). The desire to strike a balance between public opinion and her own interests doesn't seem at odds with the picture of Fauset's character drawn in Carolyn Sylvander's biography, *Jessie Redmon Fauset*. Fauset was noted for her flexibility, ability to respect political and artistic views that varied from her own, and her willingness to put groups' interests ahead of her personal advantage. While Fauset may have managed, by dint of her own tremendous energy, to meet the obligations of a "midwife" to the Harlem Renaissance, to pursue her own intellectual interests through travel, public speaking, and on-going study, and to articulate her own views on race, women, and art in her fictions, she would surely have recognized the difficulty of that feat for most women. That difficulty is a subject Fauset takes up repeatedly in her novels and is born out by the fact that she is the only woman we know of to occupy such a position in her era.

By combining elements of the sentimental romance and the passing story, Fauset creates a narrative space that can encompass the multiple positions of Otherness black women occupy. Relying, as Jane Tompkins notes, on stereotypes that "are the instantly recognizable representatives of overlapping racial, sexual, national, ethnic, economic,

social, political, and religious categories” to “convey enormous amounts of cultural information in an extremely condensed form,” the sentimental romance provides a convenient shorthand for received notions of femininity while the passing story introduces the thematic of disrupting received notions of identity (xvi).

In Fauset’s text, the action of the passing narrative opens the possibility of destabilizing constructions of female identity inherited from the nineteenth century. In many passing narratives the female protagonist’s crossing-over racial boundaries is often accompanied by a breaking of sexual taboos. This is not surprising since the narrative of racial passing introduces the idea of stepping out of one’s place—the rupturing of socially constructed identities—which is easily extended to troubling the boundaries of gendered identity. The introduction of female desire and the representation of marriage as an obstacle to full intellectual development for women serves to interrogate what it means to be a woman in the social discourse of its time, just as passing narratives have traditionally called into question biological and juridical constructions of race. The way that this novel links the act of passing (as a bid for social power) and unorthodox female sexuality reveals the extent to which Fauset is engaged in a critique of middle-class Black family relations as a microcosmic representation of Black identity politics in the New Negro movement, both of which depended on the marginalization of female experience in order to advance their programs of racial progress.

While her use of the conventions of sentimental femininity is strategic, and sometimes even parodic, she doesn’t dismiss the theoretical premise established in nineteenth century Black women’s fiction. Fauset’s use of the sentimental novel with a difference echoes the approaches of an earlier generation of Black women writers to the

extent that she critiques the reality of women's roles in marriage against the idealized vision that they articulated. However, her representation of the gendered subjectivity of Black women is an altogether new occurrence in the literature of Black women.<sup>5</sup> The slave narratives written by Black women had avoided any representation of Black women as desiring sexual agents and depicted them only as sexual victims in response to the dominant images of rampant Black female sexuality.<sup>6</sup> The post-emancipation narratives of Pauline Hopkins and Frances Harper continued to represent the Black woman primarily in response to her history of sexual victimization or channeled whatever Black female sexual energies it recognized to the work of racial uplift.<sup>7</sup> Black women as desiring subjects do not fully emerge until the twentieth century when new modes of representation are established.

The strategy of employing multiple structures is a particularly feminist strategy that allows the engagement of multiple discourses at once. This engagement with multiple discourses is evident in the work of Jessie Fauset and her contemporary, Nella Larsen, whose novels *Plum Bun* and *Quicksand*, respectively, were published in the same year. Both novels seize on the strategy of a double discourse to examine questions of gender experience in texts that are presumably about race. Critic Ann duCille cites

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<sup>5</sup> See duCille, *The Coupling Convention* (87).

<sup>6</sup> While much contemporary criticism has read Harriet Jacob's consensual relationship with Mr. Sands as an act of political will and sexual agency, her own framing of the event and of her text does not radically depart from the convention of the time in terms of representing Jacob's sexuality as entirely shaped by the system of slavery.

<sup>7</sup> In *The Coupling Convention* Ann duCille challenges Gloria Naylor's and Hazel Carby's readings of nineteenth-century Black women's literature, like Hopkins' *Contending Forces* and Harper's *Iola Leroy*, as completely devoid of representations of Black female sexuality. Rather, she claims Black female sexual energy is encoded in the representation of the social activities of their characters. Directly addressing Carby's claim that sexual desire is displaced by the desire for racial uplift, duCille argues that "sexual desire is not *displaced* by social purpose but *encoded* in it—regulated, submerged, and insinuated into the much safer realm of political zeal and the valorized venue of holy wedlock" (45).

Fauset, together with her contemporary Nella Larsen, “as the first Black women novelists to depict openly sensual Black female subjects, as the first Black writers to explore the dialectics of female desire and to address what having children can mean to a woman’s physical and mental health, as well as to her independence” (87). That duCille points to gender issues as the most significant aspects of these “passing” novels suggests how deeply intertwined the two themes are.

Ironically, elements of this double discourse had also been put to use by both Hopkins and Harper, (with whom Fauset has been most frequently and negatively compared) in their sentimental fictions, within whose narratives of lost origins and domestic unions and reunions were encoded themes of African-American liberation and resistance to Black subjugation accomplished through the physical and political terrorism of lynching. While Fauset’s engagement with the earlier generation of Black women writers has typically been understood to have a negative effect on her work—limiting her vision to the Black middle-class, and wedding her to the sentimental genre—one can see evidence of a more productive engagement with the feminist ideals of her predecessors and contemporaries.

The use of these conventions has been heavily criticized and earned most female writers of the Renaissance the reputation of being “less innovative in form and less race conscious in theme” than their male counterparts (Wall 6). In his book on African-American Women’s Writing, *Workings of the Spirit*, Houston Baker characterizes Fauset’s (and Larsen’s) engagement with the mulatto subject as a “sign of the legitimacy

and power of—in its American instance—whitemale patriarchy” (36).<sup>8</sup> A less dismissive examination of these novels, though, allows us to see the novelists responding to the experiences of the black women, whose continued, gender specific, exploitation is sympathetically rendered and fuels the very sophisticated analyses of the constraints on black and female freedom under nationalist, capitalist, and patriarchal systems.

Moving beyond the attitude that the class status of these authors precluded their production of anything but conventional, depoliticized and slavish dabbings opens the possibility of seeing that the “Blackness” of their texts lay in their thematic concern with freedom. Critics like Claudia Tate and Angela Davis have elaborated a connection between freedom and romance in black expressive culture. Suggesting that our own social values have inhibited our ability to apprehend this literature fully, Tate identifies nineteenth century black women’s use of the marriage convention as another discursive register in which to engage the theme of black liberation. Similarly, Davis suggests that the prevalence of love and relationships as themes in Blues music is linked to black historical experience and reveals that for black people one of the few freedoms afforded them after reconstruction was the freedom to choose who, how and how much to love. In this view, our own critical failure to historicize the post-emancipation social perception of marriage which, along with the vote, was implicated in the subject of civil liberty and therefore, necessarily signaled a discourse of liberation, has led to the critical dismissal of those texts. The marriage plot, on the one hand, may have signified a particular set of aspirations and experiences with regard to a generalized racial identity, but it clearly

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<sup>8</sup> Baker also links these two authors, negatively, to their nineteenth-century predecessors Francis Harper and Pauline Hopkins whose novels he argues are structured by visions of a mulatto utopia in which “a bright Victorian morality in whiteface” prevails (33).

meant something different in terms of the gendered experiences of black women. While attention to the historical specificity of post-emancipation discourses helps us to position these kinds of texts more firmly in the black literary tradition, examining Fauset's extension of the genre helps to illuminate a simultaneous engagement with racial and gender subjectivity.

If romance opens a space for historicizing an aspect of black racial experience, it also allows these authors to do some specifying about the female experience by suggesting through the marriage plot that, for women, "the freedom to desire was perpetually in jeopardy under a patriarchal system in which women could be 'articles of traffic'" (duCille 5). Fauset's engagement with the question of desire then is a significant step in the development of African-American women's writing and its concerns in the rest of the twentieth century.

The work of Marita Bonner, one of Fauset's contemporaries, is instructive in identifying some aspects of black female desire as well as some of the limitations she faced. Her 1925 essay, "On Being Young—a Woman—and Colored" suggests something of the expectations of women of her class. She begins by setting up a tension between what a woman like herself might desire—"a career...time to do things...and of course, a husband you can look up to without looking down on yourself"—and the duties and constraints that come with her class and gender position (168). In an early articulation of the multiple subject positions occupied by Black women, she articulates the ways in which black women are limited by social perceptions of them only in relation to classed stereotypes of either the licentious working-class Black woman or the bourgeois imitator of white custom. Bonner notices that women cannot even express

their frustration because to express anger or discontent is understood as unladylike, which further exacerbates their situation.

Like other black women before and after her, Bonner brings the question of women's roles within the marriage arrangement to the fore. The vision of marriage that emerges from Bonner's essay and that we will later see manifest in Fauset's *Plum Bun* is directly linked to the vision of the black female intellectual tradition of the previous generation, which linked happiness in marriage to a sense of mutuality rather than hierarchy. Particularly striking is the resonance between Fauset's literary critiques of marriage and Anna Julia Cooper's analyses of it as presented by Hazel Carby in *Reconstructing Womanhood*.

In a chapter focused on examining the social contexts out of which late nineteenth century writers like Pauline Hopkins and Francis Harper wrote, Carby links their "utopian" representations of marriage to a critical discourse on the social roles of women. Paying particular attention to Anna Julia Cooper's *A Voice from the South*, Carby argues that these women were not just concerned with altering interracial social relations but intra-racial relations between black women and men. According to Carby, Cooper redirected our attention to the position of women as a significant facet of the struggle for Black self-determination: "...Cooper indicted the practice of measuring the achievements and progress of Black men as representative of the whole race while Black women were still subject to the sexual abuse from white men that had been a central feature of their oppression as slaves" (98). Cooper saw the erasure of women from the images of black racial progress as a marker of their lack of collective power. That power, she argued, could be enhanced through a systematic program of female education that would not only

free women from the necessity of diminishing their intellects in the interests of enhancing their value in the marriage market, but would benefit the entire community by diminishing patriarchy, an ideology that required the subordination of women, as the basis of social relations between men and women.

While for many black women writers in the nineteenth century marriage signaled the potential for racial liberation through a yoking together of African and American identities and the political privileges of legal recognition, what Fauset encodes is another aspect of the meaning of marriage for black women in particular. Her representations of marriage suggested a reality that opposed the ideals of which the institution had been symbolic. This shift from representing universal ideals to an engagement with particular realities is one of the shifts in approach that Carolyn Allen, in her work on black female intellectuals, suggests is typical of black women's writing of this period. It exemplifies the localizing effect that she says characterizes Black women's writing in the late early nineteenth and twentieth century. She says: "black women's cultural production between 1880 and 1940 shifted from an overarching nineteenth-century preoccupation with domesticity to regional concerns and local public institutions" (4). The localizing that Allen describes parallels the shift that I identify in twentieth-century African-American women's writing from a kind of generalized concept of racial identity (the universal) to the more heterogeneous concepts of identity that are the predominant characteristic of the writing. A regionalist approach, for instance, could simultaneously facilitate the representation of a more diverse range of class identities, particularly with regard to the

south and Midwest, whereas “local institutions,” like the family, suggests the very kind of specificity of experience that we attribute to Black women’s writing.<sup>9</sup>

For instance, Fauset’s treatment of the domestic space and the contrasting experiences of *Plum Bun*’s Angela Murray and her mother Mattie move us toward an understanding of how the additional factor of gender complicates questions of racial liberation. When Fauset turns her attention to the home as a local institution that functions politically, the more benign conception of sentimental domesticity is inverted. Instead of operating as a positive base of morality, which the heroine seeks to return to or recreate, in *Plum Bun* home is subject to a rigorous critique of its reproduction of a rigid and limiting construction of femininity. This critique is actuated primarily through the ironic depiction of Mattie Murray as the feminine ideal and Angela as the antithesis of that ideal.

Significantly destabilizing her credibility as the representative of sentimental morality, Mattie Murray is depicted as coquettish and, perhaps purposely, unaware of Angela’s attitudes and desires as well as her own. The text repeatedly contradicts her perceptions of things. For instance, her own sense of herself as having no desire to belong to fashionable society is contradicted by her Saturday ritual of going downtown to enjoy the “almost ecstatic” satisfaction of “being even on the fringe of a fashionable gathering” (15).

The representation of Angela, too, destabilizes the conventions of sentimental fiction. Angela Murray, the protagonist, functions almost as an anti-heroine. She lacks all of the usual characteristics of the conventional sentimental heroine—she has a stable

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<sup>9</sup> Here I am thinking of Marita Bonner’s representations of working-class Black people in Chicago in her Frye Street cycle, which begins in 1926.

family life, knows her origins and is neither selfless nor morally superior but is matter-of-factly depicted as ungrateful and as hating restraint “[w]ith a wildness that fell just short of unreasonableness” (13). Further, her lack of the conventional “goodness” typical of the sentimental heroine means that she cannot be a catalyst for the moral redemption or transformation of any of the other characters in the novel. The image of her as a butterfly awaiting transformation, cited below, emphasizes the extent to which hers is a story of self-development rather than a validation of a universal moral system.

In this regard, she is much more aligned with the modernist tradition of alienation and disaffection. Early in the text, her sister, Jinny, marks Angela’s estrangement from the domestic scene in the rapturous visions she has during the family’s ritual performance of “The Dying Christian” on Sunday afternoons.

’The world recedes, it disappears,’ sang Virginia. But it made no difference how far it drifted away as long as the four of them would always be together, her father, her mother and she and Angela. With her visual mind she saw them proceeding endlessly through space; there were her parents arm in arm, and she and—but to-night and other nights she could not see Angela; it grieved her to lose sight thus of her sister, she knew she must be there, but grope as she might she could not find her (26).

Angela is not a fully established presence in the family because she hasn’t, at this point, become a fully developed subject. Her full development is actuated by her experiences in New York and constitutes one of the main thematic interests of the novel. The self-fashioned moral subjectivity at which she will finally arrive is based on her own

individual experiences and, in this way, is distinguished from the moral absolutism of the conventional sentimental romance.

In fact it is not until the novel's final section, "Home Again," that the conventions of passing literature and sentimental fiction begin to emerge with full force.<sup>10</sup> In terms of the passing story, this section, which narrates Angela's return to the fold, marks the moral climax of the narrative. Also within this section are contained the majority of the elements of the romance genre. The blocked union, the moral transformation of the heroine, and the series of coincidences that reunite the ill-fated lovers occupy the main stage of this section. However, Fauset presents us with romantic fiction with a difference. With regard to Angela's transformation, it cannot be said that she moves completely from selfishness to selflessness. Rather than a lack of self, she has a sense of self that allows her to formulate connections in a way that she had not previously been able.

Fauset's text exhibits some of the features particular to black women's writing in its insistence on integrative models of identity and authorship. Aside from providing her with a structural model for adapting the sentimental genre to her specific concerns, we can also identify a complication of their conception of the utopian possibilities of marriage. The racial liberation that those earlier texts suggest can only be accomplished, in the sphere of Fauset's texts, in tandem with the liberation of women. And the

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<sup>10</sup> Supporting my own analysis, Ann duCille suggests that Fauset purposefully deforms the sentimental genre in order to dramatize the slippage between its representations of women's lives and the social realities of those women who attempt to conform their lives to its conventions. She cites the false-feeling tacked-on endings for which Fauset's novels have been panned as evidence of Fauset's mockery of the sentimental genre and the conventional notions of femininity reproduced therein. The purposeful transformation of woman's "ideal estate" into an "unreal state" signaled by these unbelievable endings is obscured by critics' misapprehension of Fauset's generic form, which duCille claims is neither romance nor realism but a confusion of genre in keeping with and contributing to African-American literary modernism.

liberation of Black women requires some attention to the specificities of their experiences within the broader category of race. While the text affirms the idea that marriage could be a productive union, it provides a highly specified account of the conditions under which that could be so.

### **Competing Visions of Marriage**

What I want to suggest is that Fauset's treatment of marriage in *Plum Bun*, as well as the rest of her body of work, is linked to the theme of liberation but particularizes it to Black female social and sexual roles. Fauset remains committed to the notion that marriage, as a union of equals, could be linked to black racial progress, but only insofar as it was founded on the recognition of each partner's capacities for intellectual and creative development. That the dominant ideas regarding female gender socialization inhibited the full development of women leads to Fauset's troubling of marriage. She reveals the slippage between the realities of marriage for most women and the ideal of marriage that fueled the utopian visions of nineteenth century black women writers.

What emerges from her texts, then, is a picture of the typical marriage as a bargain women strike to achieve social and economic safety, a state whose pursuit and attainment present significant obstacles to the artistic, intellectual, and professional development of black women (McDowell 91, 92). The highly contrasting rendering of Angela, the protagonist, and her mother, Mattie, perfectly illustrates the dichotomy between marriage as an institution which may have afforded a kind of racial protection and advancement and marriage as an institution that delimited the personal advancement of black women within it. Angela's quest for artistic development confirms the socio-

reality described by Bonner and Cooper in which the freedom to pursue artistic and intellectual advancement were perceived as at odds with wifely value. That quest is framed in the novel as an explicit rejection of the lifestyle of domesticity in which Angela perceives her mother to be trapped. Mattie represents her life within the walls of the Opal Street home in a fairy tale fashion when she offers her stock conclusion to the fairytales she read Jinny and Angela in their girlhood: “And they lived happily ever after, just like your father and me” (33). Within the first three pages, however, the text reveals Angela’s dissatisfaction with the home that was to her “the drabbest chrysalis that had ever fettered the wings of a brilliant butterfly” (12).

Reinforcing Angela’s vision of the home as stultifying rather than enabling, the opening description of the house on Opal Street in which Angela resides establishes a series of contrasts to the standard implied in its invocation of the novel of manners. Introducing the reader to the house signals the intimate domestic world of sentimental fiction, but the description itself begins to scrape at the façade of moral superiority erected in the representation. This home is located in a “narrow, unsparkling, uninviting place” and that which it overlooks is “sad and diminutive” (11). The repetition of adjectives connoting smallness emphasizes the feeling of containment, which Angela Murray will struggle against throughout the novel. Angela’s and her mother’s contrasting visions of domesticity reveal the slippage between the ideal of marriage (as a union of equals) as it had been represented in nineteenth-century African-American

women's fiction and the reality of marriage for the majority of women at the turn of the century.<sup>11</sup>

In order to elaborate the way the novel strategically engages the sentimental tradition I offer here a summary of the plot. Following the deaths of her parents, Angela leaves her home and her sister in Philadelphia to go to New York to live as a white woman. In New York she seeks to escape the social and institutional race prejudice she has experienced where she was known to be black. In New York she enrolls in art classes at Cooper Union and is befriended by two female iconoclasts—Martha Burden and Paulette Lister—through whom she meets the wealthy Roger Fielding. After a long struggle against her desires and for a marriage proposal, she submits to a sexual relationship with Roger without the benefit of marriage. Along the way she rejects the attentions of her male classmate, Anthony Cross, because of his poverty. After Fielding unceremoniously ends their relationship, she attempts to mend her relationship with her sister whom she had initially wounded with her departure from Philadelphia and further wounded by refusing to acknowledge her when Roger Fielding intrudes on their meeting in New York. While her sister remains wary initially, their increased contact signals the beginning of another stage in Angela's development. She begins to reassess her earlier

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<sup>11</sup> It is important to remember that the marriages depicted in the texts seen as most representative of African-American women's fiction, Francis Harper's *Iola Leroy* and Pauline Hopkin's *Contending Forces*, were unions between educated men and women who'd also had the advantages of formal education as well as significant work experiences and that the women enter into them after having survived some harrowing experiences and thus bring a great deal of self-awareness and self-sufficiency to the marriages. While these fictional experiences were probably not typical for many real women entering into marriage, Fauset's own circumstances were similar enough to warrant acknowledgment. She did not marry until the age of 46, after having completed an advanced education, enjoyed extensive international travel, supported herself and helped to educate some of her siblings, and pursued a successful career as an educator, editor, novelist, and cultural critic. The general similarity of her situation to that of those fictional representations suggests that Fauset valued the ideals represented in them enough to draw on some of the conventions of the genre even as she critiqued what she saw as the realities of marriage.

vision of her connection to the black people as a burden and learns the value of community through her own experiences of loneliness as well as her observation of the fullness of Virginia's life. She discovers that she really loves Anthony Cross, the fellow student whom she'd spurned, but they cannot reunite because he is engaged to her sister. At this time too, they reveal to each other that they are "passing." She recommits herself to her work, wins a grant to study art in Europe and declares her Blackness publicly in solidarity with a fellow student—a black woman, Rachel Powell—who has won and then been denied, because of her race, the funds to travel abroad. This cinches her return to the community, she is fully reconnected to her sister, returns to Philadelphia for a reconciliatory visit and unwittingly sets into motion a series of events that will conclude with her being reunited with her love, Anthony Cross.

The trajectory of the narrative described above doesn't at first seem to complicate the conventions of the sentimental genre. When, however, we examine Fauset's depiction of Mattie Murray, her home life, and her sexuality we see that Fauset does indeed complicate the gender ideology of the sentimental genre. The sublimation of Mattie's sexual and artistic energies into the religio-maternal and commercial spheres reveals some of the contradictions that Fauset saw as inherent in the ideology of middle-class domestic aspirations.

By casting Mattie in the mold of the sentimental tradition Fauset also demonstrates the inadequacy of its model of femininity to black women's needs. Through the character of Mattie Murray, Fauset encodes the reality of sexual victimization for black women and demonstrates why marriage may have been a particularly appealing route to a modicum of physical and psychological safety for Black

women of her time. At the same time, though, Fauset also demonstrates the potential costs of such a decision by also representing the subjection of vital creativity to the reproduction of home and family. She uses the representation of Mattie to suggest the extent to which black women were still struggling to liberate themselves not only from racism but from slavery's legacy of sexual exploitation, too. Fauset's depiction further suggests the limitations of a concept of black identity that did not acknowledge the separate dimensions of black female struggles for liberation.

Mattie's marriage to Junius rescues her from the threat of sexual victimization that she faced as a single woman, and gratitude rather than passion is the most characteristic feature of Mattie's feelings for her husband. The episode in which their courtship is related encodes the history of white male sexual victimization of black women. Their courtship begins when their mutual employer, the actress, Madame Sylvio, attempts to prostitute Mattie to one of her male friends and Junius begins to accompany her when she is sent to deliver messages to the man who is attempting to seduce her. Thus, from the outset, their relationship instantiates a triangle of power in which black female security depends on male power.

Further, Mattie herself embodies that history in her physiognomy, which, ironically, marks for her employer her racial identity: "They were all naturally loose, she reasoned, when she thought about it at all. 'Look at the number of mixed bloods among them; look at Mattie herself for that matter, a perfectly white nigger if ever there was one. I'll bet her mother wasn't any better than she should be'" (29). Throughout this section black female sexuality remains firmly embedded in the historical context of its

appropriation by white males. While Fauset acknowledges the deep impact of this history at the level of the individual, her text also reveals its broader social implications.

The sacrifice, in this section, of the delineation of specifically female subjectivity to the refutation of race-specific charges of sexual immorality is consonant with nineteenth century representations of black female sexuality in which desire is sublimated into the cause of racial uplift. Angela's sister, Virginia, especially sees her parent's marriage in this context of personal sacrifice: "She had an unusually keen sense of gratitude toward her father and mother for their kindness and their unselfish ambitions for their children. Jinny never tired of hearing of the difficult childhood of her parents. She knew of no story quite so thrilling as the account of their early trials and difficulties. She thought it sweet of them to plan, as they constantly did, better things for their daughters" (33). Jinny's vision of domestic life is firmly rooted in the nineteenth century discourse of marriage as an idealized union and the foundation of black racial uplift. Angela's perceptions, however, focus the reader's attention on those spaces where the ideal doesn't meet with the reality—her own personal domestic realm, for instance.

