

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation / Thesis: THE FICTIVE FLAPPER: A WAY OF
READING RACE AND FEMALE DESIRE IN
THE NOVELS OF LARSEN, HURST,
HURSTON, AND CATHER

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This study seeks to reevaluate the 1920s icon of assertive female sexuality, the flapper, as represented in the novels of four women writers. Although cultural images often designate, by their very construction, normal and alteritous social categories, I argue that the flapper's presence and popularity encourage rather than restrict this autonomy for even those female populations she appears to reject, notably lower-class women, non-white women, and homosexuals. Specifically, the flapper was predicated upon the cultural practices and beliefs of many of the very groups she was designed to exclude, and therefore her presence attests to the reality of these women's experiences. Moreover, her emphasis on the liberating potential of sexual autonomy could not be contained within her strictly defined parameters in part because of her success in outlining this potential. Each chapter then focuses upon images of black and white female sexuality in the novels, chosen for their attention to female sexual autonomy within and beyond the flapper's boundaries as well as the author's exclusion from the flapper's parameters. Nella Larsen's *Passing* suggests that the fluidity of female sexual desire cannot be contained within strict dichotomies of race, class, or sexual orientation, and women can manipulate and perhaps even transcend such boundaries. Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*

offers a critique of the flapper's excessive emphasis on sexual desirability as defined by conspicuous consumption, maintaining that lower-class white and black women can and should have access to sexual autonomy, while *Their Eyes Were Watching God* by Zora Neale Hurston similarly questions the denigration of working-class and non-white women in this model with her affirming view of Janie Woods, but also complicates the cultural presumption that any woman can find autonomy within a heterosexual relationship if such relationships are still defined by conventional notions of gender power. Finally, Willa Cather's last novel, *Sapphira and the Slave Girl*, contends modern black and white women have the right to control their own sexual needs within an unusual antebellum setting. Thus, all of these novel provide other models of sexual autonomy besides the white, middle-class, heterosexual flapper while harnessing the flapper's affirming and popular imagery.

THE FICTIVE FLAPPER: A WAY OF READING RACE AND FEMALE DESIRE
IN THE NOVELS OF LAREN, HURST, HURSTON, AND CATHER

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Dedication

To John and Julia Gallo

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Chapter 1: “A Bold and Brazen Defiance of Decency and Modesty”:

The Flapper and Her Influence upon American Culture

“and he could see her other things too, nainsook knickers, the fabric that caresses the skin, . . . and she let him and she saw that he saw and . . . he had a full view high up above her knee no-one ever not even on the swing or wading and she wasn’t ashamed . . . She would fain have cried to him chokingly, held out her snowy slender arms to him to come, to feel his lips laid on her white brow the cry of a young girl’s love.”

James Joyce, Ulysses (1922)¹

“Her panting body heaved against his as they lay full length on the ground locked in furious embrace. Judith buried her nails in the flesh over his breast, beat her knees in his loins, set her teeth in the more tender skin over the veins at his wrists. . . . ‘Kiss me – now,’ she said in a breath.”

Martha Ostenso, Wild Geese (1925)²

“After hundreds of years of mild complaisance to wifely duties, modern women have awakened to the knowledge that they are sexual beings.”

Phyllis Blanchard and Carlyn Manasses, New Girls for Old (1930)³

In the 1920s female sexual desire entered the forefront of America’s cultural imagination. Granted, the female libido was never fully absent from public discourse even when passionless ideology had denied its existence, surfacing in free love treatises and anti-prostitution diatribes. But the twenties were the first time in American history when popular culture taught women that expressing their sexual desire and, more often, their sexual desirability provided them with power and opportunities. Psychoanalytic theory revitalized the relevance of female sexual desire at the same time popular culture

was flooded with images of vivacious female sexuality. While social historians have rightly worked to problematize the flapper's impact on social norms, documenting in detail how this sexual power was, for many women, ambiguous and limited, this study seeks to reassert the central significance of this cultural change: American culture propagated female sexual power, a liberating sense of sexual autonomy – the right to have, express and fulfill sexual desire – which transformed the lives of thousands, if not millions, of women.⁴ Not enough acknowledgement has been made about the door of possibility which opened for women in these decades. Women were not merely given license by popular culture to express their sexuality nor simply validated by science as sexual beings; for the first time in centuries, women were provided with the means to conceptualize of themselves as sexual beings with many of the same rights to sexual pleasure that their male counterparts already possessed. As a result, even those women excluded in various degrees from the cultural icons of female sexual freedom – primarily non-white, non-heterosexual, or lower-class women – still benefited from the sexual revolution of the 1920s and 1930s. Moreover, the flapper, as the predominant cultural icon of womanhood, integrated a variety of existing beliefs and practices about female sexuality which in turn validated opposing models of sexuality even as it tried to exclude or modify them. Assuming that the effects of any cultural shift are tangible, how can the gains in female sexual autonomy from this period be measured? Literature is one such discourse since texts, particularly fictional narratives, inherently focus on subjectivity and individual experience.