Thinking of her mother's marital relationship, Angela wonders if there are some women who are not diminished by giving themselves over to their husbands. While Angela attempts to see "the wash-days which [her mother] had endured for [her father], the long years of household routine" as proof of her fulfillment in marriage, the text subtly undercuts this analysis by contrasting Mattie's domestic routine with her desire for access to more satisfying pursuits (141-142). On her Saturday afternoon excursions she nurtured "some unquenchable instinct for life" (15, 16). The narrative voice tells us that for Mattie Murray

To walk through Wanamaker's on Saturday, to stroll from Fifteenth to Ninth Street on Chestnut, to have her tea in the Bellevue Stratford, to stand in the lobby of the St. James' fitting on immaculate gloves; all innocent, childish pleasures pursued without malice or envy contrived to 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).

That vitality, for Mattie, is associated with the particularly public space of the department store and not the domestic space disrupts the fairytale dimensions of her perception of her marriage.

Further, given the association in Fauset's other works of making and selling clothing and beauty products with female creativity and financial independence, we may read Mattie Murray's earlier cited love of pretty clothes and "shops devoted to the service of women" as a way in which Fauset signals some repressed aspects of her subjectivity (15).<sup>12</sup> Her love of clothing can be understood as a symbol of her repressed sexuality and creativity insofar as it serves to reveal that while her marriage may provide economic

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<sup>12</sup> Both Mary Conde and Ann duCille discuss the function of clothing in texts by Larsen. duCille's reading of the function of clothes in *Plum Bun* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*, connects them to the most explicit site of production of a discourse of Black female subjectivity in their time—the Blues. duCille suggests that their texts participate in the "battle over the Black female body" initiated in women's blues and that both authors signify on Blues style in their use of clothes as a marker of female sexuality. "The dressed or, in Harlem slang, the 'draped-down' body is the equivalent of the woman-proud blues lyric—one of the not-always-so-subtle instruments through which both Fauset and Larsen sing and sign female sexuality" (94). For middle-class women like Mattie, however, that sexuality had to remain sublimated in order to assure her value. The woman who relies on middle-class notions of proper female behavior cannot fully access the sexual potency of the blues singer because she cannot own the sexuality that she signifies but must trade it on the marriage market.

Ultimately, duCille sees the novelists' exposures of these limitations as parodic rather than affirming of middle-class notions of femininity. Of Fauset she claims that if we listen attentively to her prose we will hear her "critical, mocking tone, suggesting not sympathy for or accord with the value systems of her class- and clothes-conscious heroines, as many critics have insisted, but a kind of aloof derision, perhaps at moments even disdain, for their self-deception and self-hatred" (98-99).

position and psychological safety the cost is that she is cut off from certain aspects of herself—either the historical legacy of self-sufficiency that clothing and beauty products encode in other texts by Fauset or the recognition of the sexual subjectivity to which clothing is linked in this text. The juxtaposition of Mattie’s domestic tranquility with her longing for a more vital sensual life highlights Angela’s perception of domestic self-negation and describes and critiques, rather than affirms, middle-class gender values. Positioning Mattie as a consumer rather than producer of femininity highlights her disconnection from the active re-fashioning of black female identity so often attributed to the working-class heroines of Fauset’s other texts.

Filtered through her observations of her mother’s sacrifice of personal fulfillment to domesticity, Angela concludes that the project of racial uplift is at odds with the satisfaction of individual desires. The scenes in the novel depicting the two sisters’ Sunday afternoon parlor guests, a group of young men who come to visit the girls and discuss questions of race together, reinforce Angela’s sense of these two spheres as conflicting. Though the main topic of conversation at these gatherings is always the tension between race obligations and individual aspirations, at least one of the guests comes as much as a suitor for Angela’s attentions as he does to participate in the discussion. Angela rejects the dominant line of thinking that service to the race must be foremost in their minds, just as she rejects the main proponent of that idea, her ostensible suitor, Matthew Henson. By linking the conflict between group identification and individual aspiration to romance, Fauset brings the gender dimension of black female identity to the fore, since for Angela to accept Henson as her husband would be to accept the premise of race as the primary factor of her identity. Henson’s racial politics and her

perception of the drudgery of the majority of her mother's married life combine to convince Angela that her individual desire cannot be fulfilled in the context of middle-class black family life. This motivates her move from a black social world to a white one through the act of passing. Once race is cleared away as an obstacle to Angela's fulfillment, the gendered aspects remain, and Fauset is able to engage the most radical aspects of her text, female sexual desire and artistic endeavor.

Angela's experiences as a white woman serve to introduce the theme of female desire and the social consequences of acknowledging that desire in the sections of the novel entitled "Market" and "Plum Bun," in which racial themes are somewhat submerged. Through the narration of Angela's attempt to secure a marriage to the wealthy Roger Fielding, the novel encodes notions of free love and the sexual double standard. The ideology of free-love is associated with Angela's friend, Martha Burden, who resents having been coerced to marry after two years of living with her lover, and the actions of the character Paulette Lister, who has had a series of temporary affairs, serve to expose the double standard. The "Plum Bun" section begins with the recounting of Roger Fielding's proposal to Angela that she be his mistress and is dominated by an examination of the power relations between male and female rather than between black and white. Emphasizing the gendered dimensions of Fauset's critique, Angela, living as a white woman, still finds herself in the position that her mother sought to avoid as the sexual prey to male power. Angela's experiences, however, shift the focus from social perceptions of female desire to a woman's own understanding (or lack thereof) of sexual desire.

The text initially constructs Angela's sexual desire as a dangerous factor unaccounted for by her. It was "the 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" (198). However, inasmuch as it leads to her continuing the pattern of breaking social boundaries begun in her passing, it is in some ways productive. Interestingly, acting against convention on her sexual desires is a necessary step in Angela's psychological development. It ultimately serves to disillusion her of her expectations regarding marriage as a rescue and returns her to the development of the talent that will be the gateway to the independence that she had always claimed. Her break up with Roger "meant the vanishing of the last hope of the successful marriage which she had once so greatly craved. And even though she had not actively considered this for some time, yet as a remote possibility it had afforded a sense of security. Now that mirage was dispelled; she was brought back with a sudden shock back to reality" (233). It necessitates, as well, that she return her full attention to the question of finding her own way in the world, both materially and emotionally. After she is lucky enough to find steady employment to supplement the remaining little bit of her nest egg that stood "between her and absolute penury," she feels she has a new lease on life: "I'm young and now I'm sophisticated; the world is wide, somewhere there's happiness and peace and a place for me. I'll find it" (234-236). The processes she sets in motion by having a sexual relationship outside of marriage lead to her increased awareness of the realities of women's social positioning. She becomes aware of both the inequity of male and female social relations—"everything was for men, but even the slightest privilege was to be denied to a woman unless the man chose to

grant it”—and her own capacity to defy convention in order to acknowledge her own desires. Deciding, “Rules are for ordinary people but not for me” she vows to “live her life as an individualist, to suit herself without regard for conventions and established ways of life” (208).

While Fauset does not entirely dismiss the idealized domestic space as a site of political reform, she does question women’s roles within the home and the possibility of radical political intervention in the context of gender disequilibria. In her analysis of home and the family in Fauset’s work, Carol Allen argues that her engagement with home as a literal, metaphoric and psychological space reflects her attempts to revise black bourgeois constructions of domesticity, of which marriage is the most potent symbol. Instead of positioning home as a moral high-ground from which the conservative black factions could mould and shape the standards of ‘invading’ migrants from the South, Fauset attempted to reform the old home, Allen argues. While Fauset continued to believe in the value of home as a space in which positive values could be “mirrored” for the developing black female subject, she saw that potential as limited by “the excess, prejudices, and inequalities” that often characterized “the internal workings of Black middle-class families” and exposed those limitations in her complex representations of Black middle-class family life and values in her works (51, 53). Fauset’s representation records her and her contemporaries’ resistance to social conventions of femininity and marriage, which forestalled the possibility of black female liberation as long as Black women’s racial liberation depended on black male authority.

## Conclusion

In both Angela's case and her mother's, the psychological reasons for their passing are often linked to Fauset's ironic references to hegemonic constructions of female identity. In one passage the narrative voice notes: "Angela's mother employed her colour very much as she practiced certain winning usages of smile and voice to obtain indulgences which meant much to her and took nothing from anyone else" (15). That this is the narrator's ironic observation, rather than one of Angela's analyses of what it means for her and her mother to pass, emphasizes Fauset's conscious use of passing as a device from which to engage the question of female identity and subjectivity. By linking the performance of femininity, as a strategy to access greater social privilege, to passing she emphasizes the analogous situations of women in relation to male social dominance and black people in relation to white racial dominance. The sexual vulnerability of the protagonist in this novel is symbolically linked to her acceptance of the dominant social structure rather than some essential characteristic of race or gender biology. Further, the text's association of passing with an attempt to exceed the confines of feminine domestic duty demonstrates the efficacy of multiple narrative structures for engaging the particularities of black women's experiences.

The strategic engagement of multiple genres prevents the passing narrative in *Plum Bun* from lapsing into a reification of the racial status quo observed in many passing narratives. Instead it demonstrates a kind of intersectionality in which the play upon racial instability or illegibility encodes other kinds of alterity and destabilizes significations of identity that depend on either/or formulations.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Intersectionality is a term that I borrow from the work of Valerie Smith.

Fauset's attention to Black female subjectivity relative to various class, racial and gender alignments illuminates the concept of a Black female writing community. *Plum Bun*'s integrative approach is distinguished from black male writing which, in its insistence on framing the question of Black liberation in terms of exchange between white men and black men, fails to shift the binary discourse that structures the relations between the races. In speaking from different subjective positions Black women's writing destabilizes the notion of singular categories of identity that supports hegemonic notions of white superiority and black inferiority.

## 2. Fashionable Bodies: The Black Woman as National Other in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*

In this chapter I will demonstrate the ways in which *Passing* and *Quicksand* both encode the notion of identity as constituted by a number of intersecting positionalities rather than as a static proposition. These texts draw attention to the multiple positions of Black women with regard to race and gender by engaging the theme of American national identity, on the one hand, and the theme of black racial identity, on the other. Both questions play out in a public and visible way that is symbolized in the texts by Larsen's attention to clothing, through which are revealed a number of contradictions faced by the African-American woman of Larsen's era. These contradictions include the competing discourses of femininity in the African-American community and the broader community as well as the contradiction inherent in the conception of race as a singular and stable category, particularly in the context of African-American identity.

By the time *Quicksand* was published in 1928 the film and recording industries had developed enough to have a significant impact on the way the people of the United States would see things, literally and figuratively. The enormous popularity of filmic entertainment and the record industry's reliance on promotional materials that emphasized an identification with the artists' glamorized physical appearance would insure that the image would become the new currency of U.S. cultural life. One critic of the period, Vachel Lindsay, felt that the new systems that were arising at the time were best described as constituting a "hieroglyphic" culture—that is one in which meaning was most often conveyed through a system of visual signs (Susman, xxvi). The ultimate

result of these developments is, according to cultural historian Warren Susman, a new centrality of the body in U.S. culture, where it functions as a semiotic system:

In that environment, there was a new interest in the body itself: physical culture, health, diet, food and its preparation, 'eating out' nutrition and vitamins, obesity. How the body looked and how it felt took on new importance. Significant alteration occurred in how people lived (what they ate, the changing American diet) and how they died (different major causes of death), to say nothing about how and when they dined and how they were buried. The body had to be dressed and beautified in a world of fashion and cosmetics (xxvi).

In the environment Susman describes, the body becomes the ultimate hieroglyph since so many aspects of the new culture--from new systems of work and leisure, to morality and science--converge there. In his work on the Nineteen-Twenties, historian Geoffrey Perret, too, notes a shift in the significations of the body. Concentrating on the delineation of a new moral climate that was part of the "modernity" of the twenties, Perret describes how this new morality was signaled particularly through clothing styles and the dressed body. Larsen, too, seizes on the body's potential to represent multiple meanings, reflecting the aforementioned priority of syncretism over binarism.

The texts on which this chapter is focused are situated in and produced out of a time in which both African American identity and "American" identity generally are in flux. While there is, as Nathan Huggins suggests in *Harlem Renaissance*, some parallel between the dominant cultural effort to specify a particularly "American" identity and culture and African-American attempts to do the same through the artistic production

associated with the New Negro movement, both take place within the context of a larger shift in the social organization of the lives of all of the nation's citizens. The shift from an agrarian to industrial economy solidified in the nineteenth century had its most profound effect on the social organization of American life in the early part of the twentieth century. At this time the proliferation of mass-produced goods made possible a shift from identity as a fixed proposition linked to geography and the socio-economic position of one's birth to a notion of identity as a more flexible category in which the image was conflated with the substance of the Self. Together the department store and the cinema, with their emphasis on fashion, cosmetics, and social mobility, contributed to what has been called the specularization of culture and the concomitant notion that one had only to look a certain "part" or social role in order to realize its potential. The notion that there is a strong interrelationship between representation and reality, as I will discuss later, was especially pronounced in the discourse of the New Negro movement.

The notion of a shifting or mutable identity is captured in Larsen's texts by the emphasis on clothing, which in both novels is used to mark the protagonists' relationship to the world around her, much as they were seen to do in reality. The texts centralize clothes and the consumption of clothing in a distinctive way that helps to suggest the multi-faceted nature of identity. While the passing figure also encodes the notion of identity as shifting, it is a less functional metaphor in terms of the Black woman writer's project because it relies on the presumption of stable and distinct spheres or racial identity in which one masks the other. The centrality of clothing and consumption in the novels adds a specifically gendered dimension to the visualization of culture, as women were the primary targets of the burgeoning fashion industry, which played on the

increasingly blurred line between different modes of femininity. The use of clothing becomes further illuminating because the question of public self-presentation entailed some very specific conflicts for African-American women. So the racially ambiguous clothed female body becomes a productive figure for the artist interested in representing multiple-subjectivity as it presents an opportunity for meditation on the multi-faceted experience of African-American women.

One area where we see this notion of identity as performance played out is in the sphere of black popular print media in the New Negro era. Between the period of 1895 and 1925, when we see a distinctive shift in thinking about representing New Negro identity, there is noticeable emphasis on visually embodying black identity (Gates, 131). The effort is evidenced by the numerous photographs and written descriptions of New Negro men and women that appear in black newspapers, periodicals, and other publications of the period. Critics like Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Graham and Shane White characterize the plethora of visual images of well-dressed, well-groomed black people as part of a conscious discourse that defied prior popular cultural representations of black identity generated out of the minstrel tradition. These images worked, specifically, to align black identity with a modern, “American” (that is enfranchised rather than disenfranchised) identity. Gates notes, however, an interesting shift in the discourse of the New Negro. In the era immediately following Reconstruction the ideals that the revised image is supposed to convey take a distinctly electoral form and focus on voter participation and self-defense. But by the time that Alain Locke’s New Negro takes the stage, the ideals are significantly changed. By that time a distinctly cultural thrust, focused on the arts, had emerged. Gates description of this second figure-- “Locke’s

New Negro was a poet, and it would be in the sublimity of the fine arts, and *not* in the political sphere of action or protest poetry, that white America (they thought) would at last embrace the Negro of 1925, a negro ahistorical, a Negro who was “just like” every other American”-- suggests how the revised physical image reflected not just the particular needs of African-Americans but a more generalized social understanding of the image. That is, that idea that to look just like “every other American” in terms of modern fashion and grooming could prove that one was like “every other American” returns us to the recognition of the “specularization” of U.S. culture more generally.

The popular culture of the Harlem Renaissance relied heavily on the bourgeois black woman as an image to represent a set of qualities such as dignity, grace, manners or intellectualism with which the race had not previously been associated and from which it had, in fact, been systematically disassociated (Riggs, 1987). In *Stylin'*, a cultural history of African-American popular expression, authors Graham and Shane White document that the impulse behind *Jet* magazine's popular “jet beauty” feature is one that dates back to the Harlem Renaissance. Drawing on primary evidence from magazine and newspaper coverage from the dawning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century up until 1936, they examine black body politics and style. On the one hand, they note the freedom that the development of hair straightening systems and other cosmetic products afforded black women by providing a viable economic opportunity. On the other hand, they argue, these products and their use were not just economic opportunities, for the advertising that promoted them, as well as how they were perceived, was deeply enmeshed in a set of racial/cultural narratives that suggested the necessity of remaking the black image. The focus on black female bodies that the Whites note was part and parcel of a black cultural politic that sought to revise

the meaning of the black body. The rise of the black beauty industry, along with the other phenomenon on which they focus, the black beauty contest, offered a challenge to the long-held supremacy of white standards of beauty. At the same time, the association of cosmetic alteration of the black female body with black modernity was rooted in the discourse of the New Negro that was being generated by the intellectuals of the day.

The most well known articulation of this discourse comes in the form of the anthology edited by Alain Locke, *The New Negro*. In his essay contribution, Locke described his subject, the New Negro, as the product of the great transformation accomplished by the mass migration of rural black people to urban areas, and he narrates “a deliberate flight not only countryside to city, but from medieval America to modern” (6). The advertisements and personal testimonies that accompany the growth of the black cosmetics industry echo this discourse of modernity, and the use of these products is associated with making a claim to the modern. By reproducing this discourse of modernity as well as trying to carve out a space of recognition of black femininity, the black beauty contest, black cosmetics industry, and later the black fashion show, bound the black female body inextricably to the project of black social equality.

Similarly, in “Femininity, Publicity, and the Class Division of Cultural Labor: Jessie Redmon Fauset’s *There is Confusion*,” Nina Miller links the public performance of late nineteenth century “womanhood” to a media driven national commodity culture. She argues that “the Harlem Renaissance foregrounded the bourgeois African American woman as the icon of racial achievement” and uses Fauset’s representation of heroine Joanna Marshall to exemplify the political function of modeling a certain mode of Black femininity (205). Citing the practice of the Negro journal *The Messenger* to feature a

photo series entitled “Exalting Negro Womanhood,” Miller draws our attention to the way that Fauset’s fictional representation paralleled the reality of public performances of black bourgeois womanhood.

The association with modernity embedded in the New Negro ideal was, however, fraught with tensions as it concerned the black female body. By the early 1920’s, for instance, there would arise a new commodity of “hip” American culture, rooted in notions of black primitivism to which the sexualized black female body was central. While the Jazz Age may have represented for many a time of absolute freedom and vitality, it was only partly that for African-American women. The glamorous self-presentation of the Blues Queens and the black chorus girl may have symbolized the ethos of modern femininity and morality, but the potential for slippage between the new order and the old historical association of Black women with the thrill of forbidden sexuality was great. And while an association with modernity was desirable, an association with the sexualized Black female body is exactly what middle-class Black women wanted to disrupt.

This tension resulted in an organized attempt to police the actual bodies of working-class black women who, due to the Great Migration, represented the numerical majority of African-American women in urban settings. Hazel Carby argues that the working-class black woman’s body was a site of moral panic and was subject to a number of policing efforts. Carby’s use of the phrase moral panic is meant to signal the connection between the public and private spheres, both of which saw working-class black female sexual behavior as destabilizing of, and destabilized by, the urban moral order. The characterization of working-class black female sexuality as a degenerative

force was of particular concern to the black bourgeoisie who saw it as a threat to the progress of the race. Citing the example of Jane Hunter, whose autobiography, *A Nickel and a Prayer*, recounts her move to the North and her subsequent establishment and management of the Working Girls' Home Association (a network of boarding and domestic service training houses), Carby suggests that the goal of much bourgeoisie social work "was primarily concerned with shaping and disciplining a quiescent urban, black female, working-class population" (124). The panic generated by the working-class woman's sexuality was rooted in the black bourgeoisie's struggle to represent the black subject as citizen. Subjecting that body to a kind of bourgeois discipline that privileged modesty, good taste and the effacement of any markers of sexual vivacity was a necessary step to achieving a political personhood. The targeting of the working class black female body points us to the dilemma of hyper-embodiment faced by the black female subject and the distinctiveness of her racial experience.

We find strong examples of the contradictory position that some black women occupied in *Quicksand*, which presents its black female character in situations that highlight her as a gendered subject in the context of Naxos, a southern black college and then as a national subject in the context of her sojourn in Copenhagen. This dichotomy is also strongly thematized in *Passing*, where the characters Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield embody these competing visions of black womanhood. Of the two characters Ann duCille has noted that *Passing's* Clare Kendry, "part vamp, part flapper, and part femme fatale... represents the bohemian fascination with sexuality... and the forbidden," and Irene Redfield, "with her race work, literary salons, and house parties, signifies the propriety, the manners, the social and racial uplift... with which the black bourgeoisie

was preoccupied,” represent a dialectic of Harlem Renaissance womanhood (104).

Together these novels suggest Larsen’s consistent engagement of the distinctive features of black female identity. As well, the emphasis on duality in *Passing* and on multiplicity (particularly of social spaces) in *Quicksand* help to break up the monological tendencies of nationalist texts.

### **The Passing Figure as a Trope of Intersubjectivity**

To suggest the interconnectedness of the notions of gender and racial identity for Larsen I want to compare a scene in *Passing* to a short story, “The Wrong Man,” published by Larsen about four years before *Passing*. In *Passing* a scene borrowed from the short story provides all of the action of the third chapter of the novel’s second part when Brian, Clare and Irene attend the Negro Welfare League Ball together. Certain elements of the dialogue, as well as the main source of tension and the characterization of the two central characters of each scene, are almost directly quoted from Larsen’s 1926 story, “The Wrong Man.” “The Wrong Man” is a compact little story of a woman at a party who is shocked out of the complacency of her present comfortable marriage and life by the appearance of a man whose mistress she had previously been and about whom her husband knows nothing. She attempts to arrange a meeting with the man in order to implore him not to reveal her secret past. Overwhelmed by her fear, she unwittingly reveals her secret to the titular wrong man. Almost exactly the same description of the attendees, “Young men, old men, young women, older women, slim girls, fat women, thin men, stout men” from the story reappears in *Passing* as “Young men, old men, white men, black men; youthful women, older women, pink women, golden women; fat men,

thin men, tall men, short men; stout women, slim women, stately women, small women...” and, like the former, is followed by the character turning to another and reciting the nursery rhyme “Rich man, poor man/ Beggar man, thief,/ Doctor, lawyer/ Indian chief”(“The Wrong Man” 257 and *Passing* 204).

In *Passing* the female character of “The Wrong Man”—the respectable social figure with a secret—has been split into two separate characters. Irene represents one half of the equation as the respectable wife sans sexuality and Clare the other half, with her own secret history. It is Irene, however, who is troubled by the possibility of exposure. Both scenes are marked by a palpable fear of exposure (of one woman’s true sexual identity and the other’s true racial identity), creating a kind of continuity through the illegibility of either woman. The easy transition from a question of sexuality in one to race in the other suggests that these aspects of identity are interrelated for the black woman.

This insistence on racial identity and gender specificity as inseparable is further developed through *Passing*’s dual engagement of the black female body as both consumer and consumed. That is, through its representations of Clare and Irene as women and consumers (of clothing in particular) whose positions relative to whiteness, generally, white femininity, in particular, specifically classed versions of black femininity, and Blackness as a cultural/national identity heighten the illumination of the multiple subject positions occupied by African-American women.