A study of female sexuality first must acknowledge its psychological complexity for it incorporates a woman's ability to have, express, and satisfy her erotic desire as well as her erotic desirability, the ability to arouse desire in others. At the same time, a

number of modern theorists, including Judith Butler, Michel Foucault, and Monique Wittig, have argued that gender and sexuality are always imbued with historical and cultural markers and founded upon mutually exclusive categories that affect individual and social perceptions of deviance and normalcy. Hence, the cultural impetus to restrict and regulate sexual behavior is not only exposed by the means of regulation, legal and otherwise, but also the discourse that attempts to disguise its regulatory function as, for example, scientific “fact” or moral “truth.” With these perspectives in mind, this study analyzes the novels of four women writers – Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), Fannie Hurst’s Imitation of Life (1933), Zora Neale Hurston’s Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), and Willa Cather’s Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940) – as explorations of this new promise of female sexual agency and subjectivity in the years immediately following the flapper’s 1920s revolution. Although the flapper is visible in some texts to a greater degree than others, each author grapples with her ghost, so to speak, by focusing on female sexual autonomy during a period of profound change. Of course, the massive social upheavals of the Depression also influenced the construction of female sexuality in many of these texts, yet rather than return to a Victorian sexual conservatism, the culture of the 1930s continued and, in some cases, heightened these new assumptions about female sexual desire, helped in no small part by the new media that came of age in the 1920s: the film industry, tabloid periodicals, and advertising. Moreover, academic disciplines like psychology and sociology increased in popularity over these decades and disseminated these assumptions through allegedly objective analysis, such as Blanchard and Manasses’ study quoted above. Thus, I read each text as a response to this new sexual subjectivity represented by the flapper, notably by expanding its validation of female sexual empowerment to include black women as worthy and capable of such

empowerment without reengaging the deleterious stereotypes of primitive lasciviousness traditionally associated with black sexuality. At the same time, each also exposes the flapper's attempts to regulate this autonomy within traditional notions of middle-class, heterosexual monogamy as ultimately inadequate.

As I discuss in Chapter 2, this revolution in female sexual autonomy must be understood as the product of three main cultural influences: 1) the popularization of psychoanalytic theory, which not only gave women the framework to conceptualize their sexual needs but also provided them with scientific validation that sexual expression was necessary for overall psychological health; 2) a growth in women's economic viability in the marketplace; and 3) a new emphasis on active and visible female sexual desire in popular culture. As I have suggested, these forces are encapsulated in the most familiar icon of female sexual agency in the 1920s: the flapper. Even though the flapper phenomenon was sometimes condemned, especially early in the decade, as "a bold and brazen defiance of decency and modesty in dress and speech and conduct," her growing popularity signified an increase in and acceptance of public discourse on female sexuality ("Case Against" 40). For example, when The Little Review published this chapter of Joyce's Ulysses in 1920, the magazine's editors were fined for its indecent and "too frank" descriptions of young Gerty's exuberant sexual awareness and banned from publishing other sections (Fitch 76). In contrast, in 1925, Ostenso's novel of a girl's sexual passion was published after winning a literary contest and became wildly popular (Raub 2).

Usually associated with the younger generation, the flapper symbolized a critical cultural shift in the perception of female sexuality that affected single and married women alike, the coed as well as the housewife: the belief that a sexual drive is essential

to a woman's well-being and happiness. Furthermore, women of many ages imitated flapper fashion and mannerisms in order to be perceived as modern, and popular culture encouraged this conspicuous consumerism. While the flapper's popularity and the overwhelming emphasis on her consumer and sexual freedom perhaps did little to advance women's political standing during this period – and, in fact, the flapper persona was partly constructed to curtail such advancement – , this new validation of female sexual autonomy is noteworthy in itself as it gave millions of women the affirmation, if not always the opportunity, to revel in the same physical delights that men have almost always enjoyed.

The flapper's influence upon American women outside of the white, middle-class, heterosexual norm she projected was also due to the fact that, as the culmination of a host of theoretical, economic and demographic changes, she was constructed out of existing practices and beliefs that were already formulated upon and against antithetical models of female sexuality. For example, the flapper or vamp, as she was also known, revamped characteristics of the previous generation's New Woman, broadening her appeal and replacing her most troubling trait – her sexual desire, often characterized as either abnormally unfulfilled by motherhood or aberrantly homosexual - with youthful, uninhibited heterosexuality.⁵ This fear of homosexuality also instigated a decline in single-gender education and activities, turning the fresh-faced Gibson college girl of the turn of the century into the wild child coed of the twenties. Similarly, as I later explain, the economic freedom and independence of the workplace that gave the flapper consumerist power and access to gender-mixing amusements like dance halls and jazz clubs had already been the experience of lower-class white and black women for decades.