In, *Passing*, for instance, questions of race, class and American national identity all coalesce in the two central figures’ relationships to consumption. Meredith Goldsmith has argued that the characters’ melding of passing and consumption represents an attempt

to fashion a socially marketable black subject that would deny “the material realities of race and gender” (116). This marketability she ties to the invidious emulation of middle-class taste and links bourgeois consumption with racial transformation. Bourgeois taste and the fashion industry, however, dictated a highly sexualized version of femininity that ultimately objectified women, even as it suggested the possibility of opening new spaces in the public and social domain in terms of both race and gender. In other words, the potential for (re)constructing one’s identity through consumption seemed to offer a kind of agency, but that agency was ultimately contained by the commodification of femininity.

By contrast, some black women had, through their actual political activism as labor organizers, feminist activists, and spokespeople for black liberation, already occupied a larger space in the public realm—a space of agency. The consequence of this kind of invidious emulation is a heightened tension for black women, who would have been adopting a mode of femininity that was inherently objectifying. Since the new consumer culture sought to blur the lines between respectable lady and prostitute (on which blurring the continued expansion of the fashions and cosmetics industries depended) it was antithetical to the project of subjectification.

Confirming that there was a blurring of these lines, Geoffrey Perret suggests that the “sexual revolution [of the twenties] coincided with, and spurred along, a spectacular decline in prostitution” (154). While he does cite other factors such as a moral reform movement, decline in European immigration (from among whose ranks many prostitutes were drawn), and a slight increase in wages which makes other kinds of work more profitable, equal among them is the notion that the decline is connected to the fact that

“A generation earlier a teenager who wanted to lose his virginity would have gone to a local whorehouse” but by the Twenties “he was far more likely to try to seduce his high school sweetheart” (156). He was much more likely, too, to be successful in his attempts, if other data cited by Perret, indicating that 100 percent of the unmarried patients of one gynecologist surveyed in 1890 had had some form of sexual experience, is to be believed (153).

Establishing its engagement with the nexus of race, sexuality and the emergence of an American national identity based on consumption, the novel begins with an extended description of women in relation to consumer goods. *Passing* opens with Irene Redfield’s recollection of the day that set in motion the events of the novel—the day when she re-encountered Clare Kendry, a childhood acquaintance many years absent.<sup>14</sup> The place and circumstance of the encounter are quite telling. Irene is vacationing away from her family in Chicago and is on a shopping excursion, turned quest, to find the exact item requested by one of her small sons. Escaping the heat and the crowds, she goes to the tearoom of a hotel where she will run into Clare Kendry.

Further reflecting the shifting moral climate out of which it is produced, the text depicts Clare as a highly sexualized character that most of her peers always suspected of being different and whom they fantasize to be prostituting herself after she disappears. Clare is repeatedly characterized, primarily by Irene, as extremely seductive, and the

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<sup>14</sup> The basic contours of the plot are that two childhood acquaintances, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry (who has “passed” into the white world) are accidentally reunited. Clare insists on renewing their acquaintance and against Irene’s advice begins to frequent the often mixed-race social functions of Irene’s middle-class Black group, to visit Irene frequently in her home, and to become increasingly reckless about the concealment of her racial identity. Clare is married to a virulent racist and her increasing lack of discretion reflects her apparent desire to be free of this marriage. After running into Irene (whom he’d previously met in his home as a white woman) in the company of her visibly black friend, Clare’s husband, Bellew, begins to be suspicious and follows her to a party and discovers that she is, indeed, black. Clare falls from the high-rise window to her death.

occasion of their reunion is littered with veiled references to the possibility of Clare's promiscuity. She has entered the hotel dining room with a man who speaks to her with "pleasure in his tones" despite the fact that he is not her husband, and her character is brought under further suspicion when she repeatedly speaks too "provocatively" to the waiter (148). These insinuations are coupled with a detailed and admiring description of Clare's clothes and grooming and tend to support the notion that there was a good deal of slippage between lady and prostitute engendered by the fashions of the age. Irene's own assessment reflects this confusion, moving back and forth between the sexual indictments and an envious awareness of the "sweetly scented" Clare "in a fluttering dress of green chiffon...just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy, as summer things were so apt to be" (148).

For two women bent on enjoying all of the privileges of U.S. citizenship, which is increasingly marked by the enjoyment of leisure and abundance and the pursuit of pleasure, it is reasonable that they should meet in a hotel, one of the spaces that, along with restaurants and department stores, Susman describes as one of the new 'palaces of plenty' defining the "American" cultural landscape of the 1920's (xxvi). The text suggests that each conceives of the specific form of social privilege that she enjoys as a consumer as part of her inherent right as an "American." The irony of the situation is, of course, that each must pass in order to enjoy that right.

Still, in order to retain these rights Irene decides, later in the novel's action, that she can live with the affair that she suspects her husband is carrying on with Clare Kendry rather than accede to his other desire to move to Brazil, which he believes will afford him some relief from the racial hostilities that pervade life in the United States.

For Irene the United States represents the opportunity to “be allowed,” in her idealized position as housewife, “to direct for their own best good the lives of her sons and her husband,” and to leave it would be tantamount to relinquishing her national identity: “She belonged in this land of rising towers. She was an American. She grew from this soil, and she would not be uprooted” (235). That the predominant image of the U.S. is, for Irene, the high-rise situates the notion of Americanness firmly within the realm of the new social order described by Susman. He notes that even the possibility of the office building depended on the Organizational Revolution (which is a hallmark of late nineteenth and early twentieth century America) enabled by the proliferation of communications devices that characterizes the age. These devices he argues contribute to the development of an entirely new social order as well as the emergence of the middle-class with whom the “culture of abundance was originally” associated (xxi). Since it is this class to which Irene belongs, it is fitting then that she should see the high rise, the locus of this culture, as a potent symbol of her national identity. This is even more particularly so since it is through her participation in this culture of abundance that she “counts” as an American.

While Irene is able to distance herself from a despised racial identity through her consumption, as Goldsmith argues, there is little transformation of the terms of race or national belonging accomplished by it. In fact, her consumption is rather depoliticized in that her ability to consume is a marker of her distance from black identity. Unlike working-class African-Americans who could not pass, there is no motivation for Irene to make overt challenge to the United States’ racial policies. Though Irene, too, is black, her social position (as well as her occasional social passing) shelters her from too many

direct confrontations with racism, and for her life in the United States is comfortable and satisfying. She is able to exercise a certain amount of power as the primary consumer in her home. It is primarily from this position of power that she sees herself.<sup>15</sup> She feels little sense of identification with the masses of Black people. She values her ability to evade racist conflict more than she is inclined to challenge racism itself. These elements are seen both in her conflicts with Brian as well as in the depiction of her Club Work.

For instance where their son Junior is concerned, Brian and Irene have distinctly different approaches to how he should be guided, and these approaches, of course, reflect their own dispositions. On the one hand, Irene sees the economic privilege her family enjoys as an opportunity to protect him from encountering any “queer ideas” (189). What she wants is to send Junior away to a European boarding school, a plan which has dual appeal for her since it could shield Junior from the unseemly ideas of his classmates as well as pacify Brian’s discontent by offering him a “break in the easy monotony” of his life since he would accompany Junior in his travel to school (190). Though the queer ideas to which Irene refers in this passage are of a sexual nature, they are, in Brian’s estimation, symptomatic of Irene’s desire to shield him from *any* knowledge she might deem unpleasant. Bearing this reading out, the scene is paralleled several chapters later when Irene asks Brian not to discuss issues like lynching, about which he has been reading in the newspaper, in the presence of the children. To her assertion that they can learn about such atrocities when they are older he replies: ““You are absolutely wrong! If, as you are so determined, they’ve got to live in this damned country, they’d better find

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<sup>15</sup> This is a very different notion of power than that demonstrated by the historical club-women who saw the consumer boycott as one of their most effective tools for challenging racism. It also contrasts with the consumption of working-class African-Americans who often consumed in ways that affirmed their connection to black culture and community.

out what sort of thing they're up against as soon as possible'" (231). He then goes on to remind her of how her effort to protect them from learning the word "'nigger'" failed when "'somebody called Junior a dirty nigger'" (232). In these two passages their conflicting attitudes about the tense relationship between race and national identity reveals economic power as a force that mediates that tension. Brian's unflagging desire to leave the United States stems from his belief that he will never be able to be fully integrated into the national family. This is evidenced to him by his being confined to treating only colored patients, a restriction he would escape by leaving the United States and its racist system if she did not prevent it. Irene only sees, on the other hand, the privileges associated with being, even, a "colored doctor" and she presumes that they can enjoy a happiness equal to, if separate from, the majority of "Americans."

Irene's insider status—her sense of Americanness—therefore depends on her unwillingness to challenge either gender or racial ideologies that, in spite of a shifting moral and consumer economy, continue to accord privilege to white males. In this way Irene is contrasted to both her husband, Brian, and her friend, Clare, who are aligned in the text by their willingness to resist the domination of white male privilege.

Clare, who is described by her friends as one who "always had a having way," provides an interesting contrast to Irene. This language is interesting because women of the time were increasingly being produced as objects to be "had" by men. Clare, however, resists total objectification by essentially defrauding her husband. That is, while she does trade her sexuality and reproductive capacity for material comfort and social privilege in her marriage to Jack Bellew, he does not have complete control of the situation because he does not know exactly what he has gotten. Bellew is a raging racist

who would never knowingly have gotten involved with someone “black,” and so in marrying him, Clare destabilizes the authority of white male domination. Further, her assessment of black culture, which bell hooks has read as profound love for Blackness, resists his presentation of the dominant view and valuation of black people and culture. While Irene disparages her desire to return to the black social world as another instance of “White” fascination, Clare herself expresses a desire “to see Negroes, to be with them again, to hear them laugh...” that is so strong that she might be willing to kill for it and for which she is willing to risk and, ultimately, give her life (200).

A comparison of Irene’s and Clare’s attitudes with reference to working class black identity helps to establish the distinction between the two attitudes. In the scholarship on *Passing*, it is a fairly commonplace view that Irene is not a highly reliable narrative filter and that her own suspicions and prejudices about Clare color the way that Clare is represented within the text.<sup>16</sup> If we examine what Clare is willing to risk and the price she ultimately pays in order to be in community with black people, Irene’s analysis of Clare as merely seeking the thrill of the exotic is somewhat destabilized. Clare’s attitude is contrasted with Irene’s own unwillingness to risk her own social standing to act hospitably toward Clare and invite her to a party with their old friends when they first reunite in Chicago. Also with regard to how they interact with other black people we see a marked difference in their relations to Zulena and Sadie, Irene’s maids, who are the only representatives of working-class black identity in the whole novel. Irene is greatly befuddled by Clare’s habit of visiting with Zulena and her co-worker Sadie, for Irene’s

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<sup>16</sup> See, for instance, Deborah McDowell’s introduction to the Rutgers edition, Jonathan Little’s “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: Irony and the Critics,” chapter six of Jacqueline McClendon’s *The Politics of Color in the fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, and Claudia Tate’s “Nella Larsen’s *Passing*: A Problem of Interpretation.”

perception of them is much more aligned with the white notion of black people as some category of being that is not quite human. Irene's perception of Zulena as a "small mahogany-coloured creature" reflects that her humanity doesn't quite seem to register for Irene. Her observation that Clare would not have "been so friendly with white servants" fails to account for the fact that Clare doesn't see them as merely servants but rather as more of the black *people* for whom she longs (208).

Further, Irene, the socialite, does not really jibe with historical accounts of the African-American club-woman whose political activism was on par with or superceded her social activities.<sup>17</sup> By contrast, Irene's motivation for her participation in the charitable organizations that she supports seems to be primarily to have an opportunity to be seen. Her main work for the Negro Welfare League consists of selling cakes and tickets and being appropriately dressed for the benefit dance. Though historians cite the notable physical presentations of club-women activists, like Mary Church Terrell, their presence in the public sphere was much more defined by their political activism and advocacy of issues like unionism, scholarship programs, and the creation of social services facilities in neglected black communities, which suggests a commitment to a heterogenous black community and a challenge to white political and economic dominance that is absent in the characterization of Irene Redfield in *Passing*.<sup>18</sup> By contrast, Irene's occupation of public spaces tends to be as a consumer and consequently exemplifies a much more limited subjectification than the historical type after whom she

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<sup>17</sup> See Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: The Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* and Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-construction of American History* for detailed accounts of the kinds of activities engaged in by African-American club women.

<sup>18</sup> Chapter Seven of White and White's *Stylin'* provides an interesting recollection of the visual impact created by Terrell's self-presentation.

is modeled. Where the advocacy of the typical club woman was the expression of a particular notion of citizenship, rooted in a post-Reconstruction era New Negro ideology of active political participation and physical self-defense, the rhetoric of citizenship of that shapes Irene's consciousness is more closely associated with notion of the marketplace as the primary site of democratic participation.

In the article, "National Brands/National Body," Lauren Berlant illuminates the synthesis of political and consumer cultures, arguing that the rise of national capitalism facilitated the processes of individual abstraction that are central to the American political process. She argues that constructing one's self as a citizen has, since the inception of the United States, required a kind of self-abstraction in which the corporeality of the subject is made invisible. That is, the juridical "person" constructed in the legal and social contracts that bind citizen and government and produce rights was consciously de-racialized and de-gendered—that is, abstracted—to mask the reality that he was exclusively male and white. For the non-white, non-male subject, then, this resulted in a hyper-embodiment that functions as sign and source of her exclusion. The rise of mass consumption and national corporate culture, however, provided a mechanism for exceeding the limitations of disenfranchisement by creating an alternate social space that could more easily be occupied by Others. One way around this exclusion is presented in the "passing" enacted by the body whose meaning is not fixed. Berlant, for instance, uses the text(s) of *Imitation of Life* to discuss the way that "the structures of commodity capitalism and American mass culture" tend to reproduce the status quo of "the American body politic" (114, 115). Examining all three versions of the text—the novel, the 1934 film, and the 1959 film—she discusses their reflection of the way that national identity

and consumer identity are, over the course of the twentieth century, increasingly merged in the United States.

In a section of the essay in which she discusses the novel version of the text, she outlines the argument that has the most relevance for this essay. She describes the heroine, Bea Pullman, as performing a double-passing since she first disguises her gender (a kind of “passing”) when she takes over her husband’s maple syrup business after his death, and then as a black woman after she expands that business to include ready-made pancake mix and adopts a logo that is the image of her black housekeeper, originator of the “Aunt Delilah” recipe. Ultimately, Berlant argues, Bea Pullman’s passing constitutes only an evasion and not a challenge since she fails to take any action that counters the racist and sexist logic of the dominant order. In accepting the linkage between consumer culture and American national identity, Irene similarly falls victim to “the auto-containment of the commodity form, by reinforcing the very apparatus whose practices she flees...” (Berlant, 121).

While Irene’s relationship to consumer culture and the palaces of plenty demonstrate the particularities of class and gender in the black struggle for inclusion in the nation-state, Helga Crane’s experiences will be localized around the formulation of racial identity and its conception of nation as family. In *Quicksand*, Larsen’s attention to clothing will produce a visual sign through which we can read the questions of alterity that are the primary thematic of the novel. By focusing our attention on Helga’s body and her self-presentation, the text reveals the limited conceptions of both race and gender identity in nationalist formations.

### **Clothing as a Sign of Gendered Black Identity in *Quicksand***

Like other critics, I see that the nexus of race and gender identity, with specific reference to the question of female sexuality, is at the core of this text. Pamela Barnett, reads the novel “as an extended exploration of the limitations of two modes of representation that framed the construction of black female sexuality: racist depictions of primitive sexuality and reactionary portraits of desexualized bourgeois black women” (580). The limitation is, of course, the way that these two modes of representation seem to have foreclosed the possibility of a positive identification with or representation of black female sexual desire. In my own reading, however, Larsen’s engagement of that dialectic represents a strategic intervention in the nationalist dimensions of the discourse on black identity, which contribute to the problematic identified by Barnett. Further, I suggest that Larsen uses Helga’s relationship to clothing as a metaphor for the process of self-construction. Her clothing, in almost every locale, visually marks Helga’s difference. In the context of Naxos, Helga’s love for luxurious clothing marks her as a questionable woman; in Denmark clothes mark her as exotic and re-inscribe her within a singular racial configuration, while in the South as the wife of Reverend Green her relationship to clothes symbolizes her self-alienation. Taken together the representation of these various modes of Blackness serves to establish the complexity of African-American identity. Moreover, they suggest not only heterogeneity of black identity in terms of class and region, but they also incorporate the added dimension of gender so that we can see how these geographic and economic differences are further inflected by the addition of gender specificity. By representing Helga as always on the outside, Larsen

demonstrates the extent to which a nationalist model is inadequate to the needs of the hybrid (and therefore multiple rather than singular) identity of the African-American.

While she doesn't discuss clothing in particular, Barbara Johnson argues very convincingly that *Quicksand* thematizes the difficulty of stable identity formation in a nationalist context. Johnson provides a psychoanalytic rather than racial (meaning relying solely on the binary model offered by the mulatto figure) explanation for the insider/outsider theme in the novel. Opposing psychologist Heinz Kohut's view of subject formation to the Lacanian mirror paradigm, she suggests that Helga's inability to achieve satisfaction stems from an arrested development of self rather than mere selfishness. Unlike the Lacanian model's insistence on separation from the mirror image as the moment of subjectivity, Kohut's model posits that self-subjectivity is formed by *merging* with "the mirroring selfobject" (257). The selfobject, usually a parent (and a mother in particular) provides the affirmation that validates and allows the subject to recognize itself as Self. Failure to merge leaves the subject in a narcissistic deficit stage "which is based not on self-satisfaction but on hollowness" (257). Though Kohut focuses primarily on the nuclear family unit, Johnson argues for the applicability of this model to national contexts and racial identity in which an entire people could function as the self-object. For Johnson this understanding of the psychological processes of self-development goes a long way to explaining Helga's ongoing and unresolved sense of alienation since she lacked positive self-mirroring in either her nuclear family or the national families of the black race or the American nation. Ultimately, for Johnson, the persistence of Helga's alienation suggests Larsen's concern with asking the reader to see the links between individual psychic development and the social sphere.

In my own analysis, Helga's experience of alienation at Naxos, in particular, is symptomatic of not only her lack of positive self-mirroring in the social sphere of national families, but of the limitations of the nationalist model itself, which is acknowledged to be governed by processes of exclusion and insider/outsider binaries. That is, nationalism, in its reliance on notions of cultural purity and authenticity cannot account positively for the mixed race person who is always seen as an expression of pollution. Additionally, the understanding of women's roles in a nationalist paradigm is fairly limited and is often reduced to the very binaristic poles of purity or contamination. They either serve as reproducers of an authentic culture or are seen as potential sources of contamination. In either case these two extremes tend to localize around the female body and the proper channeling of female sexuality. In Helga's experiences at Naxos and with the New Negro social set into which she falls in New York, this concern with appropriate female sexual roles and behavior is centralized. These sections of the text illustrate the social mechanisms that function to police female desire as well as provide a critique of marriage as an institution that works to contain women.

In the context of Naxos, black identity is understood in a very reactive way that measures itself against the white normative gaze. In this episode we see black elites, who historically dominated the discourse on black identity, proposing a singular model of identity that is governed by a binaristic western notion of difference.<sup>19</sup> The result of this approach is, for one, a reproduction of the sexist gender norms of the dominant culture that leads to a very rigidly defined notion of femininity. At Naxos, then, we see reflected the ideal of feminine purity in the attitudes and actions of Helga's colleagues.

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<sup>19</sup> See Hazel Carby, "The Quicksands of Representation: *Rethinking Black Cultural Politics*."

Consequently, Helga, who bridges a number of polarities—racial, social and regional—is not easily legible, troubling the waters of black identity and exposing the contradictions that arise when one tries to fit multiplicity to a nationalist paradigm. In her experiences at Naxos this contradiction is localized in Helga’s anti-establishment mode of femininity. Helga’s love of clothing operates, in this section, as a marker of her difference and is “one of her difficulties at Naxos” (18).

Of particular concern for them is Helga’s failure to conform to a specific gender ideal. Her failure to conform localizes around the issue of her self-presentation, which, in its showiness and sensuality undermines the notion of feminine modesty and associates her with those aspects of “American” modernity that were sources of tension in the politics of African-American representation. Of course, this tension has much to do with the fact of historical constructions of Black female sexuality as excessive. In her introduction to the novel, Deborah McDowell notes: “It is well known that during slavery the white slave master constructed an image of black female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves. They, not he, had wanton, insatiable desires that he was powerless to resist. The image did not end with emancipation. So persistent was it that black club women devoted part of their first national conference in July 1895 to addressing it” (xii).

When we meet Helga Crane in the first pages of *Quicksand* she is deeply associated with a highly sexualized image of femininity and she is already positioned as separated from the society around her. The narration details the setting, describing color (“vivid green and gold,” “blue-black”), texture (“glistening,” “brocaded,” “soft as yellow satin”) and arrangement as if it were the design for a window display, placing

Helga at the center of our vision and guiding us to the conclusion that she was “attractive” (2). This attractive “girl of twenty-two” is somewhat underappreciated, however, in her environment. The very qualities for which she would be admired, were she a store-window mannequin, here, mark her as suspicious in an atmosphere dominated by “carelessly unkind and gossiping faculty” (1). The emphasis here on Helga as primarily image establishes one of the dominant themes of the novel, Helga’s inability to fit herself to an acceptable mode of identity within the context of Blackness or Whiteness and the consequent destabilization of static categories of identity.

With regard to black identity, however, the question goes beyond just constructing an appropriately respectable look. Though the clothing is the signifier, that which is signified is not just Helga as potential source of pollution, but Helga as polluted. She falls under extra scrutiny that has to do with her lack of acceptable origins, in an atmosphere in which the question of background and family origins is a central preoccupation, which may only coincidentally produce an awareness of her clothing as a *sign* of difference. Helga as mulatto represents a failure of containment and the destabilization of racial boundaries.

This nexus is illustrated in a passage where Helga reflects on the contrast between her attitude toward dress and those of the women around her. Meditating on the question as she waits in the President’s outer office to tender her resignation she reflects how she, “a despised mulatto,” and the dean of women, “a great ‘race’ woman,” have conflicting views on what constitutes appropriate attire (18). While on the one hand, the question is tied to color consciousness and framed in terms of what colors are becoming for people of dark complexions, it also reflects something deeper as Helga is aware when she links

her alienation and racial status and contrasts them with those of the dean whose position as a race woman is linked to her belonging to “one of the ‘first families’” of Southern Black society (18). Helga has already observed the hypocrisy of a social hierarchy in which “you could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant or even love beauty” only if you were possessed of a family name which put you in good social standing (8). Ultimately, though, this system prevails and she finds that, in spite of her efforts to meet the standards of the community, “the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments. Too, they felt that the colors were queer; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy clinging silks...Her faultless, slim shoes made them uncomfortable and her small plain hats seemed to them positively indecent” (18). In these passages, with their emphasis on the interplay between fabric colors and skin colors and the final association of Helga with indecency, questions of racial purity and sexual contamination are clearly figured as retrograde aspects of the “Naxos policy of uplift” (5).