When judging the effects of any cultural shift, we must acknowledge that what the public sees on the screen or reads on the page may be less projections of reality than contrived fantasies, designed not to influence morals per se but to encourage the consumption of goods. The gap between cultural icons and actual experience is itself a complex phenomenon. On one hand, popular culture molds (or, for some theorists, controls) individual subjectivity and behavior, providing a set of standards that people mimic a myriad of ways, often through consumption. For instance, in their classic essay, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer argue that prevalence of culture in its many forms, from films to journalism to advertising, functions “not to leave the customer alone, not for a moment to allow him any suspicion that resistance is possible. The principle dictates that he should be shown all his needs as capable of fulfillment, but that those needs should be so predetermined that he feels himself to be the eternal consumer, the object of the culture industry” (40). The relationship between consumer objects and the values they represent is often the focus of what Raymond Williams has called modern or “psychological advertising,” when “the attempt is made . . . to associate this consumption with human desires to which it has no real reference. You do not only buy an object: you buy social respect, discrimination, health, beauty, success, power to control your environment” (189). Nonetheless, the pervasiveness of the system guarantees that eventually “many people will indeed look twice at you, upgrade you, upmarket you, respond to your displayed signals, if you have made the right purchases with a system of meanings to which you are all trained” (Williams 189). As this study indicates, psychological advertising took hold during these decades, and a woman required a variety of consumer goods in order to

fulfill the flapper identity, while these goods, in turn, were infused with the flapper's qualities of modernity, upper-class leisure, and sexual *joie de vivre*.

On the other hand, culture reflects and integrates a host of social values at any given time, and, indeed, it must in order to function. Roland Marchand points out in his insightful study of advertising that although ads tend "to reflect public aspirations rather than contemporary circumstances, to mirror popular fantasies rather than social realities," within these "ideals and aspirations of the system" lie the dominant values of our culture (xvii, xviii). As a result, Warren I. Susman notes in Culture as History, "the products of the culture became advertisements of the culture itself" (xxiv). Thus, the flapper icon represented modern womanhood during this era from within a larger context of American values, such as the idealization of the middle-class family, the American dream of economic and social advancement, and the social contract of marriage. And as a model of behavior, she mediated anxiety about female sexuality and social power during a period of rapid scientific, economic, and demographic change. As I contend, the flapper herself was therefore a contradictory figure as she validated the female right to sexual autonomy yet also reinforced limits on how this sexual autonomy could be expressed.

Novels, like other media, simultaneously reflect and influence a period's cultural values. All of the novelists in this study are not merely artists but also sophisticated social critics who, without exception, had already published earlier texts, books as well as magazine articles or short stories, and therefore recognized the power of the public sphere on individuals as well as art. Granted, Cather, as an acclaimed author, no doubt had a different approach to her thirteenth novel than Nella Larsen did to her second, whereas best-selling authors Cather and Hurst had different publishing expectations than Hurston

and Larsen, whose race narrowed publishing opportunities considerably. In their personal lives, these women also made unconventional choices regarding marriage (of the three who married, only one, Hurst, did not divorce but instead advocated “visiting” or non-cohabitational marriage), motherhood (none had children), and, obviously, careers. Consequently, their personal decisions mostly likely influenced their understanding and depiction of female sexuality, while, in turn, their texts influenced literary and social discourse, making their own contributions to how female sexuality was celebrated or feared. Although I do not suggest that all types of cultural discourse are equally powerful, fiction shares with advertisements, advice literature, academic surveys, and self-help manuals the ability to create a cultural narrative that governs how actual women approach and interpret their lives, as this study will explain. Yet unlike these other media, the narrative and subjective contexts of fiction permit the author to explore the consequences of personal choice in more detail, to move beyond the promise, in other words, and examine its fulfillment. The novels in this study offer differing interpretations of how the black and white modern woman should and could fulfill her sexual autonomy but all suggest the limitations of enacting this new sexual agency when the normative relationship continued to reflect traditional patriarchal priorities. Nonetheless, the significance of their central thesis – sexual autonomy is a right available to *all* women and integral to her self-worth rather than merely a determinant of her moral, social or marital status – makes each text an exemplar to demonstrate how the flapper’s relatively limited endorsement of sexual power signified greater sexual empowerment across American culture. In other words, as I later explain, the novelists sought to reassert the alterity within the flapper model, to expose the contradictions upon which she

was constructed and redress her exclusion of other classes, races, and sexual preferences, while integrating the cultural affirmation of female sexual power that she represented.