In other words, Helga as mulatto is read as a sign of threat to stable boundaries of race. Her embodiment of two racial orders resonates with the historical threat to a cohesive family structure presented by the mulatto. While this threat is usually figured in terms of the destabilization of the white family structure, the more metaphorical dimensions of family, as a microcosmic representation of nation, has obvious applicability to the structure of racial identity.<sup>20</sup> While white families may have had more at stake economically in maintaining clearly legible lines of kinship in terms of

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<sup>20</sup> My articulation of the threat posed by the mulatto is indebted to Monique Guillory’s discussion of the New Orleans Quadroon Ball.

questions of paternity and inheritance, the mulatto was no less destabilizing of Black family structures as a sign of the usurpation of black male prerogative. Helga as mulatto operates then, in *Naxos*, as a painful sign of a stigmatized aspect of black women's sexual histories.

Larsen formulates a critique of this reactionary understanding of female sexuality in the representation of marriage in the text, revealing the loss of subjectivity that accompanied black bourgeois formulations of femininity which imitated Victorian models of pious domesticity. The definition of lady that emerges from this text, initially through the character of Miss MacGooden, and later, Helga's friend, Anne Grey, is that of a woman who consciously eschews her own sexuality. In the case of *Naxos* dormitory matron, Miss MacGooden, female delicacy and sensitivity are so strong that they prevent her from entering into marriage, as they would hinder her ability to fulfill her matrimonial obligations. Providing an ironic contrast Helga, too, seems to be prevented, by her nature, from finalizing her engagement to James Vayle. From the beginning, when we learn of Helga's engagement to James Vayle, a *Naxos* colleague, Helga resists the conformity of marriage. Her betrothal to Vayle seems to depend on her "naturalization" to the *Naxos* environment, in which adherence to slavishly imitative social norms prevails. Larsen's use of the term "naturalization" is resonant, because it signals not just the process of become accustomed to one's environment, but carries the additional resonance of gaining the liberties of citizenship within a nation, which is in fact what the bourgeoisie hope to secure by adopting the cultural habits of the white elite. Helga rejects the cookie-cutter mold of respectable middle-class femininity. She embraces sensuality in an environment where "it was presumptuous of you to be anything

but inconspicuous and conformable” unless you belonged to a family of prestige (8). Her resistance to the process seems to account for her request for a lengthened engagement. Since she cannot achieve this conformity, modeled on the dominant ideologies of both racial and gendered norms, she can never finalize her marriage and winds up escaping both Naxos and Vayle. Unfortunately, for a woman of her class avoiding marriage means that she must also avoid her sexual desire. As a partial insider Helga has firsthand knowledge of the ideologies that shape the middle-class female psyche, but she is rendered outsider by her social status as an un-moneyed woman of mixed heritage and by her resistance to them. While Helga’s social milieu is indeed that of the bourgeoisie she herself is excluded from its bosom by either her lack of social standing or her own rejection of the racial politics of that set. She can neither identify with what she sees as the hypocritical stance of the black middle-class that rejects working-class black culture and emulates white social custom and declares itself the model for a national black image, nor with its nationalist insistence on the fiction of racial purity. For instance, noting that it will make her acceptance difficult, Mrs. Hayes-Rore advises Helga to keep the fact of her white ancestry a secret since “Colored people won’t understand it, and after all it’s your own business” (41).

As at Naxos, in New York Helga finds that womanhood is figured as the modeling of a very sober, de-sexualized brand of respectability to which marriage is central. In the construction of this episode, Larsen demonstrates both the social privilege and the personal constraint associated with the institution. Both Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Helga’s beneficent temporary employer and Anne Grey, her friend and landlady in New York, are “respectable” women freed from the constraints of marriage—one through

mysterious circumstances in which she may be implicated and the other through the convenient, but apparently un-regrettable, circumstance of widowhood—who are able to occupy the public sphere without question. This freedom is a distinct phenomenon and a privilege, which Helga as a never married woman does not enjoy. The contrast is made apparent when we note Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s curiosity about the ability of a “nice girl” like Helga to accompany her on a trip on very short notice: “I should think your people’d object, or’d make inquiries, or something” she observes (38). “Nice” girls don’t move freely about the world, without running the risk of being mistaken for a less than nice girl, they both know. They must first achieve through marriage, the social status of a lady in order to be able to exercise other freedoms—even those as simple as walking about the city. For instance, one preceding episode in the novel describes how Helga Crane is propositioned as a prostitute as she walks around Chicago seeking employment: While looking for employment “She traversed acres of streets, but it seemed in that whole energetic place nobody wanted her services. At least not the kind that she offered. A few men, both white and black, offered her money, but the price was too dear” (34). While Helga does engage in the course of her wanderings in an illicit activity—shopping for luxury items when she is essentially destitute—the episode demonstrates the still unsolidified codes of female conduct that make it difficult to distinguish what kinds of services she offers.<sup>21</sup> Mrs. Hayes-Rore, by contrast, had inherited from her late husband “money and some of that prestige which in Negro circles had been his” and could travel

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<sup>21</sup> There is of course a racialized component to the presumption that Helga is available. Her racial identity and her public presence converge to suggest that her very body must be available for sale. That Larsen is aware of the shifting codes of femininity and the especially troublesome way that they converged for African-American women is demonstrated in another episode that illustrates the blurred boundaries between lady and prostitute, the sojourn in Denmark, which I discuss later.

about lecturing on the “Negro Problem” (37). Larsen, it seems, could not just write the woman as single, since the socio-reality of her status would have depended, to a large extent, on her having married. In turn, her public presence as the embodied representative of the New Negro womanhood depended on her ability to model the respectability on which black bourgeois claims for national inclusion were based.

If, however, Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s experience typifies the social freedom that attends the respectability of marriage, Ann Grey illustrates the potential for individual loss that marks the ideology of pure womanhood. Like Miss McGooden, Anne understands the realm of sexual desire as a “lawless place where she herself never hoped or desired to enter,” even within the confines of her second marriage (95). These middle-class notions of female sexuality stand in stark contrast to the celebration of female sexual desire that provides the subject of much of the blues material produced at the time. What this discourse meant for the black woman is a separation of raced and gendered experience that is reflected in much of the literature of the time. The result is that the authoritative or professionalized discourse of black womanhood, “lifting as we climb,” neglects crucial dimensions of the female experience of blackness, especially regarding black women’s sexual lives.<sup>22</sup> Larsen, however, in attempting to write from a specifically

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<sup>22</sup> Larsen’s representation of this ideology can be seen as the flip side of the blues woman’s discourse emanating from a source more likely to be taken seriously or even heard by the very women it represents. In her introduction to the collected novels, Deborah McDowell notes that the class of women represented in Larsen’s novel were not likely to have identified with the celebration of “the female body and female desire” seen in the work of the female blues singer. While this seems true, her claim that the way Larsen (as well as Jessie Fauset) deal with the conflicts inherent in representing black female sexuality (how to represent sexual subjectivity without reinforcing stereotypes) is ultimately to go the “safe” route and contain it within middle-class notions of respectability, ignores the novels consistent indictment of “respectability” as a false and hypocritical bourgeois stance. It minimizes Helga’s questing for some other possibility of expression for her sexuality. The novel seems to lay a lot of the blame for the curtailment of women’s sexual freedom on the particularly rigid class ideologies. In positioning Helga as an insider/outsider to this class Larsen articulates a challenge to and resentment of black bourgeois notions of racial uplift that modeled itself on white ideals of morality and propriety.

female consciousness expands our understanding of black subjectivity as well as brings us what many regard as the first open literary representation of black female sexual desire.

That Larsen is quite conscious of the historical representations of black female sexuality that may have caused her predecessors to shy away from the topic is made clear in the portions of the text that take place in Denmark. Here Helga's costume is deliberately constructed to emphasize her as exotic and play upon the widely accepted notion of an exaggerated African sensuality. In this way the clothes continue to operate as a sign by which we read Helga's alterity.

Interestingly in the scene immediately preceding Helga's departure for Denmark all of the questions that she will face are foreshadowed in a scene in a Harlem cabaret in which she encounters not only the spectrum of phenotypical phenomena associated with African descended people—"sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, wooly hair"—but also the nearly white Audrey Denny and her own sexual desire (59). Audrey, also noted for her outré dress, provides, briefly, a kind of double for Helga, in that she is suspect because of her failure to acknowledge or uphold racial boundaries in her social life. Audrey is subject to the same kind of suspicion that Helga has encountered at Naxos, and it is suggested, too, that she presents a particularly sexualized kind of threat and should, consequently, be ostracized. The notion of sexual contamination and racial purity coalesce in Anne's cutting remarks about what happens at the parties given by Audrey Denney: "And the white men dance with the colored women. Now you know,

Helga Crane, that can only mean one thing...You can't get around the fact the her behavior is outrageous, treacherous in fact. That's what's the matter with the Negro race. They won't stick together'" (61). While Anne emphasizes those dimensions of nationalism that focus on racial purity through control of female sexuality, Helga's response to Denney undercuts the nationalist ideology. Watching Audrey, "the beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers," Helga has a moment of self-recognition and a sense of the possibilities that might be available to her.

In Denmark, Helga attempts to realize the possibilities suggested by her encounter with Audrey Denney. In the initial stages of her sojourn in Denmark Helga finds herself, at last, in a position to be able to recognize submerged aspects of her multiracial self, and her arrival on the ship is figured in such a way as to emphasize those aspects of her identity that the black American community has required her to repress.<sup>23</sup> She is positively linked to her mother in the captain's memory of their earlier crossing together as well as in the narrator's characterization of Helga as "a good sailor," which seems to

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<sup>23</sup> In his article "Subject to Disappearance: Interracial Identity in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" George Hutchison attempts to fill in the gaps he notices in the discussion of *Quicksand* regarding interracial relationships and subjectivity. He argues that a large part of Helga's inability to "fit in" in black American society can be attributed to their requirement that she sever herself from her mother and whiteness. He glosses the Greek myth of Ariadne and Naxos, a story which he claims is ultimately about the concealment of mixed and forbidden origins. (In the mythic story Minos of Crete requires an annual sacrifice of seven boys and seven girls to be consumed by the Minotaur in the Labyrinth. Theseus offers to slay the beast in order to end the sacrifices. Ariadne, Minos' daughter falls in love with Theseus and gives him a string to help him find his way out of the Labyrinth again. In alternate versions he leaves her on the island of Naxos where she eventually marries Dionysus and becomes immortal while he goes off to celebrate his victory with a dance called Geranos, "the Crane" or Theseus leaves her pregnant and she dies in childbirth). Hutchison links the concern for racial purity to nationalist appropriations of female sexuality and offers support for his identification of Larsen's satirization of this manifestation of nationalism in his reading of the novel's concluding actions. According to him, when Larsen has Helga, pregnant for the fifth time and bedridden asking to be read Anatole France's *The Procurer of Judea*, she "articulates the relationship between racial ideology, empire, patriarchy and the control of sexuality for procreative purposes, the reproduction of race and the imperial state" (188).

link her to that Nordic tradition (64). However, the possibility for this more dynamic self-conception is not, ultimately, realized for, in Copenhagen, her developing sense of Self is in conflict with the Danes' perception of her. The perception of her difference once again localizes around the issue of clothing when her aunt and uncle insist upon a "fantastic" wardrobe designed to emphasize Helga's racial difference (74). Their insistence on Helga's difference coupled with her own binaristic American racial ideals make it impossible for her to achieve the racial fluidity modeled by Audrey Denney.

Though she attempts to reconcile herself to the exoticized racial construction by focusing on the luxury and flattery that accompany it, the narrative voice destabilizes her "pleasure [at] having so many new and expensive clothes at one time" by representing them as objects of constraint (74). At various times she is described as feeling "like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited" or "she submitted" herself to being a curiosity to be gazed upon (70, 74). In submitting herself to this fantastic costuming, Helga, unwittingly entrenches herself more firmly than ever in a static concept of race. Not only does she accept the Dane's evaluation of her sensual "nature" as an African descended person, but she also accepts the erasure of her whiteness. She is, then, misconstrued on multiple levels. Helga fails, initially, to see or acknowledge the way that her own self-conception is limited by this arrangement. Her general sense of well-being is so pervasive that even poverty looks better in Copenhagen. The text presents Helga's failure to perceive that she is right back where she started—oversexualized and racially misconstrued—in an ironic manner. Helga's rejection of America—"Helga Crane didn't think often of America...except in unfavorable contrast to Denmark"—becomes almost comic when one considers that she is in the exact same

situation as she was in Naxos (75). She is still unable to acknowledge some aspects of her racial self and over-determined by other aspects. Helga, however, at least temporarily sees her situation as “recompensed” for her earlier sufferings. Finally Helga realizes that “she had been... insulted” and she rejects the offer of marriage from Herr Olsen, before whom she has been dangled like a carrot by her aunt and uncle. The rejection of his proposal is the culmination of a dawning awareness initiated when she attends a minstrel show with Olsen and other friends and must confront the contradiction between their pleasure and her mortification at the dehumanized representation of Blackness contained in the show. Olsen’s marriage proposal, which he likens to prostitution, cements her decision to return to the United States as well as her awareness that the person constructed by her aunt and uncle, in conjunction with Olsen, is not who she knows herself to be. Underlining her failure to merge her multiple positionalities into a coherent whole, Helga thinks as she leaves Denmark for the United States, “Why couldn’t she have two lives...” (93). This yearning for two lives underscores the inadequacy of formulating racial identity as a singular formation.

Upon her return to New York, Helga resigns herself once again to a totalizing conception of race and renews her sense of kinship with the “dark-eyed brown folk...[who] were her people” (95). In this singular identification of her people, Helga capitulates to the nationalist formulation of race that incorporates the mulatto into a more totalized conception of Blackness. Consequently, in this return to New York, Helga’s contentment will be short-lived, for she will be bound to a static conception of race. Additionally, she will be disappointed in her attempt to acknowledge her sexual

subjectivity and in the novel's final sequence the issue of gender identity will be the theme that is foregrounded.

In this final section of the novel, the alienation that Helga has experienced as a consequence of her racial two-ness is secondary to the sense of alienation that results from her sexual subjectification and in this way it demonstrates the intersectionality of Larsen's text. While up until this point the question of Helga's sexuality has been intertwined with the question of race, in the final acts of the novel, her sexual subjectivity is yoked to the question of reproduction and in this way presents a specifically gendered approach.

Following a series of encounters with Dr. Robert Anderson after her return to New York, Helga finds herself again a resident of the South, this time as the wife of Reverend Pleasant Green. Her route to the South is a circuitous one and is entirely the consequence of her acknowledging and then acting on her physical desires. In chapter eighteen we are presented with a repetition of an earlier scene, which preceded Helga's departure to Denmark, that begins the final dissolution of Helga Crane. Gathered again are Audrey Denney, Robert Anderson, Anne Grey Anderson, and Helga herself in another frolic as if to test whether Helga has lived up to the promise of self-definition hinted at in the earlier chapter. While the text, again, describes a parallel between Helga Crane and Audrey Denney—wanting to mock the innocence of James Vayle (who has also reemerged at this point in the text) the hostess of the party tells Helga: "I was going to introduce him to Audrey and tell her to do a good job of vamping on him...but you'll do just as well"—Helga has yet to achieve the autonomy that Audrey Denney has. In fact, by the time she leaves the party, after having stumbled into the arms of Robert

Anderson and exchanging a long passionate kiss, she will be thrown into a spiral of alienation that will once again be metaphorized through her relationship to clothing. Her clothing and physical appearance which have, throughout the novel, operated as sign of Helga's struggle for self-definition will, from this point on, receive less of both her and the narrator's attention. This diminishing attention is read as a sign of Helga's increasing resignation to the dominant orders that define her race and, more importantly in this case, gendered subjectivity. In only one of the two catalytic scenes do we get a description of Helga's dress. In the scene of her failed sexual encounter with Anderson, which she expects to be a consummation of their desire rather than the repudiation Anderson actually offers, we are told only that she spent hours before the mirror preparing herself. This is unusual in the text which, up until then, has revealed in detailed descriptions of the cut, color and texture of almost everyone's clothing. In the second important scene, which is a reaction to the first, we do get a description of the "clinging red dress" that revealed her bare arms and neck, but this costume is not presented as a sign of Helga's joyous love of color, rather as the mark of "A scarlet 'oman" (112). This scene is the oft-cited scene of Helga's conversion, which, though it takes place in a church and is therefore ostensibly religious, is presented in language that emphasizes the slippage between ecstaticism and ecstasy. In other words, the scene documents more of a material conversion than a spiritual one. It is followed by Helga's union, both physical and legal, with the Reverend Pleasant Green, whom the text characterizes as most "at home among the mere material aspects of things" (116). Helga, in becoming his mate, joins him in the realm of the material, and unknowingly submits herself to the materiality, the essence, of the body. In choosing the pleasures of the body she becomes constrained to an even

more self-diminishing bodily materiality than that of race—she becomes enmeshed in an endless round of reproduction that is the ultimate self-alienation.

Helga's changing relationship to clothing mirrors this shift. As she inserts herself into the world of Reverend Green, her self-concept is changed entirely: "Herself, Helga had come to look upon as a finicky, showy thing of unnecessary prejudices and fripperies" (121). From this point on, she seeks her fulfillment in the pleasures of the body rather than the pleasures of the mind, a portion of which had previously centered on appreciation of the aesthetic. All of the energies that had once gone into fashioning herself, both literally and figuratively, are now subsumed to the main fulfillment marriage has to offer Helga, her sexual desire. "And night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason" (122). What those shoots of reason would have told Helga, had they not been devoured, was that in spite of her pleasure her Self was still not her own. This fact will be made tragically evident in the round of childbirth that will consume her body. After the birth of the three children there is a noticeable shift in the tenor of her relationship with the Reverend Green as well as with her self. Her husband "had rather lost any personal interest in her, except for the short spaces between the times when she was preparing for or recovering from childbirth" (124). Even her relationship to her own body changes, "For she, who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it" (123). At this point, however, Helga thinks little of clothing, and her body has been co-opted by the consequences of Green's occasional attention—the children who follow one after the other. Finally, Helga's body

is converted from either the instrument or sign of her own desire that it had been at Naxos, in Denmark and at the beginning of her life in Alabama.

## **Conclusion**

In *Quicksand* the focus is on racial formations and the shifting meanings assigned to Helga Crane's body in different geographic locales. Within it Larsen frames a challenge to the notion of a singular black identity and reveals the way black female sexuality is constrained when it is yoked to the politics of nationalism and pitted against personal subjectification. The text's revelation of the a priori indictment of the mulatto subject and its critique of marriage illuminates the troubled legacy, for the individual black woman, of the historical association of black women, as a group, with a mythic sexuality.

This engagement with the tension between the private self and the public self is continued in *Passing*, where it is localized around the image of the middle-class black woman. This text's emphasis on the surface of things reflects the increasing "specularization" of culture that is taking place both in the United States and Europe in the periods just before and after the Great War. It reveals how, for the black bourgeoisie and its women in particular, the proliferation of certain physical images of blackness was troublesome. It interfered with their attempts to secure the full rights of citizenship to itself. Black women were, at the same time operating within the black community as symbols of black citizenship potential.

While both *Quicksand* and *Passing* are characterized by rather hopeless endings which seem to suggest that overcoming the problems faced by their heroines is an

impossibility, they are still valuable for their contribution to the articulation of the social realities of African-American women in that era. Larsen's vision encompasses the particular experiences of black women in relation to Blackness, whiteness, and femininity in the context of early twentieth century U.S. culture. Taken altogether, this attention to multiplicity of black female constitutes the hallmark of black women's writing across the Diaspora and is seen in its incipient stages in these texts.

### 3. Locating the Language of Sycorax in Jamaica Kincaid's *The Autobiography of My Mother*

In her third work of fiction, *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Jamaica Kincaid makes a gendered intervention into the corpus of Caribbean literature. In a move typical of the writing of black women of the diaspora, Kincaid represents the multiple subjective spaces occupied by black women. For women in the Caribbean these subjectivities include the experience of gender oppression as well as colonization. This novel thematizes both the liberatory and oppressive possibilities of language and constitutes what Miriam Chancy, drawing on the work of Françoise Lionnet, calls a socio-literary project. This kind of project, according to Lionnet, accounts for “the ways in which literature mirrors actual social realities and the ways in which it remains a ‘discursive practice that encodes and transmits as well as creates ideology’” (quoted in Chancy, 109). In attempting to delineate the social realities of the Caribbean female, Kincaid must challenge two sets of discursive practices, the colonial and the anti-colonial, that both participate in a masculinist ideology which effaces the specificities of female experience. While Kincaid, a writer, must use language, she does attempt to evade the pitfalls of logocentrism in which the ideology of masculinism inheres. Moving away from the Calibanized approaches typical of much Caribbean literature *The Autobiography of My Mother* points us toward the knowledge embodied by the Sycoraxian other.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup>Drawing on Abenia Busia's discussion of the silenced woman, “Silencing Sycorax: On African Colonial Discourse and the Unvoiced Female,” I use the term “Calibanized” to refer to the tendency of the literature of decolonization to focus on masculine identity as the representative symbol of the colonial subject. Critics of Caribbean literature have identified this tendency in those texts which engage Shakespeare's play directly, like Lamming's “The Pleasures of Exile” and Césaire's “A Tempest,” which do not attempt to

Privileging an epistemology of experience, this text opposes the primacy of the word as mechanism for structuring both colonial and female subjectivity. Rather than seek to locate her self in the western (British) canon or look to the early independence era Caribbean canon, Kincaid constantly contests the way that black women have been represented in both literatures. In order to challenge the representations of femininity that dominate these forms and are rooted in nationalist paradigms, Kincaid employs the language of the fictional autobiography, which affirms a feminist poetic. Betty Wilson says of this mode of narration that “the structure of the fictional autobiography, journal, diary letter or other relatively ‘intimate’ genres seem to be the preferred vehicle for expressing feminine/feminist/female consciousness” (quoted in Davies & Fido, 6).

This fictional autobiography rejects at once the category of received truth, as well as the notion of a single subject/ivity as the central concern of the narrative. Because women’s experiences have been so ignored as to become unreal or so misrepresented that the more realistic representations have an air of untruth about them, it becomes necessary to destabilize the very notion of a singular subject who articulates an authentic and verifiable history.<sup>25</sup> Françoise Lionnet, in “*Métissage*, Emancipation and Female Textuality in Two Francophone Writers,” an essay that links the textual rendering of female experience with the liberation of the female subject, says of the relationship between truth and female social experiences:

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specify any aspect of Caribbean female experience (Yeoh, 103). Out of these critiques has arisen the call for a return to Sycorax, or an examination of the feminine spaces of the Caribbean experience. This return has been formulated as the employment of another language (both literally and conceptually) that can accommodate the multiple dimensions of Caribbean identity in a way that the cultural and linguistic system of the colonizer has not been able to.

<sup>25</sup> For an extended discussion of the representation of multiple subjectivities in Kincaid’s text, see Allison Donnell’s “When Writing the Other is Being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*.”

The female writer who struggles to articulate a personal vision and to verbalize the vast areas of feminine experience which have remained unexpressed, if not repressed, is engaged in an attempt to excavate those elements of the female self which have been buried under the cultural and patriarchal myths of selfhood. She perceives these myths as alienating and radically *other* and her aim is often the retrieval of a more authentic image, one that may not be ostensibly “true” or “familiar” at first, since our ways of perceiving are so subtly conditioned by our social and historical circumstance and since our collective imagination is so overwhelmingly nonfemale. Having no literary tradition that empowers her to speak, she seeks to reveal the “hidden face of Eve” and displace the traditional distinctions of rigidly defined literary genres.

I have quoted Lionnet at length because her analysis gets to the crux of contemporary Caribbean female uses of the fictional autobiographical mode. It suggests that two important features of Caribbean women’s writing are the deformation of generic boundaries as well as the importance of collective experience to self-understanding. Together these constitute what Lionnet describes as a mixed (or Creole) form. By this she means to signal a historical rootedness in, and allegiance to, specific physical and cultural geographies of the Caribbean.

Michael Gilkes’ introduction to his study of the West Indian novel offers some explanation for the political resonance of the term Creole. Drawing on an essay by Edward Brathwaite, he suggests that Creole writing can be understood in opposition to West Indian writing which tended, in the nineteenth century, “to be the result of

occasional visits from articulate, well-bred outsiders, the journals of literate plantation owners, or the well-meaning but condescending attempts to ‘rehabilitate’ the degraded blacks” (Gilkes, 9). Moreover, literature produced by native Caribbeans in the first half of the twentieth century tended to reflect the writers’ education in the literature and values of the Mother Country and could not be called Creole because of its failure to represent an intimate knowledge of the West Indian and its lack of commitment to articulating that experience.

The fictional autobiography, as a Creole form, is particularly suited to Afro-Caribbean authors who tend to eschew the ideology of individualism that is typical of the conventional autobiographical self. Instead, the Afro-Caribbean writer most often writes from a position inside the community in a way that recognizes the responsibilities of that relationship. These kinds of narratives subvert conventional notions of the authorial subject because they do not posit an individual subject with singular control of the narrative but document the lives of women from various social backgrounds and constitute a collaboration between self and community. Fictional autobiography is a way of revising the histories that have either failed to account for black women’s experiences or misrepresented those experiences.

Kathleen Renk pays attention to textual strategies rooted in historical practice and also suggests, in *Caribbean Shadows & Victorian Ghosts*, that there are some specific characteristics that can be assigned to Caribbean women’s writing that distinguish it from both black and feminist writing in general. She posits that for the contemporary Caribbean female author, writing is analogous to the Obeah ritual of shadow catching. One catches one’s shadow through the literal act of lighting candles, which dispels

darkness and symbolically enacts a sighting of the self that Renk equates with controlling one's destiny. The political force of the practice emerges from the historical context of slavery in which the magical religious practice of Obeah opposed the hegemonic authority of the European Christian tradition. Contemporary Caribbean writers enact this shadow catching by employing four distinct narrative strategies. The first she calls Creolism—derived from the tradition of the Anancy tale, defined by its subversive intent and manifest in the use of oppositional nation language. It is important to note here that while she does suggest that the Creole tale often literally employs patois, she also recognizes the more symbolic use of nation language in those tales which give voice to the people when they “speak of the continuing cycle of violence against women and children, of the color-caste system that has its roots in the colonial era, and of the disfiguring, destructive mothering practices that stem from the imposition of ‘Victorian’ discourse” (22). This expansive refiguring of nation language is a feminist attempt to forestall the possibility of replicating sexist patriarchal forms inherited from the plantation system.

The second feature—magical storytelling (or ancestral storyteller magic)—depends on the textual outing of repressed knowledge possessed by the female storyteller within the text. Here Renk refers to a textual orality in which women transmit knowledge born of experience in the form of story. Because women's history has generally gone unrecorded in written form, women's experiences have not generally been seen as sources of knowledge. This kind of storytelling is, consequently, seen as a subversive act in that it values and transmits a body of knowledge that counters dominant discourses. Third, she includes the writing of alternative or repressed histories accomplished by the

use of multiple narrative voices. The use of multiple voices emphasizes the collective production of the knowledge that is transmitted by the stories. Finally, she identifies the use of the dreamscape, a strategy that draws on and articulates the collective consciousness of colonized people.

Kincaid's text employs three of these strategies to a greater or lesser degree. *The Autobiography of My Mother* functions as a Creolized Anancy tale in its oppositional gender politics and inversions of our generic expectations. Its title signals, at once, the novel's commitment to a narrative practice rooted in oppositional practice, blurring the boundaries of classification, expanding the notion of subjectivity by offering an I (speaking subject) who represents a collective experience. Second, the novel is an exercise in storytelling magic, the transmission of knowledge born from female experience. It is, in fact, the growth and development of the protagonist Xuela's body that actuates the narrative. All of the observations and truths that Xuela uncovers generate directly from her relationship to her body. From her early childhood, when she refuses to accept food prepared by others and begins to feed herself, her understanding of the world emerges from her perceptions of her body. When she sees that she is despised because her body is brown and female, she begins to love that body, attend to it, and worship it in an effort to accord it the value and esteem it will not receive in the world. This accords with what Renk describes as a signal that an author is invoking "ancestral storyteller magic," which uses the female figure as "a harbinger of transformation" (23).

Finally, Kincaid evokes the quality of a dreamscape by depositing the reader in an unspecified, but markedly different, time period and creating, through the juxtaposition of modern prose style and a seemingly pre-modern setting, a sense of uncertainty and

ambiguity that we experience as more fantastic than realistic. Moreover, the text's ambiguity is a manifestation of a dream logic that rejects this world's dualism and embraces those realms in "which opposites coexist and consciousness remembers a time when all things were united, not yet divided by European conquest, empirical science and classificatory reason" (Renk, 25). That Xuela is only able to connect with her mother in dreams, then, is symbolic of the opposition between the consciousness of the world we inhabit, structured by difference, hierarchy and domination and the more expansive consciousness of "before time" when female knowledge was still valued and was something around which the entire community cohered.

From the recurrent images of sexual self-love and archetypal representations of femininity in which women are imaged as dangerous and threatening because of their sexuality emerges the call for a female language that arises from culturally specific spiritual locations whose knowledge is connected with lived experiences. This dynamism, rooted in the lived experience of the body, distinguishes Kincaid's use of the mother figure as a metaphor for culture from literary nationalist uses of the same metaphor. She severs the image of the mother from representations of the newly independent nation and transforms it into a symbol of the necessity of female-identified empowerment. This disrupts the historical tendency to see the mother as a symbol of culture and a conduit for the articulation of Caribbean male subjectivity that then stands in for the whole of Caribbean experience. From this re-articulation there emerges a representation of black female subjectivity concerned with developing social awareness of distinctive female cultures.

In her encounter with the colonizer's language, English, Xuela has an experience typical of the colonized subject where her ability to be perceived as human rests on her ability to acquire the language of the colonizer. Within the novel, all things English, including language and the landscape, are associated with the violent imposition of an alien moral order. Because of the differing relations to the written word in African and European cultures, literacy provides a convenient marker of difference in the colonial context which, according to Abdul JanMohamed, creates a situation in which "racial difference is transformed into a moral and even metaphysical difference within the logocentric system of the Western tradition or culture" (quoted in Lubiano, 214).

In her study of gender and Caribbean narrative, *Making Men*, Belinda Edmondson gives a historicized account of the way that this link between the word and a subject's demonstration of morality plays out in Caribbean literature. She argues that the work of Anglophone Caribbean male writers of the pre- and early independence era is deeply structured by Victorian notions of literacy and masculinity. Locating the characteristics of early twentieth-century Caribbean writing in pre-independence attitudes, she suggests that the Caribbean male writer's textual authority rests not on its accurate representation of the whole of Caribbean society (including women and the folk), nor on a revolutionary attempt to develop a distinctive Creole form that puts nation language and alternative knowledge systems on par with English forms, but rather on his mastery of the English literary and philosophical tradition. Edmondson demonstrates how intimately connected English ideas of nation and masculinity were. For the colonial subject the possibility of enfranchisement depended on the ability to display the characteristics associated with British masculinity—intellectualism and properly channeled physical virility. The

necessity for modeling this version of masculinity is tied to English perceptions of the West Indies. They saw the West Indies as a blank cultural slate, neither Europe nor Africa, which functioned as a kind of laboratory for testing whether or not Africans, away from Africa, could be elevated from their supposedly inferior position. This elevation would be evidenced by their attainment of the English character through education in, and production of, English cultural forms. English perception of the potential for development was important in that, to a great extent, it determined the colonists' positions on the question of self-rule in the colonies. If African males could acquire the trappings of gentility through the cultivation of English manners and morals and the mastery of English literary forms, the imperialists would be able to perceive them as men who were, therefore, capable of self rule.

These attitudes deeply impacted Caribbean male self-perception and contributed to the potency of the Caliban image in early Caribbean writing. However, while many have seized upon Caliban as a metaphor for the insurgent Caribbean male, they have often ignored the more problematic aspects of gender relations as they are encoded in the original narrative. Reflecting emerging critical takes on the Caliban paradigm, Opal Palmer Adisa notes that "Caliban's counterpart is noticeably absent; the Caribbean woman is rendered not only dumb but invisible as well in this important play by Shakespeare" (23). She goes on to suggest that the Calibanized subject's responses are, to some extent, contained by the ideological vocabulary Prospero's language makes available to him: "That Caribbean male writers and intellectuals have not so far argued for their mate is merely a reflection of the sexism inherent in the society, but of equal danger is their embracing of Caliban as a symbol of their emergence in literature and the

beginning of their voice. The consequence of this canonization is the erasure of a vital part of their historical culture” (23).

Likewise, Edmondson recognizes the limitations of the Caliban paradigm for representing black female subjectivity. She argues that in the typical post-independence novel of revolution, authored by the Caribbean male, the primary concern is the exchange of power between white men and black men and is often negotiated over or symbolized by the exchange or conquest of a white female body. The black female body, she suggests, is too historically fraught with symbolic implications to be useful in the articulation of an independent Caribbean identity. The black woman, as a symbol of the slave past, destabilizes efforts “to liberate the Caribbean space by remaking it, literally and figuratively, in the image of the Caribbean man” (107). This destabilizing effect is tied to the body of the black woman whose reproductive capacity, through its cooptation under slavery, has been linked to the degradation of black masculinity. In a notion of national identity in which masculinity is primary, the black female body can only serve as a “discursive reminder of the subjugated status of [black] Caribbean men to white European men” (107).

Since it is the relationship between black and white men that is encoded in the Caliban paradigm, black Caribbean women have inherited the burden of developing textual forms and imagistic strategies that treat black female experience seriously. Kincaid’s engagement with this struggle in *The Autobiography of My Mother* is manifest in her use of the fictional autobiographical form and her treatment of language as a central theme.

Her attention to the violence that has been enacted on women through their social representations leads Kincaid to critique not only English as a language of domination, but also includes a view of nation language that complicates more celebratory attitudes toward its usages. While Kincaid does affirm the empowering potential of nation language when she connects it to Xuela's resistance to the ideological components of her missionary education, she is also cognizant of the fact that one can couch old ideas in new vocabularies. In "‘Woman is a Nation’ ... Women in Caribbean Oral Literatures" Carol Boyce Davies offers an analysis of the images of women that occur in the proverbs, folktales and calypsos of the region. Because these forms "are used as codes-of conduct or quick reference points of ancestral wisdom in diverse human situations" and are the material on which the linguistic and conceptual vocabulary of nation language draws, it is important to examine the values that are being transmitted (Davies, 166). In many cases, what that examination reveals is that Caribbean male behavior toward Caribbean women is often an "emulation and transferal of the hostility the male learned within the plantation system" (Davies, 175). So while nation language may at one level signal an opposition to the dominant racial order, it may, unwittingly, replicate the gender violence that also circulates within the colonial system.

Contrary to the way that nation language has been figured positively by thinkers such as Kamau Brathwaite, in this novel nation language can also be made to represent the more reactionary aspects of nationalism.<sup>26</sup> Rather than serve as a way of signaling the

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<sup>26</sup> See Adisa's "De Language Reflect Dem Ethos: Some Issues With Nation Language" and Elaine Savory's "Returning to Sycorax/Prospero's Response: Kamau Brathwaite's Word Journey" for some characterizations of the political potential of nation language. While Adisa does acknowledge some problems with the way nation language has been employed (discussed in the text above) she draws on

celebration of newly emergent Caribbean national identities, Kincaid's presentation of nation language forces us to be aware of the way that many of those emergent nations have failed to reject patriarchy as their colonial inheritance.

To this end, Kincaid's novel is not merely concerned with a condemnation of the use of the colonizer's language as representative of a racially biased moral system but also indicts the language of the "people of African blood" by making it the language in which her female protagonist's subjectivity is degraded at home. Kincaid's complication of the idea of nation language reveals the limitation of nationalist thinking and identifies the need to move beyond nationalism as a strategy for liberation. While Xuela's experience with nation language, as a schoolgirl trying to find a framework for resistance, affirms the necessity of a nationalist program as a first step in the process of liberation, Kincaid, the author, will also suggest the need for moving beyond nationalism.<sup>27</sup>

For instance, Xuela understands her stepmother's speaking to her in patois, not as a way of solidifying their bonds as Caribbeans, but rather as "an attempt on her part to make an illegitimate of me, to associate me with the made-up language of people regarded as not real—the shadow people, the forever humiliated, the forever low" (30-31). Her stepmother's attempt to establish and maintain distance between them is attributed to her belief that, as women, they are in competition for limited emotional and economic resources within the family.

Her interactions with Xuela reflect and are resonant with the way the Caribbean woman has been constructed as the national other—a source of sexual/social

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Brathwaite's idea of nation language in a generally positive way and suggests that Caribbean women writers are in a particularly good position to expand its use.

<sup>27</sup> For an elaboration of the phases of liberation see Albert Memmi's *The Colonizer and the Colonized*.

contamination and moral pollution that must be contained. In the passage which follows shortly after that quoted above this notion of female insalubrity is made clear when the stepmother instructs Xuela in how to wash properly, not with kindness but as if it were merely an opportunity to display her disdain for the humanity that Xuela's form and odor present. That Xuela is violently constructed within the home as well as outside of it resonates with Kincaid's overarching concern with the limitations of both colonial and anti-colonial models of representation produced thus far. If we see the positioning of home as a metaphor for racial community in the text, then Xuela's relationship to home begs us to question the myth of a national home as a safe space for the Caribbean female.

The limitations of nationalism as a concept that allows for a re-articulation of female subjectivity suggests the necessity for new models of identity. The text makes an explicit rejection of a predominant female type in Caribbean literature. When she is summoned to her father's house after living by herself, "not a man, not a woman," Xuela encounters a woman who, though not much older than Xuela, had been aged by a relentless cycle of work and poverty. Though she may have appeared as a martyr to a cause unknown even to herself, for Xuela she did not "[become] a symbol of anything" (106). On the other hand, her occupation as washerwoman, her dark skin and martyred appearance all accord with a dominant type in black literature of the Americas—the enduring, self-sacrificing black woman. Xuela's refusal to make her a symbol reflects a different politics of representation. In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, the longing for the absent mother suggests that we might seek a return to a truly Creolized, integrative politic that would enable black female self-love instead of self-sacrifice.

As noted earlier, the model that the Caliban paradigm offers for the representation of the colonized subject is limited. Caliban's access to the ancestral properties that constitute his maternal inheritance is blocked by his dependence on the language of Prospero, which limits his ability to speak from any position but that of Other.

On the other hand, the model provided by Sycorax, who occupies a wider range of positions—mother, indigenous, colonized, spiritual journeyer—exemplifies the heteroglossic discourse associated with the writing of Black American women writers. This speaking of and from different tongues enables “an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity” (Henderson 18). Unlike the Caliban model of subjectivity, “The interlocutory character of black women's writings is, thus, not *only* a consequence of a dialogic relationship with an imaginary or ‘generalized Other’” but reflects a black female consciousness arrived at via their social positioning as gendered Other with regard to black men as well as a more “generalized” Other in relation to white society (Henderson 18, emphasis added). Sycorax, who represents the fused knowledge embodied by and constitutive of Creolized Caribbean culture, more aptly figures this emphasis on a plural subjectivity.

An instance of this kind of Sycoraxian function is seen in Kincaid's text, when Xuela finds herself in an oppositional relationship to the school as an institution. In particular, her struggles with language, which she recognizes as communicating a whole moral system that is hostile to her, as Other, because of her raced identity and her identity as a woman. Kincaid's representation exceeds the limits of a Calibanized discourse by having Xuela shape her life according to the values accorded to her by another system of knowledge and its alternative moral system.

Within the text, the protagonist's account of her initial encounter with the written word typifies the dual relationship of the colonized subject to language. She recounts that, in school, the words, 'The British Empire,' were the first three words she learned to read. These words, her first encounter with formal literacy, are meant to mark, finally, her status as a colonized subject. Even her mastery of literacy, though, does not guarantee her access to the social power and status of a citizen of the nation. Xuela's teacher's reaction to Xuela's aptitude illustrates the link JanMohamed posits between race, literacy, and morality:

I learned to read and write very quickly. My memory, my ability to retain information, to retrieve the tiniest detail, to recall who said what and when, was regarded as unusual, so unusual that my teacher, who was trained to think only of good and evil and whose judgment of such things was always mistaken, said I was evil, I was possessed—and to establish that there could be not doubt of this, she pointed again to the fact that my mother was of the Carib people (16).

This passage emphasizes the colonial logic of difference. According to that logic Xuela and her people are colonized because they are inferior and their inferiority is evidenced by lack of facility with the English language. Her facility with language is suspect because it defies the expectations of a logocentric moral order that associates literacy with good and racial alterity with evil. Xuela's mastery of literacy confounds these distinctions and threatens that moral order. Her relationship to the missionary-trained teacher, who represents the subjectivity of the colonized African woman, contrasts with the more enabling relationship she has with her mother through dreams.

Xuela's fantastic relationship with her mother is represented as productive. In fact Xuela relates a dream encounter with her mother just before she begins to relate this incident in which the teacher suspects her of being possessed. Stopping to rest at her favorite place to commune with nature, she dreams for the first time a dream of her mother in which she can see only her mother's heels descending a ladder. She finds that vision comforting and relates the experience as a transformative one: "When I awoke, I was not the same child I had been before I fell asleep" (18).

The transformative potential that her mother symbolizes is directly linked to Creolism. Her absent mother, a descendant of the extinguished Carib people, represents that absented or repressed aspect of her identity. She is a figure of indigenous maternity that is analogous to Sycorax as the third, and often missing, term in the Caliban model of Caribbean Creole identity. The following passage emphasizes that she understands that she need not privilege one aspect over the other but can integrate both into the identity that she fashions for herself:

I had thick eyebrows; my hair was coarse, thick, and wavy; my eyes were set far apart from each other and they had the shape of almonds; my lips were wide and narrow in an unexpected way. I was of the African people, but not exclusively. My mother was a Carib woman, and when they [the other members of her school] looked at me this is what they saw: The Carib people had been defeated and then exterminated, thrown away like the weeds in a garden; the African people had been defeated but had survived. When they looked at me, they saw only the Carib people. They were wrong but I did not tell them so (15-16).

By stressing her physical resemblance to her mother, she underscores the link between them. Her teacher and all-male classmates misapprehend that link, associating it with the possibility of utter conquest. On the other hand, for Xuela, the link represents an aspect of self-knowledge that, coupled with the legacy of African survival, will allow her to resist such extinction.

While her education into the symbolic realm of language is initially an experience of denigration, two things interrupt the dynamic of linguistic oppression. One is her access to nation language, the French patois that she and her schoolmates use among themselves; “a language that was not considered proper at all, a language that a person from France could not speak and could only with difficulty understand” (16). The emphasis on this language as a private one to which the European is denied access underscores its oppositionality.

Another of her experiences at school, the response she gets to a series of letters she writes, buttresses Xuela’s dawning understanding that the power of language works two ways. From copying the letters of others as an exercise in school designed to teach the mastery of the letter writing form, Xuela quickly moves to articulating her own alienation and dissatisfaction with her situation in a series of secret letters to her father. Though Xuela does not intend to send the letters to her father, secreting them away in the schoolyard instead, her teacher discovers them and, to demonstrate her lack of a guilty conscience as a contributor to Xuela’s unhappiness, forwards them to Xuela’s father who shortly thereafter arrives to remove her from the school. Xuela sees that she had, “through the use of some words,” which until then she had experienced as instruments of violence, “changed [her] situation.” Describing her reaction to this turn of events, she

says “To speak of my own situation, to myself or to others, is something that I would always do thereafter...From this unfocused, childish expression of pain, my life was changed and I took note of it” (22).

While this turn of events provides a useful political lesson within the literal terms of the narrative, it also operates metonymically as a lesson for the female authorial subject. The shift from the mastery of letters, which “a person in the position that [she] was expected to occupy—the position of a woman and a poor one—would have no need whatsoever” of, to authoring her own letters, “in which [she] would express [her] feelings about [her] own life as it appeared to [her],” encodes the shifting relationship of the Caribbean female to the literary tradition (18-19). It affirms the project of much black female Caribbean writing, which assumes that to speak of the situation of women is a necessary political act that will, finally, result in material change.

What is still more interesting about this string of events, however, is that, though the letters were nominally addressed to her father, Xuela’s words and their implicit request for someone to show her how to love herself are really meant for her absent mother. She says of her expressions of pain: “These words were not meant for my father at all but for the person of whom I could see only her heels” (19). When her father shows up to remove her from the school, she notes that he arrives wearing his symbol of authority, his jailer’s clothes, and while “To him this had no meaning,” her and the reader’s expectations for liberating transformation are reduced significantly (22).

That it is actually her mother with whom Xuela seeks to communicate signals something about Kincaid’s own attempts to suggest the necessity for a dialogue between women in which female experience forms the basis for self-knowledge, rather than

accessing power through appeals to patriarchal authority. The entrenchment of Caribbean literature in models of identity that have proven to be unconcerned with, if not hostile to, female subjectivity necessitates this kind of evasive move.

That Xuela's absented mother is, like Sycorax, absented from the outset of the text, but nonetheless represents a resource to which the child's/protagonist's access is blocked, suggests that Kincaid draws a purposeful parallel in her use of this structure. Though Xuela is like Caliban in that much of her discourse is concerned with the bitter curses of the alienated subject, she is unlike him in that she recognizes the mother's lost knowledge as a possible source of healing. Her mother's voice as she hears it in her dreams is to her "a treasure that inspires not astonishment but contentment and eternal pleasure" (31).

Paula Gunn Allen, writing about the role of Mother in indigenous North American Keres culture, helps to explain the processes that might accompany the loss of the mother in an a culture which emphasizes fusion over difference. She says:

Among the Keres, "context" and "matrix" are equivalent terms, and both refer to approximately the same thing as knowing your derivation and place. Failure to know your mother, that is, your position and its attendant traditions, history and place in the scheme of things, is failure to remember your significance, your reality, your relationship to earth and society. It is the same as being lost—isolated, abandoned, self-estranged, and alienated from your own life (210).

The loss of the mother, or female/maternal culture, then leads, necessarily, to a diminution of the self because one loses track of the cultural power that derives from an essential awareness, symbolized in the mother-child bond, of one's interconnectedness with one's surroundings. For the black female specifically, the loss of power derived from maternal/ancestral functions diminishes the possibility of negotiating positive interaction with those people and social institutions including her own black nation. This notion that power derives from communal connections sharply contrasts with the western notion of individual power and significance that informs the traditional autobiography and has, to some extent, been reproduced in traditional Caribbean literature. The Creole form, then, is a maternal form in that it emphasizes the communal in its insistence on the integration of different sources of knowledge.

Kincaid's alignment of Xuela's mother with the Sycorax figure suggests the necessity of the mother-daughter bond for female wholeness. Implied in this is the primacy of woman-to-woman bonds in the development of healthy female subjectivity. The absence of female community in this novel accounts, largely, for Xuela's alienation, her sense that she is incapable of love. The absence of an integrative model of female subjectivity to oppose the colonial model that is the social and literary inheritance of the Caribbean woman means that Xuela is unable to fully realize the possibilities symbolized by her mother's Creole identity.

## **The Female Socio-Literary Body**

While Xuela's mother represents the yet unachieved possibilities of an encompassing female identity, that which she symbolizes stands in stark contrast to the reality represented in the text. By taking possession of herself, Xuela attempts to transform the reality to the ideal, but, ultimately, finds that she is not equipped to do so. Her natural inclination to accept duality and ambiguity is opposed to the insistence on strict division in the world around her. Without a community that shares her apprehension of multiplicity, she cannot fully occupy that Creolized space, which actually depends on a notion of collective experience. Neither can she bend herself to the acceptance of a world of strict divisions.

In the text, the tension between the colonial logic of difference and the more incorporating logic of Creolism is engaged through its treatment of female sexuality. Xuela's experience of sexual subjectivity is distinguished from the experiences of the women around her who model the dangers of accepting the ideology of difference. Their adherence to a colonial model of gender identity based on the association of female "difference" with female inferiority prevents them from identifying the possibility of personal agency through female community. While nurturing her desire is an act of agency for Xuela, for the other women in her community accepting a binary model of female subjectivity means a loss of power.

The acceptance of duality is associated with the naturalization of female sexuality. Recalling the first time she leaves home for school, Xuela remembers "That morning was a morning like any other, so ordinary it was profound: it was

sunny in some places and not in others, and the two (sunny, cloudy) occupied different parts of the sky quite comfortably; there was the green of the leaves, the red burst of the flowers from the flamboyant trees, the sickly yellow fruit of the cashew, the smell of lime, the smell of the almonds, the coffee on my breath, Eunice's skirt blowing in my face, and the stirring up of the smells that came from between her legs, which I shall never forget, and whenever I smell myself I am reminded of her" (13). Suggested in this passage is her early orientation toward the ability to contain opposites in the same space. In this space female sexuality is associated with an encompassing vision of the world. It is part of a vision of the erotic that includes not just sexuality but all the powerful sensual experiences, including sight, sound, and smell, that affirm human vitality.

Examining the strategies that Caribbean women writers employ in their efforts to "de-scribe" imperial and patriarchal discourses and colonial literary aesthetics, Denise Narain suggests that while Caribbean women writers have taken up the challenge to find new textual forms they have, by and large, failed to address female sexuality (desire) directly. Instead they treat female sexuality only as a biological category and often hide it "behind a focus on mother-daughter relationships" (99). Kincaid, however, presents the difficulty of building sustaining communal ties between women in the context of colonial gender ideology. Where typically in Caribbean women's writing, the mother daughter relationship (a metaphor of female identification) is defined by conflict rooted in the mother's attempts to contain the daughter's burgeoning sexuality (a dynamic which Narain suggests shifts our focus away from the articulation of female desire), Kincaid, by absenting the biological mother, is able to clear a space for the daughter, Xuela, to

attempt to define her sexuality for herself. Kincaid's treatment of Xuela's sexual development, in fact, consistently positions sexuality as an integral component of Self. She does not, however, ignore female complicity in female sexual containment and the transmission of colonial values but displaces the guilt onto Xuela's other-mother figures in an almost total reversal of the arrangements described by Simone A. J. Alexander in her study of the mother figure in Caribbean women's literature. According to Alexander, the biological mother is often an enemy who advocates for colonial values and habits and who the daughter experiences as "Other" while the surrogate "othermother is a positive influence for the daughter and therefore encompasses a nurturing, supporting image" (7).

This necessity of some positive mother figure is borne out by the trajectory of Xuela's development within the novel. Though she attempts, throughout the novel, to love herself, without connection to an affirming female culture she remains unable to forge real bonds of love with those around her so that by the end of the novel she experiences the same sense of alienation and disconnection that she did at its beginning. By illustrating the crippling effects of a lack of female community the text suggests its necessity.

Unlike her peers, one of Xuela's responses to her denigrated condition as a black female is a concerted effort to love herself. Of her first interaction with her stepmother, a lesson in proper hygiene, she notes that her "human form and odor were an opportunity to heap scorn on [her]" (32). This sense that her stepmother echoes the larger social attitude that her very body represents an affront that must be contained conditions her response:

I responded in a fashion by now characteristic of me: whatever I was told to hate I loved and loved the most. I loved the smell of the thin dirt behind

my ears, the smell of my unwashed mouth, the smell that came from between my legs, the smell in the pit of my arm the smell of my unwashed feet. Whatever about me caused offense, whatever was native to me, whatever I could not help and was not a moral failing—those things about me I loved with the fervor of the devoted (32).

The narrator's insistence on and attention to the details of the body highlight the idea that the perception and acceptance of her humanity are what is ultimately at stake—can she *incorporate* herself into the social sphere? Recognizing that her body is in jeopardy, either through her stepmother's direct attempts at physical harm (through poisoning) or from those social strictures that ask her, as a black woman, to expect and accept silence, erasure, and scorn, she dedicates herself to loving, protecting and nurturing that body. Most often this care and feeding of her body take the form of accessing sexual pleasure. Laying in bed at night as a young girl listening to the sounds of animal predator and prey moving in the night she slept only “after [her] hands had traveled up and down all over [her] own body in a loving caress, finally coming to the soft, moist spot between [her] legs, and a gasp of pleasure had escaped her lips which she would allow no one to hear” (43). That her self-loving is an act of self-preservation is made clear by the way the text images the animals with whom she has this almost supernatural connection that allows her to “hear” even snakes moving about on the ground. Imaging the pitiful state of those about to be devoured and the temporary satisfaction of those doing the devouring makes explicit that her loving herself is a strategy in a contest of power. She, as a woman, is linked to those about to be devoured, and the condition of temporary satisfaction, attributed to the predatory animals, suggests the nature of female oppression is cyclic and

requires continual reproduction of the norms and values that ultimately devour female bodies.

Within the text Xuela's self-loving habits represent a counter to the dominant social ideology of female sexuality as a threat. The text encodes, through the experiences of the women around her, a reality in which women's social and sexual experiences are determined by their biological status as women.

Because the other women she encounters in the text have internalized the colonial model, Xuela's relationships with them are fraught with conflict, competition, and disharmony. From Ma Eunice, through Lise LaBatte, to her Step-Mother and Step-Sister, her relationships with other women are characterized by indifference at best and malice at worst. In each case, Xuela's attempt to bond with them are blocked by their evaluating and, consequently, devaluing, her according to their own colonized notions of appropriate female behavior.

She describes her sister as having been born at a bad time. "It was too bright a time of day to be born; to be born at such a time could only mean that you would be robbed of all your secrets, your ability to determine events" (107). The connection of secrets, or an interior life, to agency in this passage echoes Xuela's own sense of self-knowledge as an enabling factor in her resistance to the attempts of others to define her. Unlike Xuela, who can draw on the alternative model of subjectivity symbolized by her mother that privileges fusion rather than difference, her sister is robbed of her ability to formulate her own subjectivity. Her lack of inner resources is connected to what her mother and father both

symbolize—the acceptance of colonial hierarchies of gender. Her “life itself” is conditioned by her having been born into an ideological context in which “any time of day a son is born is the right time” (107).

Her sister’s enmeshment in this ideology is connected to her rejection of Xuela’s attempt to build community with her. She says: “She became my sister when shortly after she was expelled from school she found herself with child and I helped her rid herself of this condition...I never became *her* sister; she never took me into her confidence, she never thanked me; in fact, the powerful clasp in which she could see I held my own life only led to more suspicion and misunderstanding” (114-115). Rather than recognize the similarities of their experience and their mutual condition, her sister continues to see Xuela as a threat to her power. Xuela explains that “she had been born feeling that her birthright was already spoken for. She thought I was the person who might take it away from her. I could not. I was not a man” (117). Her sister misrecognizes her opportunity for developing her internal power and mistakes the location of external social power. Her failure to see Xuela as an ally means that she misses out on the fruit of Xuela’s wisdom, which could possibly have helped her to avoid the tragic end to which she comes. Because she lacks the experience to know better and the community of women to show her better, the sister mistakes sexual passion, her pleasure “when his was inside her, his body just that part between his waist and his knees,” for love. Failing to recognize that she could achieve these sensations with “anyone else, including herself” she rushes, like Lise LaBatte,

into the outwardly respectable but deeply dissatisfying folly of marriage to a selfish man (120).

For instance, we are offered the example of Lise LaBatte, the wife of a couple with whom Xuela's father boards her during her teenage years. Lise is a woman who the text describes as defeated by her own desire, the fulfillment of which she can only envision in terms of marriage to the man who is the object of her desire. While she is able to secure a marriage with Jack LaBatte by feeding him food laced with her own menstrual blood, her female power, represented by that menstrual blood, is no match for the social power which constructs marriage and reproduction (of which she is incapable) as the only proper channel for female desire and the most viable route to social power. Securing her marriage to LaBatte is Lise's last act of power and her loss of vitality is symbolized in the text through her aged and deadened physiognomy and her barrenness: "Her hair was gray, and not from age. Like so much about her it had just lost its vitality, it lay on her head without any real life to it" (65). While Lise LaBatte accepts this order, and even tries to uphold it by having Xuela act as a surrogate mother for the child she was unable to produce, Xuela rejects maternity altogether.

Observing the cost of Lise's desire for LaBatte, Xuela concludes that she would not "allow the passage of time or the full weight of desire to make a pawn of me" (65). Her rejection of motherhood, facilitated by her mastery of the crone's knowledge of herbs, frees the Caribbean female textual body from its enshrinement in the static representations of the Woman as Mother archetype. Instead of the typical association of birthing with the reproduction of a national culture, Xuela's actions disrupt the symbolic

reproduction of the Woman type. After enduring four days of the intense pain of an abortion induced by “a woman who is dead now,” Xuela herself is reborn, declaring that she had carried *her own life* in her hands (82). Xuela declares this refusal of motherhood complete but distinguishes the refusal to mother from the refusal to bear children:

I would bear children, but I would never be a mother to them. I would bear them in abundance; they would emerge from my head, from my armpits, from between my legs; I would bear children, they would hang from me like fruit from a vine, but I would destroy them with the carelessness of a god. I would bear children in the morning, I would bathe them at noon in a water that came from myself, and I would eat them at night, swallowing them whole, all at once. They would live and then they would not live. In their day of life, I would walk them to the edge of a precipice. I would not push them over; I would not have to; the sweet voices of unusual pleasures would call to them from its bottom; they would not rest until they became one with these sounds. I would cover their bodies with diseases, embellish skins with thinly crusted sores, the sores sometimes oozing a thick pus for which they would thirst, a thirst that could never be quenched. I would condemn them to live in an empty space frozen in the same posture in which they had been born. I would throw them from a great height; every bone in their body would be broken and the bones would never be properly set, healing the way they were broken, healing never at all. I would decorate them when they were only corpses and set each corpse in a polished wooden box, and place the

polished wooden box in the earth and forget the part of the earth where I  
had buried the box (97-98).

In her declaration, which embraces all the taboo actions of maternity and ironizes the hypocrisy of patriarchal morality, Xuela reformulates what it means to be a woman. Her refusal to perform one of the definitive functions of womanhood is part of her attempt to create a new model of femininity. She feels that by refusing to submit to maternity she will be able to retain possession of her self, to be her own mother, and that would be as productive a thing as she could do. In this way too she would be certain to avoid reproducing, herself, the colonial values that all of the other women around her have exhibited. The connection between her refusal to mother and her refusal of the politics of colonialism is reiterated in the final pages of her narration when she frames her decision not to have children as a refusal to belong to race or nation. In her old age, she states, she “knew the crime of these identities...more than ever” (226). Chief among these crimes, for Xuela, seems to be the loss of self on which female inclusion in the categories of race and nation depend.

The representation of Lise LaBatte as one deadened to her own vitality recalls the notion of zombification, in which the colonial subject’s inability to perceive herself outside of her representation in the dominant order amounts to a loss of self. The novel tropes this notion of the zombified woman by recounting the story of a little boy, with whom the narrator and others had walked the long journey to school, who is lured into a river by a vision of a woman in the water and drowns. That the siren woman “was not a woman; she was something that took the shape of a woman” indicates Kincaid’s awareness of the gap between the social and literary images of women and how women,

given the opportunity, might represent their own interior lives, interpret their experiences, and perceive their boundaries (37). Offering a summation of the meaning of the community's refusal to accept the reality of the appearance of this woman who was not a woman, the passage goes on to suggest how dominant social definitions of Woman disempower women: "Everything about us is held in doubt and...Our experience cannot be interpreted by us; we do not know the truth of it" (37).

The novel suggests, too, the impact of race on female self-definition. On the one hand, Xuela describes one of the characters in the novel as satisfied with herself in spite of the fact that she is a woman: "She was very pleased to be who she was, and by that she meant she was pleased to be of the English people, and that made sense, because it is among the first tools you need to transgress against another human being—to be very pleased with who you are" (156). On the other hand, that the siren woman is imaged as a beautiful brown and naked woman surrounded by "mouth-watering" and "tantalizing" fruits, ripe to bursting in vivid shades of red, yellow and pink makes us aware of the added dimension that black women must face in terms of the representations of them as hyper-sexualized (36). This image of woman as a sexual temptress has particular resonance for the woman of African descent, who, bell hooks argues in *Ain't I a Woman*, was made the container for all the notions of contamination that had been associated with women in general before it became political and economically necessary to incorporate the white woman into the imperialist national ideal. It is out of this crucible of the perception of black female as immoral that the majority of women in the novel shape their self-images. The only way open to these women to recognize their value is by

conforming to the image of respectability achieved by suppressing their own desires or channeling them into the socially sanctioned institution of marriage.

The story of Xuela's sister's clandestine affair and its bad consequences (an unwanted pregnancy from which Xuela saves her and, finally, an accident that results in permanent injury) constitutes another episode that suggests that to act against sanctioned female social roles and on one's desires can be dangerous for women. Both Lise LaBatte and Xuela's sister accept the dominant perception of female sexuality as something that must be repressed rather than expressed. Together they represent the zombified woman, the woman reduced by dominant ideology to her biological essence. These figures, in Kincaid's text, do double work in that they stand for the way woman has been figured in Caribbean literature in general while, at the same time, they signal a social perception of women that must be revised.

Ultimately, Xuela is only able to make limited use of her maternal inheritances. Her inability to exceed the colonial logic of difference is reflected in her marriage to Phillip. Her relationship to Phillip contrasts with her relationship with Roland. At the beginning of her relationship with Roland she sees the possibility of their equality. She describes their first time in bed together noting her satisfaction with the board upon which they lay instead of a mattress, stating, "this small detail, evidence of our poverty—people in our position, a stevedore and a doctor's servant, could not afford a proper mattress—was a major contribution to my satisfaction, for it allowed me to brace myself and match him breath for breath" (169). That they occupy the same social position seems to enable a sense of sexual equality and is qualitatively different from her sexual relationships with Mr. LaBatte and Phillip as well. In these relationships her feelings for

them seem to be limited to the physical pleasure that they can provide for her. While putting her sexual pleasure in a position of primacy is in one way empowering, her relationship with Roland suggests her desire for a deeper connection. Roland, however, is not able to provide that connection either. While she is attracted to Roland precisely because of his abundant sexuality—"I could not have loved Roland the way I did if he had not loved other women"—he is frustrated by his inability to co-opt Xuela's sexuality to his own ends (171).

And Roland looked at me, his face expressing confusion. Why did I not bear his children? He could feel the time that I was fertile, and yet each month I expressed confidence at its imminent arrival and departure, and always I was overjoyed at the accuracy of my prediction. When I saw him like that, on his face a look that was a mixture—confusion, dumfoundedness, defeat—I felt much sorrow for him, for his life was reduced to a list of names [of women with whom he'd had extra-marital relations] that were not countries, and to the number of times he brought the monthly flow of blood to a halt...(175-176)

This look on Roland's face causes Xuela to realize that despite the fact that, like her, "he did not have a history" but "carried himself as if he were precious," he is still invested in a possessive notion of masculinity that is related to the very notions of femininity she seeks to escape (167). While Xuela resists Roland's attempt to claim her she is not, finally, able to carve out a space in which she can exceed the history of colonialism.

Her marriage to Philip, and their retirement to the land of her mother's people who "were balanced precariously on the ledge of eternity, waiting to be swallowed up in

the great yawn of nothingness” seems, finally, to represent the kind of self capitulation that Xuela has resisted all throughout the novel. In emphasizing that Philip’s choice to be with Xuela was really an exercise of power, the text also draws attention to her lack of power. She asks: “Could he be blamed for believing that the successful actions of his ancestors bestowed on him the right to act in an unprecedented, all-powerful way, and without consequences?” His ability to defy convention to love and marry Xuela comes from his colonial sense of superiority, whereas her main sense of power in all of her relations is to withhold herself. Given the lack of love on her part, her marriage to Philip reads as a symbol of failure, of her final dramatic submission to white and male privilege. Her marriage to Phillip transforms “all that is impersonal” into something personal. It becomes her dramatic and perverse way of enacting the colonial dynamics of power that she has not been able to escape. She ends her “account of the person who [she] was never allowed to be” and of “the person [she] did not allow [her]self to become” longing for death, the only thing that she can to acknowledge as truly worthy of her submission.

## **Conclusion**

The necessity for revivifying the zombified woman is born out in the narrative by Xuela’s alienated position. While, on the one hand, her severed connection with her mother seems surely a metaphor for the colonial condition of being cut off from a nurturing relationship with the “mother” culture, on the other, her failure to make any positive bonds with any of the other several women in the novel is indicative of the limitations of conventional ways of conceiving of both woman and motherhood. It is her perception of the other women in the novel as either alienated from themselves and

therefore unable to make connections with her or any other women that inhibits any representation of female community in this novel. The disconnection that results from women's self-alienation can be perceived in reality as well as in Kincaid's representation. Simone Alexander has identified the "other mother," a surrogate mother figure, as providing material, emotional, and ideological support for a developing woman that allows that woman to move into maturation and full self-knowledge. That these other mother figures, often grandmothers or older women, are able to be effective has much to do with the fact that they have resisted dominant understandings of women and derive their senses of self from communal and ancestral knowledge.

Because of their zombified state, however, the female figures that Xuela encounters are unable to provide such edifying support for her. They are, on the whole, depicted as deadened to their own desires or victims of it as well as rather automated in their acceptance of the standards of behavior imposed on women. In the representation of these women, including Xuela who remains disconnected even at the novel's conclusion, Kincaid adds force to her call for female community by making us painfully aware of the consequences for female subjectivity when that community is lacking. Kincaid's representation of female subjectivity is a call to her nation to examine how it represents itself based on how these representations play out for the entire community. Xuela's disavowal of both race and nation at the end of the novel signal a refusal to accept a definition of blackness that replicates patriarchal formulations of national identity. The novel's undercutting of the notion of an individual subjectivity is reflected in its titular fusion of identities and its narrative delineation of the alienation that results when access to all facets of identity is blocked. The dystopic rendering of surrogate and

biological mother/daughter relationships re-contextualizes and re-politicizes the image of the black female. The text's refusal of the assumption that women are, for other women, necessarily, a source of safety but choose to act in community with other women based on their own understanding and value of female culture shifts the maternal function from a symbolic to a political context. In this new context, woman does not operate essentially but epistemologically, facilitating our apprehension of the multiple facets of who we as black people are.

#### 4. Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*: Historicizing the Colonial Woman

*African spirituality had no book, nor did it express itself through written doctrines, creeds, and tenets formulated by a religious hierarchy of councils. Instead, it was written on the tablets of the people's hearts and expressed itself throughout daily African culture to the extent that, as discussed earlier, religion was not separate from culture.*

Flora Bridges.

The passage above describes the complex interrelationships among African-based spiritual systems, the privileging of oral expression, and the centrality of lived experience in cultures of the Diaspora. That traditional African philosophical paradigms embraced difference, multiplicity, and alternativity over dichotomy is at the root of African people's approaches to spirituality in the New World. A "both/and" way of thinking is typical of the African worldview, according to theologian Flora Bridges, whose reading of African American Christian practice places lived experience at the center of black spiritual epistemologies. The result of this functional matrix is what Bridges describes as a "radical freedom" in which the spiritual subject (the African-American slave in Bridges' account) was able to act on her own behalf, regardless of social status (72). In Edwidge Danticat's *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, we see this radical freedom in motion again, enabling a text that de-centers the Western literary tradition in its invocation of the Vodou ceremony to assert its historical vision of the Black female experience.

Movements like the New Negro movement in the U.S. (also known as the Harlem Renaissance) and the Negritude Movement, as well as subsequent nationalist movements, have been characterized by binary thinking that reflects the ideological structures from which they emerge. The monolithic categories of race and nation, which these

movements engage, have historically been defined discursively in either/or, inside/outside terms—that is, in terms of opposition. In the Caribbean, this approach has often meant that the articulation of female identity has been subsumed within the larger category of racial or national identity as it is defined against the colonizing metropolis. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, however, Danticat’s use of figures and concepts derived from the practice of Haitian Vodou provides an alternative framework from which to represent female experience. Vodou provides a set of metaphors that encodes the shifting and multi-faceted nature of Caribbean experience (Trefzer, 5). It moves beyond the static conception of self and identity provided by the paradigm of nationality, which assumes a fixed stable point of origin to which all else must be assimilated, and provides an extensive philosophical model of both resistance and incorporation.

### **Vodou: A Fundamental Expression of Alter/native Consciousness**

Vodou, as an encapsulation of the transformative nature of Black cultural practice and the physical expression of an African spiritual inheritance immediately signals a non-hegemonic, multiple way of understanding difference in the text. In order to fully understand how it is employed in Danticat’s text, we need to understand how Vodou manifests its syncretism, the way its practice is oriented toward maintenance of the community, and the characteristics associated with the deities who occupy center stage in Danticat’s text.

Vodou is more accurately characterized as a collection of attitudes and practices than as a religion as we usually understand them. While we can identify a coherent worldview that informs these practices and attitudes, there is no specified doctrine

associated with it, nor is there an organized system of governance to which all or most of its practitioners are linked. In fact a codified doctrine is nearly impossible for Vodou because such codification could never account for individual variance. According to noted student/scholar of Vodou, Karen McCarthy Brown: “In Vodou, an individual lives a moral life by faithfully serving the particular configuration of spirits that ‘love’ or ‘protect’ that person. This includes following their advice, advice that will be consistent with the personalities of the spirits. Thus it might be said the Vodou ethic is an intensely contextual one” (226). In this system, then, to serve faithfully is to uphold the general values of the community as expressed in the ceremonies and gifting rituals of which it consists.

In Haiti temples and their congregations have tended, since the time of the Haitian revolution, to be organized along extended family lines and each local community exhibits a degree of autonomy in the form of its worship. The general content and purpose of the ceremonies, which are practiced in rural and urban locations in Haiti and in various locales associated with the Haitian diaspora, remains constant. Contact with the spirit world, in the form of possession, is the goal of each ceremony and is made possible by the collective spiritual energy generated by the congregation through communal participation in ritual song and dance. Vodou’s primary trope of expression, possession, invests it with a deep association with both spatial and temporal indeterminacy. For example, the center post in the *hounfort*, or temple, is at once the way up and the way down for the spirits who ascend from the sea to descend upon the bodies of their servitors. It acts as a bridge connecting the visible and invisible worlds as well as the cultural and political present and past of its participants. The communication with the

spirit world is very practically oriented toward accessing its superior knowledge in order to deal with the social realities of the human world. It is this connection to the practical realities of living that is the basis for the characteristic flexibility of Vodou.

This flexibility has been at the heart of Vodou's survival, which has depended on its ability to adapt to very particular social contexts. The best example of this adaptability is the way Vodou has coexisted with Roman Catholicism. Reflecting the truly syncretistic nature of this African-based spirituality, Vodou has not been displaced by the institutionalized opposition of the Catholic Church, nor by its demonization in popular culture during the American Occupation, nor by its corruption by the Duvalier regimes, nor by the encroachment of U.S. capitalist systems in the late twentieth century. Instead, the system has provided a means by which to resist, inscribe, and/or incorporate the varying historical realities that the Haitian people have confronted.<sup>28</sup>

With regard to the Catholic Church, Vodou's survival was made possible by its conflation of traditional Vodou figures with traditional Catholic saints so that, for instance, St. Patrick became associated with Damballah while Erzulie is associated with images of the Sorrowing Mother. In these cases the iconography associated with each figure in its culture of origin—the snake with Patrick and Damballah and the pierced heart with Mater Doloris and Erzulie—made for an easy elision of the two and suggested to the authorities a singular acceptance of Catholicism. What is going on, though, with the practitioners of Vodou is not a simple masking of one practice with the other, as those

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<sup>28</sup> As it was deployed in the popular culture abroad, Vodou came to stand for the radical otherness of the Haitian and served as a justification for the American Occupation from 1915-1934. In this way it encodes the colonial experience of imperialist penetration. Following the Occupation, Vodou was again implicated in the political life of the nation in the anti-superstition campaigns of the Catholic church as well as "Papa Doc" Duvalier's use of Vodou as a repressive mechanism. In that it contains multiple significations on Haitian political life, self-conception and international image, Vodou provides in this novel a more functional sign system than the Western literary tradition.

outside the culture have perceived it. Instead, the dialogic characteristic of African culture has meant that for the majority of Haitians the two systems can coexist. In fact, the majority of Haitians in Haiti practice both systems, relying on one for some needs and the other for other needs. Indeed, some temples have incorporated elements of Catholicism into their own ceremonies (Murphy, 13).

The coexistence of Catholicism and Vodou reflects more than just the dialogic nature of a syncretistic culture, it also expresses the degree to which Vodou is a system geared toward addressing the multiple needs of its human practitioners including the political, spiritual, and economic. It is not structured by longings for human purity or transcendence but forges a relationship of mutuality between the material and spirit worlds. The *loa* or gods are bound in intimate relations with their human servitors and their continued existence depends on the humans who serve them. The *loa* are, then, necessarily, concerned with the social, political, and material well-being of the people. Consequently, Vodou is often the system of approach for those problems that fall outside of a strictly spiritual realm. This is most likely so because its difference from Christianity, its lack of absolutism, provides the greatest potential for resolution of the complex of social crises confronted by New World Africans and their descendants.

In her discussion “Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods,” Joan Dayan stresses adaptability as a primary characteristic of the *loa*. This adaptability is a necessary quality for a spiritual system whose ontological base is the preservation of community. One proof of that adaptability is their having followed their people to the new world. Those deities (and dances and drum rhythms) that have origins in Africa, primarily with the Arada people of Benin, are associated with what are presently known as Rada rites. In

addition to the Rada rites and deities, there are numerous other classes of Gods and ceremonial variants. One among these, the Petro rites best exemplify that aspect of Vodou that is oriented toward the maintenance of the community. Though all of the Petro gods were “born” in the New World, there is, among them, a class of gods called “les dieux de circonstance or de politique” which suggests the way that Vodou responds to the historical realities of its practitioners (21). That the system accounts for these specificities is not surprising when one considers that Vodou is, primarily, a system of social healing which has as its goal the maintenance of a healthy community.

Two figures from Vodou’s sign system—the *marasa* and Erzulie—deftly illustrate Vodou’s subversion of dichotomies as well as its reflection of socio-historical realities. The magical *marasa*, twin companions of Legba, the “trickster” guardian of crossroads, symbolize potential and possibility. Because they serve with Legba, the guardian of crossroads, they are associated with intersecting spaces. This means that they are literally linked with doorways and thresholds and on a more symbolic level signify transition, mediation, and the transcendence of oppositions. The *marasa* are imaged as children and are particularly associated with children and the poor.<sup>29</sup> The ceremonies to honor the *marasa* are communal dinners to which everyone in the community contributes and which feature the favorite foods of children. The privilege accorded at these ceremonies to the children and the poor, who eat first and to their full satisfaction, reflects the *marasa*’s concern with protecting the most vulnerable groups in the community. The *veve*, or ritual sign of the *marasa* signifies the transcendence of binaries implied in western conceptions of twinning. It presents two nearly identical versions of

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<sup>29</sup> In Haitian culture many unusual physical phenomena including other multiple births, breech births, albinism, cauled or “veiled” birth, extra digits, etc. are described as twins.

the same design combined with a third varied design. This third design represents the *dousou/a* or third segment of the unit, which completes it. The presence of this third segment in the iconography suggests the completion of the phenomenal power symbolized by the twins. This concept of power is reflected the Haitian perception of the birth of twins as “a partial manifestation of a group of three,” the full potential of which can only be recognized after the birth of the child who follows them, the *marasa dousou/a*, who completes the unit (Houlberg, 271).

The association of the *marasa* with poverty and vulnerability contrasts markedly with the dominant characteristics of Erzulie. She represents the feminine principle of Legba’s generative energies, but she is not a goddess of fertility. She is more accurately associated with the creative process of the artist. Like most of the *loa*, she exhibits many characteristics, but most primary are a love of luxury, delicacy and refinement, a jealous nature, and an appetite for sensual pleasure. When she mounts (possesses) a human s/he evokes her character by donning the clothing and posture of a “high class mulatto who walks with a saucy sway to her hips” (Corbett, 7). Despite the association with sexual experience signaled by her “saucy” mulatto image, she is also symbolized as the Virgin Mary. This is less contradictory than it seems, though, since she reflects a high level of idealism as the *loa* of hopes, dreams and aspirations and is genuinely troubled by the misery of the world.

Her association with the figure of the mulatto suggests the degree to which Erzulie is “of the world.” The historical specificities of race, class, and gender dynamics across several centuries coalesce in the figure of Erzulie as mulatto. For example, Joan Dayan reads Erzulie (Ezili) as a figure that encodes a “collective psychical remembrance”

of the race and gender context out of which the image arose (56). She signifies the “splitting of women into objects to be desired or feared” that resulted from the politics of domination which fused love and servitude in 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century Saint-Domingue (59). Dayan claims that the Erzulie figure enacts a “mimicry of [the] excess[es]” of the materialism and violence which characterized the slave system. Evoking this image reminds us of the historical construction of female sexuality as threatening and in need of containment, which, on the island of Hispanola was racialized and played out in terms of fascination with the *mulata* in the white sexual imagination. Erzulie Freda, the light-skinned lady of luxury and love associated with the sorrowing mother or Virgin Mary of Catholicism reflects the social contradiction of the time which cast the white or white looking woman as the ultimate object of sexual desire, but prohibited any expression of her own sexuality and transformed her into an object of veneration in her role as mother. The sexuality denied to women of the upper social classes was then projected onto black women who were subjected to the sexual and racial domination of the planter class.

Dayan says:

If, in the perverse ethics of the planter, the spiritualized, refined images of white women depended on the violation of black women, the bleached-out sable Venus accommodated both extremes. In the crossing and unsettling of enforced (and contrived) duality, the free woman of color would be served, fed, honored, and adored, and at the same time excluded from marriage, threatened by poverty and often abandoned (56, 57).

Erzulie-Freda is not, however, Erzulie’s only emanation. Among many others are Erzulie Dantor and Erzulie-ge-rouge who are associated with the images of the suffering black

woman and the passionate and vengeful woman, respectively. The fact of Erzulie's multiple emanations is consistent with Vodou's refusal of absolutes. The multiplicity of characteristics assigned Erzulie, including the stooped bent back of old age, challenges not only the opposition of black and white women, but any kind of static construction of black female experience as well. It is in the sense that Erzulie demonstrates the interconnectedness of Vodou practice and communal experience in the Haitian context.

In addition to providing a set of symbols for dialogism and the specificities of gender in a colonial context through the use of the *marasa* and Erzulie figures, respectively, the text itself functions as symbolic Vodou ceremony. It exhibits the characteristic functions of bringing community social problems into the public in order to effect a healing and the restoration of balance. In an essay on the relationship between Afro-Caribbean religions and healing, Karen McCarthy argues that healing is in fact the foremost function of Afro-Caribbean religions. Focusing particularly on Haitian Vodou, she presents an image of Vodou ritual as fundamentally concerned with maintaining the health of the community through the communal engagement of an individual's problems. McCarthy Brown notes that while each time a spirit possesses someone it identifies itself through the exhibition of a specific set of characteristics, it may also address "particular persons and gives advice about specific problems. The spirits hug, hold, and dance with the devotees. They give ritual blessings and sometimes ritual chastisements, both appropriate to the situation... at these large public events the Vodou spirits process the problems of the community, fine-tuning human relationships" (270). In her engagement of the questions of restrictive gender roles, the sexual victimization of women, and the

silencing of female voices, Danticat enacts, within the text, a ritual address of community imbalance that echoes the function of the Vodou ceremony.

Because Voodoo (as well as other similar spiritual practices of the Diaspora such as Candomblé, Santeria, and Obeah) functions, in the words of Annette Trefzer, to “endow black Caribbeans with cultural memories and practices that are beyond the didactic control of public narratives” it is strongly associated, in my reading, with the production of a generalized spirit of resistance that can be constituted and reconstituted to suit the needs of the worker (5). In this way Vodou provides a fitting framework for transmitting multiple ways of seeing, experiencing, and being.

### **The *Marasa* as Cipher for a New Narrative of Female Subjectivity**

My reading of how the *marasa* figure functions in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* is deeply influenced by VéVé Clark’s reading of the figure as a symbol of a particular political consciousness in Diaspora literature.<sup>30</sup> The *marasa* figure, as a symbol of multiplicity, encodes the simultaneous engagement of past and present that is at the root of Diaspora consciousness. Marasa consciousness, as Clark defines it, is “a third stage in diasporic development, the first two representing the racially conscious new letters movements followed in Africa and the Caribbean by anti-colonial, anti-repression

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<sup>30</sup> Danticat’s novel can also be seen to align itself with certain trends specific to contemporary Haitian cultural production. Her use of Vodou as a structuring principle is resonant with post-Duvalier era attempts to recover some measure of legitimacy to the practice of Vodou. Laënnec Hurbon, for instance, suggests that the recent explosion of Vodou forms into the popular culture generally, and with regard to music and painting especially, signals a transformation of Vodou’s meaning. The movement of the visual symbols and other aspects of Vodou practice such as trance and possession into the public sphere make explicit the link between religion and political circumstance which had heretofore existed within the confines of the *hounfort* (temple) and the realm of the private relationship between the loa and their servitors. The result of this transformation is, according to Hurbon, the emergence of a space of identification for “the peasantry and suburban population as well as the Haitian Diaspora” (123-24).

writing. This third position looks back at the contradictions of new letters and liberation movements by commenting upon the results in an environment of continuous change” (45). It represents the continuing evolution of Black literary practice, moving away from the oppositional framework that has defined the new letters movement. *Marasa* consciousness relies on a multifaceted approach to literary production that incorporates aspects of its subject’s social, historical, linguistic, and political experiences to create works that are “more than a purely intellectual exercise” (42). Instead, these texts participate in what Clark describes as a “spiralist” agenda that aims for the synthesis of difference and which “opens the doors” for us to imagine that which lies beyond binarism (43). The attempt to imagine new identities, modes of being, and ways of understanding reflects the degree to which much of the literature of the Diaspora is oriented toward functionality for the people that it represents and addresses and, in this way, it represents more than just an intellectual exercise.

Frequently as part of its multi-facetedness and its concern with the contradictions of these two previous movements, the text that exhibits *marasa* consciousness must engage the issue of gender. A literary consciousness emanating from this position of accommodating difference is well-suited to the kind of practice and analysis in which Caribbean women writers are engaged. *Breath, Eyes, Memory* exhibits the characteristics that Clark describes in two ways. First by attempting to represent a third term or new possibility of experience for the Caco women who are trapped in a cycle of abuse and second, by offering a complex and extensive account of the colonial experience of exile. In its focus on constructions of gender and the social experiences of Haitian women, the text fully exhibits the *marasa* consciousness that Clark describes.

While the tendency is to see writers like Danticat who reside in the United States as tangential to the dominant discourses of Caribbean literature, Danticat's work clearly reflects the *marasa* consciousness described by Clark. In her rendering of the complex experience of exile, for example, she both acknowledges the centrality of exile as a theme of the literature and reflects the way that this third wave of writing responds to the characteristic flux of Diaspora experience. Like other Caribbean female writers, such as Paule Marshall, Jamaica Kincaid, and Michelle Cliff, Danticat challenges canonical representations of literal and metaphorical home spaces, figuring them as sites of both empowerment and disempowerment.

This dialogic vision of home resonates with the more flexible notions of identity that have emerged in the study of Caribbean literature. For instance, in an essay on the textual strategies that francophone women writers from Africa and the Caribbean employ in their "re-versionings" of history, Valerie Orlando suggests the term deterritorialization to describe how post-colonial women negotiate the multiple aspects of their identities. Deterritorialization, a term she borrows from Deleuze and Guattari, is distinguished from exile in that it is associated not just with a geographic break, but with the transcendence of "sociocultural boundaries" and the reformulation of identity that incorporates new "fields of reference" (2). Similarly, J. Michael Dash finds this dialogic conception of home much more suitable to the francophone Caribbean, whose societies he sees as "particularly divided" and better characterized by Glissant's notion of *errance* (452). The wandering implied by the term *errance* signals a series of detours that "are seen as important thresholds of self-discovery, a kind of salutary disorientation" (453). In that they signal a rupture with the restrictive ideologies of colonialism, which may continue to

exist in the context of decolonization, both deterritorialization and *errance* offer productive ways to read the geographic movements that occur in Danticat's text.

In order to make evident the processes of deterritorialization at work in the text, I will offer here a summary of the novel. Sophie's first person narrative begins in rural Haiti when she is twelve years old and about to learn that she will be leaving her Aunt Atie, the only mother she has known, to join her biological mother in the United States. Her mother, Martine, had left Haiti for New York shortly after Sophie's birth, fleeing the trauma of having been raped. Sophie passes her troubled adolescence in the Haitian diasporic community of New York with her mother. In addition to the marginalization of being perceived as alien by her peers, she suffers the burden of having to rescue her mother, almost nightly, from the nightmares in which she relives the rape. Sophie remains isolated until, at age eighteen, she meets and marries an older man, the musician Joseph, in an act of rebellion against the repressive sexual morality that dominates her life. Her marriage to Joseph cannot, however, liberate her from the cycle of trauma in which she is enmeshed, and after the birth of her daughter she returns to Haiti, seeking for a way to break the cycle of trauma for herself. In Haiti she is able to enter into a further stage of healing through a series of encounters with the various women in her family. Sophie's mother comes to Haiti to bring her back and, together, they return to the United States. Having renewed contact, they appear to be on the road to healing, until Martine becomes pregnant and the shame drives her to suicide. Sophie returns to Haiti, alone, to bury her mother and the novel ends with the emergence of a new consciousness in Sophie, which allows her to recognize that though the past is inescapably linked to the

present—“breath, eyes, and memory are one”—she need not be bound by it, for “words can give wings to [her] feet” (234).

*Breath, Eyes, Memory* represents Martine’s inability to recover from the shame of rape and Sophie’s scarred psyche as interconnected phenomena that complicate typical nationalist formulations of home and the uncritical privileging of folk custom. By focusing on the social factors that push Haitian women in particular away from home and also acknowledging the enabling aspects of exile, Danticat echoes contemporary Caribbean writers, male and female, in complicating the notion of home set up in the texts of an earlier era of Caribbean literature.<sup>31</sup> The novel’s movement back and forth between Haiti and New York disrupts the more traditional formulation of home as regenerative and elsewhere as the site of fragmentation. Neither location is privileged above the other and both contribute to the social crises examined in the texts and to their resolutions.

The significance of the movement back and forth from Haiti is indicative of a multi-dimensional view of Haiti as a site of trauma and healing and it also helps to delineate the ways in which migration may be a distinctive experience for Haitian men

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<sup>31</sup> J. Michael Dash locates the beginning of a distinctive articulation of the relationship between exile and identity in the work of Jacques Roumain and Aimé Césaire. They began to complicate the idea of home, which had previously been figured only in opposition to the metropole without accounting for the contradictions engendered by the Creole nature of Caribbean identity (451). He argues that since then the literature has moved away from the formulation of exile as a condition of alienation, rooted in European Romanticism, which privileged “the ideal of a fixed identity, of the writer housed in his native culture, of the individual organically related to the collectivity” (451). Dash suggests that while Roumain’s *Masters of the Dew* keeps the outsider/insider formulation he complicates it by also figuring the protagonist’s experiences “elsewhere” as the catalyst for his transformation of “home.” Dash sees Césaire as metaphorically refiguring “home” in *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land*, by representing it as the point at which one arrives at a new consciousness that is synthetic and transformative. Among the literatures of the Caribbean, Haitian literature, according to Dash, best exemplifies the concern with the condition of exile because of its particular social history, which, from the time of American Occupation into the post-Duvalier era, entails numerous instances of banishment for political reasons as well as an ongoing concern with national identity and the question of authenticity.

and women. Martine flees Haiti in the late twentieth century, not as a political or economic refugee, but as one trying to escape her own self-image. That image, however, is tied to the social and political realms in that it is shaped within the crucible of a gender construction that essentially holds her responsible for her own victimization. That is, having grown up in a culture where she is seen as likely “to be raised trash with no man in the house” and in need of constant monitoring and containment through the practice of testing (a manual examination to check the integrity of a woman’s hymen), being raped can be experienced as nothing but a confirmation of the fact that she was, in fact, the “trash” that testing supposes her to be (156). As a consequence of seeing herself in this way, Martine is never able to recover from the rape. On the other hand, if Haitian culture is the site of a repressive ideology of femininity it also provides a mechanism for resistance and recovery in its privileging of the word as power. As the locus of a storytelling tradition, it acts as an enabling site, which provides Sophie with the tools she needs to break the cycle of victimization.

In Haiti, Sophie is able to access a discourse of female resistance encoded in the women’s storytelling. The necessity for access to these stories is emphasized in Sophie’s exchange with a cab driver about her good command of Creole upon her arrival in her grandmother’s village, Dame Marie:

‘People who have been away from Haiti fewer years than you, they return and pretend they speak no Creole.’

‘Perhaps they can’t.’

‘Is it so easy to forget?’

‘Some people need to forget.’

‘Obviously, you do not need to forget.’

‘I need to remember’ (95).

Sophie needs to remember Creole so that she will have access to the wisdom that is contained in the stories that are so deeply associated with her Auntie Atie and her Grandmother Ife, who usually answer any question she presents with a story. While her aunt and her grandmother may *act* in accordance with the repressive gender system, their *speech* encodes an alternative consciousness. The narratives they offer stand in contrast to Martine’s, whose story of the *marasa* is meant to offer Sophie a lesson of containment by helping her to accept the testing. Her grandmother, for instance, tells stories of little girls who can take control of their own destinies and outwit the kings who would hold them captive. In providing Sophie with stories that transform women from victims to agents they provide a view of femininity that counterbalances Martine’s and makes it possible for Sophie to envision an alternative ending to the story of the Caco women.

Before she returns to Haiti, Sophie seems destined to repeat the cycle of self-silencing and shame established by her mother, Martine. For instance, in one of her efforts to liberate herself she decides to end the testing by rupturing her own hymen with a pestle. Ironically, instead of freeing herself, she merely reenacts her mother’s experience of one sexual trauma replacing another. While her mother suffers from nightmares, Sophie suffers from sexual dysfunction, and where Martine tries to obliterate her physical self by abusing bleaching creams, Sophie’s attempts to obliterate her physical self come in the form of bulimia. While she begins the process of healing through her participation in women’s therapy group, Sophie’s tremendous need for alternative models is supplied by the stories her Aunt and Grandmother tell. That she

constructs both the United States and Haiti as sites that provide critical components for Sophie's recovery, privileging neither one nor the other, reveals Danticat's commitment to a complex account of the Diaspora experience. Her refusal to dismiss the problematic or enabling aspects of either culture exemplifies the type of critical engagement that is typical of *marasa* consciousness.

While Danticat's text exhibits the concept of *marasa* consciousness in its revisionary engagement with the theme of exile, she also employs the concept of the *marasa* in her structuring of the relationship between characters. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, the main character Sophie, her mother Martine, and her Aunt Atie represent a kind of *marasa trois*, with Sophie and Martine, through their duplicated experiences, occupying the role of the twins, while Atie represents the *marasa doussa*, the final, enabling aspect of the *marasa*. Though repetition is one of the central motifs of the novel, its use of the symbol of the divine twins, the *marasa*, does not suggest the continued repetition of the cycle of oppression experienced by the women of the Caco family. Rather, it opens a space for a new term with the potential to break and reform the cycle. The third term potential it suggests is most aptly figured by the female-to-female relationships that reveal the tension of the good woman paradigm and encode the possibility of transcending the binarism of patriarchy.

Interestingly it is Atie, a secondary or perhaps tertiary character, who most aptly represents a *marasa* consciousness. She makes the clearest articulation of her desire to exceed the social roles designated for Haitian women, typified in her statement that she wished for an extra finger on each hand so that she might have something left for herself since the Haitian attitude toward female gender roles is that "each finger had a

purpose...Mothering. Boiling. Loving. Baking. Nursing. Frying. Healing. Washing. Ironing. Scrubbing” (151). Given the association of extra digits with the twins, another way of understanding Atie’s longing is for access to the healing power and social veneration and respect accorded those marked by the *marasa*. Further, it is her relationships with her niece Sophie and her friend Louise, that are the most idealized examples of female to female relations represented in the novel.

While Atie does not grow extra fingers, she is able to create a space for self-nurturance in her friendship with Louise. The relationship between Atie and Louise encodes the true potential of the *marasa* in the way that their relationship enables Atie’s self-actualization and her challenge to the established social roles governing femininity. In contrast to her relationship with Mr. Augustine, who rejects her as a marriage partner because of her illiteracy, Atie’s relationship with Louise is marked by her attainment of literacy. In this context, though, literacy does not function as a distinctive marker of class, but as a mechanism through which Atie can claim her identity and mark her self in spite of her social class. She can enter her name and the names of the other women in her family in the county register, thereby inscribing their place in the Haitian national history.

This inscription of the identity, history, and presences of the Caco women metaphorizes the larger project of the novel, which seeks to integrate the multiple ways of knowing that the black female subject draws on. The name that Danticat chooses for the family of women, Caco, emphasizes the larger goals of the novel. In an essay that traces allusions to and representations of Haitian folk culture in the novel, Marie-Jose N’Zengou-Tayo elaborates on Danticat’s use of the name Caco:

The family name Caco is inherited from the husband but re-appropriated by the women...In Haiti, “caco” is the name of a tiny red ant whose bite burns terribly. Through analogy, people gave the name to nineteenth-century peasant soldiers who defeated successive Haitian governments. We do not find the association of “Caco” with a bird in the literature (popular names of birds, plants etc.). The grandfather’s name is “Charlemagne Le Grand Caco.” In this name we recognize the reference to Haitian history with Charlemagne Péralte who was the leader of the Haitian Caco resistance against the American Occupation (124-5).

Though there is some misdirection about the meaning of the name within the text, which associates the name Caco with a bird, N’Zengou-Tayo’s gloss on the name as one associated with national resistance movements is revealing. That the name is associated with the female members of the line serves to reconnect Haitian women to the national imaginary. Atie’s insistence on registering them affirms this desire to be counted as part of the nation.

Atie’s insistence on registering her line of women in the national record suggests an affirmation of the concept of nation as a community of inclusion, although it has not been practiced that way. She attempts to redirect the discursive function of femininity, moving it beyond the reproduction of static concepts of gender identity. If Martine and Sophie’s experiences reveal the either/or principle that governs traditional conceptions of female purity and value, Atie represents another way of conceiving of female sexuality. Crossing the bounds of traditional female behavior empowers Atie to act in her own interests as well as in the interests of others. Having been rejected, in her youth, by her

suitors in favor of a more educated bride, Atie attains literacy late in her life. This literacy is deeply intertwined with her love for another woman, which the text stops just short of making openly physical.

Atie's function as representative for another kind of female possibility is borne out by the way her role as storyteller counters that of her sister Martine's. While Martine does tell one or two stories, her stories are utilized in the reproduction of sexual containment. On the other hand, Atie's storytelling is aligned with a revisionist impulse that presents and then challenges the notions of female sexuality encoded in the oral tradition that provides the moral view of women that governs their society. Her explications of the stories reveal that she is of another mind regarding the role of women in Haitian society. Inserting her self, as the speaking voice, into a French love poem that she revises as her own she emphasizes two aspects through which female domination is accomplished. The poem as she recites it, begins with and repeats the line, "She speaks in silent voices, my love." It also incorporates a line that resonates with a folktale represented elsewhere in the novel, "I drink her blood with milk" (134, 135). This poem aptly thematizes the silence around sexual violence against females by linking the notion of female silence to the story of a man who bleeds his new bride to death in an attempt to produce a display of bloody sheets that would affirm to the community the purity of his new bride. The story ends with the man piously and hypocritically drinking a few drops of her blood in goat milk. The scene in which Atie reads this poem is immediately followed by one in which she refuses to name a pig according to its sex organs. She tells Sophie, "You do not have to name something to make it any more yours" (136). The power of naming, in this context, connotes not the power to name oneself but a

masculinized notion of power as ownership. This conception of power as the power over depends on the disempowerment of an/other, in this case the silenced woman.

Throughout the text, however, Atie's story telling reflects the former version of power—the power of self-definition.

In her essay on the interpolation of various narratives as a unifying principle of the novel, Nancy Gerber argues that the novel represents the transformative and community-building potentials of storytelling. The novel's polyphonic incorporation of other women's storytelling "emblemizes a thematics of community and collectivity" (189) while, the protagonist, Sophie, is able to transform herself, her relationship with her mother, and the meaning of her mother's life and death by telling her own story. Finally, Gerber concludes that storytelling is also a way of reconnecting with the past, and sees Sophie's narrative interpolation of the other women's stories as locating her at "the critical juncture of both the literary and oral traditions" (189).

### **Mounted by Erzulie: The Text as Healing Ceremony**

In its articulation of the trauma of female sexual victimization, the text enacts a symbolic ceremony that reflects the healing aspects of Vodou ritual. We have already discussed how Vodou includes a mechanism for airing community problems in order to achieve balance in the community. This reflects not only Vodou's function as a stabilizing force in the community but also the concept of the word as power, which is common to oral cultures. Central to *Breath, Eyes, Memory's* ritual address of the specificities of female social experience in the Haitian diasporic context is the figure of Erzulie whose very presence signals heightened attention to the social realities of women.

The use of the Erzulie figure exemplifies the characteristic approach of *marasa* consciousness and encodes the construction of Haitian female subjectivity as it emerges from the colonial past as well as the impulse toward transformation that is the basis for both Vodou practice as well as Black female writing practice. Erzulie is also a fitting icon for the novel's sexual politics. Erzulie, who "marries" both women and men, does not accept restrictive gender roles, and in this way is an apt figure for a novel whose concern is disrupting the social roles that restrict the development of female subjectivity.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, the emanation of Erzulie Freda, light-skinned lady of love, suggests the problematic politics of raced and gendered notions of difference. In terms of gendered ideologies she presents a model of rebellion against conventional constructions of femininity that fail to recognize female desire. In her emanation as a sensual creature who demands the satisfaction of her desires she challenges the social construction of women which values them only as objects of desire. At the same time, as one who conforms to a European standard of beauty she reveals yet another component of binary notions of difference and their effects on Black women's self-images. In this way, Erzulie functions to localize female concerns, which have been generally been ignored in anti-colonial literature.

Because she embodies the legacies of colonial domination and resistance at once Erzulie presents a symbol that can accommodate all of the dimensions of the Caco women's experience. As a figure whose characterization records, in particular, the patriarchal dimensions of colonialism, she affirms Martine's experiences as rooted in a

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<sup>32</sup> The marriages between the *loa* and human, signify a special kind of affinity based on shared characteristics. The *loa* chooses the individual who exhibits certain propensities that satisfy the loa and they are united in an actual ceremony that acknowledges the mutual commitment. In exchange for the human's service the *loa* offer particular concern for the "spouse."

concrete historical reality. As a symbol of transcendence she symbolizes the potential for recovery and provides an example of how to carry the colonial history without being crippled by it. Sophie's grandmother recognizes these dual functions and, after telling Sophie that "she cannot always carry the pain" of her sexual repression, gives her a statue of Erzulie as an apology for the pain that they had caused her with the testing, emphasizing Erzulie's function as a symbol of both pain and liberation. Her presence in the novel as a model of articulation and transformation is central to activating the processes that begin healing.

Breaking the silence surrounding women's victimization can be seen as part of a project of oral healing described by Gay Wilentz in *Healing Narratives: Women Writers Curing Cultural Dis-ease*. Beginning from the notion that physical ailments can be linked to cultural ills, Wilentz seeks to identify the recovery of traditional healing approaches in the writings of women of various races, cultures, and ethnic groups. She suggests that for people from oppressed groups the first step to curing the depression, nervous breakdowns, alienation, and their physical manifestations that indicate cultural self-loathing is the recovery of traditional healing practices. Of particular importance, for Wilentz, is the emphasis in many non-western cultures (she will look at texts that encode healing practices of the Laguna Pueblo/Navajo, Maori, and Yoruba traditions) on the oral aspect of the healing process, which may include ritual chants, storytelling or the invocation of sacred words. While Wilentz acknowledges that none of these traditions exists in isolation from other cultural views, their efficacy resides for her in the development of a discourse of healing that destabilizes binarisms like the mind/body split that is at the heart of allopathic medical approaches as well as cultural constructions of

racially oppressed people in particular. This discourse is a necessary first step in developing a multi-vocal healing model that reconnects the body and the spirit, embraces the fragmentation and contradictions inherent in syncretistic cultures, and restores self-esteem in cultures in which self-loathing and collective self-hate prevail. Wilentz identifies the novel as an ideal form of oral medicine for curing cultural dis-ease. Citing Terry Eagleton's idea of narrative as a mechanism of recovery she argues that the novel's potential for reconstructing reality "can be a source of consolation" for the "cultural self and community" (15, 16). The novel as she describes it, however, is not a static form but is structurally and stylistically innovative and may draw on a "less linear language of symbol and visualization" (20).

In an essay focused on representations of women's experiences of sexual violence during the era of Indian Partition, Sujala Singh also identifies literature as a site of healing for the post-colonial subject. She notes that both colonial and nationalist versions of history depend heavily on silence. The nationalist project requires silence regarding women's experiences in order to re-incorporate them into "traditional networks" (125). "The management of violence into or out of the annals of public memory is thus crucially hinged upon the separation of the sphere of its effects, the private world of the victims and agents" (124-25). She describes how the reincorporation of women who have been sexually victimized into the family network often depends on silence about those experiences. Literature, she claims, provides a valuable methodology for un-silencing these experiences.

What Singh's analyses reveal is the extent to which both the national and the individual family can be implicated in the victimization of its women. As we have noted

earlier, one of the conditions that helps to perpetuate the cycle of sexual violence against women is women's own silence about their experiences. Singh's analysis, however, brings one of the factors in women's self-silencing to light. Women are often reticent to speak of their sexual victimization because they have already been named as suspect (by virtue of their womanhood) and fear that they will be held responsible for their own victimization.

The tendency toward self-silencing described by Singh can also be seen at work in the black community. In an essay which examines representations of rape in fiction by African American women, Maud Ellmann notes that one of the primary factors in women's silence about their victimization is the fear of reprisal against some loved one of the victim or, in instances of interracial rape, violence between racial groups. She observes that the transfer of the responsibility for violence to the women for speaking elides the violence inherent in the act of rape itself. To represent rape from the point of view of its victim disrupts the tendency that Ellmann notes is present in literature from Ovid to T.S. Eliot of rape functioning as a symbol for something else—usually some kind of transformation of masculine identity. Defying convention, Danticat's representation of rape and other sexual trauma is concretely grounded in women's experiences and affirms the reality of their trauma, thus initiating the process of recovery.

To speak about black female experience of rape is an important act that challenges the silence that surrounds, and thereby legitimizes, the sexual victimization of black women. In *Searching for Safe Spaces* Myriam Chancy argues that while black women writers of the past thirty years have begun to address the issue, sexual violence against black women is legitimized, in the wider culture, by the lack of a systematic

denunciation. This failure is exacerbated by the rupture of intergenerational bonds, resulting in many cases from the necessity of emigration, which deprives women of a community that would enable both resistance and survival. In *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, Danticat bridges this gap between generations by having Sophie travel back to Haiti. In Haiti Sophie is able to speak to her grandmother about the pain of her experience and to question the implicit sanction that mothers give to the practice of testing when they enact it on their daughters. By centralizing the question of female sexual trauma, the text presents a challenge to what Darlene Clark Hine calls a “culture of dissemblance” in which black women hide the truth of their experiences from their oppressors and themselves. It is a particularly difficult and painful disruption or un-silencing because the source of the trauma is intra-communal.

For instance, Martine’s rape, at the hands of a black man, functions as a textual encoding of the reproduction of domination *within* the community of the colonized and makes explicit the distinctions among the colonized, particularly with regard to gender. Using it in this way contrasts with the more frequent use of rape as a metaphor to describe national relations of power between the colonizer and the colonized. Within the novel, the Tonton Macoute becomes the visible symbol of the cultural acceptance of sexualized violence. The text’s association of the Macoute with the hidden face of Martine’s rapist—“My father might have been a Macoute” says Sophie, the product of that rape—suggests that men constitute an institutional force that enacts literal and symbolic violence on women at will (139). The power to construct female sexuality according to their own ends and will is no different from the actions of the Macoutes who, after forcing their way into someone’s home, “asked to be fed, demanded the

woman of the house, and forced her into her own bedroom” (139). Danticat’s opposition of women’s interests and the Macoute as an arm of the state effects a gender differentiation within the Haitian community that disrupts the more simplistic notion of rape as a metaphor for Haiti’s colonial history by forcing us to examine the way the way power is being reproduced or deployed within the community. What emerges is a deft illustration of the power of the creative writer to address those aspects of women’s lives that are often obscured by the post-colonial text’s focus on the nation as the site of trauma.

In its representation of another kind of sexual appropriation, the continued cycle of testing, *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also demonstrates just how deeply women have internalized that sense of their own culpability. When Sophie challenges her grandmother’s apparent endorsement of the practice of testing, her grandmother offers that is a woman’s responsibility as a mother. She says: “From the time a girl begins to menstruate to the time you turn her over to her husband, the mother is responsible for her purity. If I give a soiled daughter to her husband, he can shame my family, speak evil of me, even bring her back to me” (156). The conversation in which this dialogue appears is interrupted by Sophie’s internal meditation. In it she remembers her own experience of the tests and the strategy she used to endure them. “I had learned to double while being tested. I would close my eyes and imagine all the pleasant thing that I had known. The lukewarm noon breeze through our bougainvillea. Tante Atie’s gentle voice blowing over a field of daffodils” (155). The passage emphasizes the extent to which survival and healing are linked to the voice and storytelling by invoking Atie as the symbol of transcendent and transformative storytelling.

The need to speak of women's experiences of sexual violence before the cycle can be broken and so that women might begin the process of healing is affirmed by the representation of Sophie's participation in therapy group for female victims of sexual abuse. The group consists of Sophie, an Ethiopian woman who had been subject to clitorrectomy, and a Chicana woman who was raped by her grandfather for ten years. This grouping reveals two things of import. First, it reveals the commonality, across social locations, of women's victimization. Second, it suggests that Sophie's experience of "testing" at the hands of her mother constitutes sexual abuse as much as these other experiences do. The representation of what occurs at these meetings both challenges the silence that surrounds women's experiences of victimization as well as reveals one of the sources of this silence. Both Sophie and Buki, the Ethiopian student, have suffered at the hands of women in their families and their identification with their abusers as women, in whom they see themselves, make it difficult to acknowledge the anger they feel. To speak of their experiences requires that they give voice to that anger.

Confronting female culpability breaks another silence around female sexual victimization. It reveals that the reproduction of an ideological system in which female morality is always in question requires the participation of women in their function as mothers. Under patriarchal systems, which hold women primarily responsible for the moral education of the children, women may go to extremes to ensure their own reputations as good women and mothers. The grandmother's response does not reflect an inherent belief in the moral fallibility of the female, but rather an acceptance and acculturation to a social conditioning, that assumes that a woman can only achieve worth and power in the context of the family. Under this system the mother's value is bound to

the children she produces, requiring her to victimize her daughters, and the cycle is perpetuated. Sophie seeks desperately to break this cycle and in order to do so must, essentially, locate alternative models of feminine socialization.

Françoise Lionnet echoes the notion of speaking as healing when she characterizes women's writing as engaged in a struggle to articulate areas of female experience that have been repressed and result in a self split between patriarchal myths of female selfhood and a more authentic internal image of the self. Lionnet also suggests that madness is frequently used to represent the trauma that results from the gap between the social constructions of women and the reality of their experiences. She describes female characters who, as colonial subjects, have internalized "debilitating sexual and racial stereotypes of their colonial past" and are "unable to deal with 'reality' as presented in the master narratives of colonization" (263). Following Lionnet's lead, we can see Martine's constant feeling of being one step ahead of the mental institution, as a kind of alienation that is not only the result of her experience of being raped but also of the social and historical circumstances which govern her female sexuality.

The testing that she endures to assure her "wholeness" is one example of how these social constructions of gender—in this case one that values sexual purity—impinge on the subject's self-development. It enacts the assumption that a woman's primary value is as a sexual object traded in the marriage market. Women whose lives are constrained by these constructions of gender frequently experience these limitations as traumatic and this response is often encoded in the literature as madness. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, for instance, links testing and rape as two equally traumatic experiences when Martine explains to Sophie that "the two greatest pains of [her] life are very much

related...the testing and the rape. I live both every day” (170). The two are qualitatively alike in that each denies the female ownership of her own sexuality—rape through outright appropriation and “testing” through its assumption that female sexuality should be held in reserve for male proprietorship. If we understand the practice of testing as a response to internalized racial and sexual stereotypes, then we can see that like rape, it is a violent assault on female subjectivity that could engender similar feelings of madness.

In contrast to Sophie’s dream association of her mother with Erzulie-Freda, the novel’s association of Martine with trauma encodes the notion of female resentment and struggle against female containment. As a child, Sophie imagined that her mother was an Erzulie-like “healer of all women and the desire of all men. She had gorgeous dresses in satin, silk, and lace, necklaces, pendants, earrings, bracelets, anklets, and lots and lots of French perfume” (59). However, the more consistent image of her mother that appears in the text is of the unstilled resentment of Erzulie-Ge-Rouge. This resentment, however, is internally rather than externally directed. It manifests itself in her sexual abuse of Sophie, in the practice of testing and her own diminished sense of self-worth, which finds ultimate expression in her suicide. She kills herself after becoming pregnant by an upper-class Haitian man with whom she’s had a many years long relationship in the United States. Though he wants to marry her, she has been conditioned by racial and gender ideologies which tell her that as a black and “impure” woman she is of no worth and she cannot recognize the potential “for someone like Marc to love someone like [her]” since he came from an upstanding family descended from a French man (59).

Ultimately, it is Sophie who becomes the Erzulie figure, after vowing to break the cycle of sexual victimization for her own daughter. She becomes an Erzulie figure in her

posthumous transformation of her mother from victim to agent and her own occupation of the realm of the artistic as the one who synthesizes and conveys the story of the Caco women. She picks, for her mother's burial, a red pantsuit of which she says: "It was too loud a color for a burial. I knew it. She would look like a Jezebel, hot-blooded Erzulie who feared no men, but rather made them her slaves, raped them, and killed *them*. She was the only woman with that power. It was too bright a red for burial. If we had an open coffin at the funeral home, people would talk. It was too loud a color for burial, but I chose it" (227).

In choosing a color that could be associated with improper female sexual behavior, Sophie subverts that system which forces on women the culpability for their sexual victimization, the acceptance of which is signaled by Martine's inability to free herself from the guilt of having been raped, as well as her failure to reject the "cult of virginity" that results in the practice of "testing," of which both Martine and then Sophie are victims. By enshrouding her mother in Erzulie's color, red, Sophie occupies the role of Erzulie as the instrument of transformation and disrupts the cycle of female oppression.

## **Conclusion**

Since for Africans religion did not exist in a separate sphere from other aspects of culture it would make sense that their spiritual and secular lives would be deeply intertwined. Turning to the frame of Vodou, the practice of which is also informed by the socio-political realities of its servitors, then makes sense for a novelist concerned with liberating the female subject from ideologies rooted in dichotomous and hierarchical

thinking that constructs them along an either/or axis of morality. Because of its insistence on maintaining the connection between the spiritual world and the larger cultural world of African descended people, the use of Vodou figures as a structuring principle for *Breath, Eyes, Memory* also facilitates the historicization of black female experience. This focus on women's experiences constitutes an intervention in the discourse of identity in Caribbean literature that reflects the more dialogic nature of contemporary diaspora consciousness and is most evident in the novel's treatment of exile and its representation of challenges to conventional conceptions of gender identity.

## **Conclusion:**

In looking at the way black women writers across various temporal and geographic locations centralize questions of the body and female sexual identity, it has become apparent that more than just this theme of sexuality unified their writing. There is also a shared set of narrative strategies that reflect the impact of political, economic, and other historical exigencies that shape the black experience. If black male writing in the Harlem Renaissance and post-independence Caribbean are unified by their privileging of certain nationalist paradigms, black women's writing is equally structured by a particular political subjectivity that results in a separate and distinctive literature. Out of this dialogic subjectivity the characteristic features of this literature arise. These features include 1) an intra-communal focus 2) experimental narrative forms, and 3) the representation of the body as an epistemological structure.

While black women writers have in no way abandoned a critique of racial domination, the multiple subject positions they occupy has helped to produce a more nuanced vision of black experiences which, in accounting for the positions of otherness they occupy in relation to Blackness, produces what I call an intra-communal critique. By shifting our focus away from the relations of power solely between black and white, the black woman's text disrupts the monolithic conception of racial identity and experience that is at the root of nationalism. It helps to illuminate the uneven distribution of power within Black communities. In *Plum Bun* this is particularly exemplified in Fauset's critique of bourgeois forms of marriage, which limit the opportunities of the female partner to satisfy her own creative and sexual desires. Fauset's presentation of the reproduction of bourgeois ideology in the black middle-class as antithetical to the egalitarian values articulated in the black women's sentimental fiction of the nineteenth-

century demonstrates exactly the kind of dialogic and dialectic engagement that leads to both affirmation and critique of the community in writing by black women. In *Quicksand* Helga's alienation from the black community because of her mixed race status and her refusal to deny her sensuality illuminate the multiple positions of otherness occupied by the black woman. *Passing*, particularly through its articulation of class divisions, exhibits the dimension of black women's engagement of self-as other. In this text, Irene, who is representative of the black middle-class, is heavily implicated in the reproduction of white supremacy in her acceptance of the racial status quo. Further, the contrast that she presents to other models of black femininity—the club-woman activist in particular—makes explicit the limitations of the focus on assimilation that was part of New Negro ideology. The detailed attention to black female identity in this era enacts the kind of interventionist politics that Henderson ascribes to black women's writing by destabilizing the black-white polarity that characterized a great deal of African-American literature. The *Autobiography of My Mother* and *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, too, engage in this dialectic and dialogic enterprise in their expansion of the traditional figure of colonial critique, the Caliban/Prospero paradigm, to include the Sycorax principle. Each continues to articulate the generalized experiences of the colonial subject even as they give attention to the specifically gendered dimensions of that subjectivity.

In order to capture the multiple dimensions of black experience, black women writers have had to locate or innovate narrative forms and strategies that enable a dialogic account of black identity. This has resulted in a prevalence of mixed genres or unusual narrative strategies in the writing of black women, which are necessary to convey the insights that emerge from black women's multiple subject positions. These narrative strategies are exemplified in all but one of the texts that I examine here. In its use of multiple generic forms, *Plum Bun* represents an

early attempt to locate a narrative form that would accommodate the simultaneous engagement of race and gender subjectivity. *The Autobiography of My Mother* employs the fictional autobiographical form to refocus our attention on the way that race and gender coalesce in the colonial context. This form is widely associated with a feminist imperative since it provides a level of interiority that tends to be erased in male representations of women. The use of Vodou as an organizing principle in *Breath, Eyes, Memory* coupled with the text's emphasis on storytelling place it squarely in the context of oral literature (the privileging of folk cultural forms and means of expression in written literature). The primacy of the first person voice who speaks intimately and directly to the reader in these texts recreates the dynamic of oral transmission. Additionally, the sense that their stories present some value to be gleaned or lesson learned affirms the oral dynamic. Xuela narrates her own experiences of the struggle for control over the meaning of her body that, in the oral tradition, offers an elaboration of the dual experiences of race and gender alienation. Sophie's narrative is tied to the oral tradition in its emphasis on the healing and transformative powers of the word.

The sense of the body as the generative site of experience-based knowledge flows through all of the texts that I have examined herein. The racially ambiguous passing body of *Plum Bun* establishes the discourse of race and gender as separate aspects of black subjectivity. The dressed body in *Quicksand* and *Passing* produces an awareness of the social tensions engendered by black bourgeois notions of racial advancement. *Quicksand* foregrounds the difficulty of formulating an identity that encompasses multiple subjectivities in the context of bourgeois nationalism while, *Passing* reveals the degree to which embourgeoisment depends on a depoliticized black identity. In *The Autobiography of My Mother* Xuela's quest for individual sexual agency (control of her body) operates as a metaphor for female social agency. While she

does not, ultimately, achieve that agency her experience does reveal the women's acceptance of racist and sexist constructions of femininity as a primary obstacle to the development of social agency. *Breath, Eyes, Memory*, likewise, directs our attention to women's roles in social change. By paralleling rape and "testing" as instances of female sexual victimization its narrative of the traumatized body calls for women to reject sexist constructions of women as objects of pleasure and contamination.

In the introduction to this work I stated that in working to define the contours of black women's writing as a particular body of literature I hoped to contribute to the study of Diaspora literature. This work, by specifying a set of features that characterize black women's writing in the U.S. and the Caribbean, represents a beginning toward understanding what many writers themselves describe as a consciousness of writing together with other black women across the Diaspora. Where African and Caribbean women writers cite African-American women's texts as providing a kind of authority through example, black women writers from the U.S. just as frequently attempt to establish connections with the work and cultures of other Diasporic women. I would hope then that new scholarship in this area would extend the insights of this work to examine the ways in which African women's writing may exhibit these same characteristics.

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