By exploring the promises and contradictions within cultural images of female sexuality, this study follows the work of other literary theorists who seek to bridge what Simone Weil Davis calls “the relationship between people and representations” and to examine “the processes of reflection and influence [which] bring with them all sorts of experiences that are not embedded in the [cultural] narratives themselves” (13).⁶ Sexuality, despite its increasing presence in public discourse during this era, is still a classic example of this gap between cultural representations and personal experience as it was, and is, a highly charged subject, constantly present but just as constantly silenced within more acceptable discussions of “morals,” “personal freedom,” and “health.” But the conception of personal experience, of one’s understanding of the self, changed dramatically at the beginning of the twentieth century as a popularized notion of the psyche and human motivations transformed earlier perceptions of individualism, in one historian’s view, “from self-improvement to self-justification” (Burnham 81). As the second chapter explains, the popularization of psychoanalytic theory revolutionized a variety of industries, from advertising to art to advice literature, yet for women in particular it now advocated, in Michael Gordon’s words, “her right to experience orgasm” (68). This chapter then provides the framework that is necessary to recognize the sexual revolution in both its empowering possibilities and discouraging limitations, first by discussing the economic changes that transformed women into a new consumer force and then by analyzing popular culture’s new emphasis on female sexual autonomy. Although the flapper can be understood as normalizing changes in behavior that had

already been practiced by women outside of the white, middle-class mainstream, she was also constructed to exclude such women and reinforce conventional messages of consumerism, monogamy, and heterosexuality. Each section therefore tempers this empowering image with reminders of how only women of a particular race, class, and sexual preference were targeted and what such messages told the scores of women who were excluded. In other words, did the flapper offer the same affirmation of sexual power to working-class, non-white, or homosexual women as it did to their white, middle-class, heterosexual counterparts?

As we turn to the specific novels in this study, we must recognize that, in addition to other pressures from her literary or social communities, each of these writers had to grapple with her own exclusion from the popular culture's ideal of female sexuality while investigating the subject in her work. Nella Larsen and Zora Neale Hurston were educated and talented black women who struggled with the racial and gender restrictions placed upon them by the Harlem Renaissance movement as well as the white dominant society. In fact, in choosing to write about the subjective female experience, each jeopardized her reputation as a "serious" African American writer and perhaps contributed to her decline in fame and status, a decline that, especially for Larsen, has only recently been reversed. The daughter of German Jews, Fannie Hurst was an activist in race relations and a promoter of the Harlem Renaissance, but she also commented extensively on women's social status and advocated an open form of marriage based upon her own. The domestic focus in many of her novels shows her awareness of how acceptable roles for women were transmitted by popular culture as well as a desire to promote an affirming view of female sexual autonomy. Willa Cather, in contrast, infrequently used her position as a revered author to make social pronouncements, and,

indeed, she publicly demonstrated her disdain for politically conscious fiction even as it increased in popularity in the 1930s. This reticence extended to her personal life, partly a legacy of her experience in the more sexually conservative New Woman generation, but mainly due to her lifelong romantic commitments to other women, which gave her a sensitivity to public perceptions of female sexuality and the many ways social pressure can constrict women's choices. Due to these personal, professional, and cultural constrictions, it is perhaps not surprising that these authors affirm female sexual autonomy without, for the most part, offering a model sexual relationship that allows their protagonists to practice this sexual autonomy. This exclusion does not undermine the texts' powerful core thesis but instead indicates the inherent contradiction of advocating female sexual empowerment within a culture so heavily invested in patriarchal social institutions.

Larsen's and Hurston's participation in the Harlem Renaissance, a network of writers, artists, and critics who believed that artistic endeavors could alter the dominant society's negative treatment of African Americans, was equally an empowering and constrictive experience. In fact, definitions of what constituted the Renaissance vary as the movement encompasses both the self-consciously defined "New Negro" movement formulated by W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Alain Locke, and others as well as those artists who later branched out from these roots, such as Hurston, Langston Hughes, and Bruce Nugent, and posited a more radical position, arguing against didactic or propagandistic subject matter and aesthetic style.⁷ The movement certainly provided resources, support, and eventually an audience for many black artists and helped stimulate unprecedented artistic growth and innovation in the black community. However, for the older generation, a great part of this project, as I discuss in Chapter 2,

was to revise degrading stereotypes of lascivious, aggressive black female sexuality by promoting an image of moral motherhood. Female artists were thus constrained in their choices of issues to address if they wished to be seen by the black artistic establishment as productive race women, a crucial decision that could limit their promotion and patronage by the mainly male power structure. Furthermore, many of these female artists themselves rejected the motherhood role, including Larsen and Hurston but also Jessie Fauset, Gwendolyn Bennett, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. As a result, Larsen and Hurston, like other female writers, often confronted in their work, in Anne Stavney's words, "not only white racist imaging [of the black woman], but black male constructions of her as well" (534).

Women were also limited in the roles they could play within the Renaissance. As Gloria T. Hull contends, the mainly male Renaissance power brokers, such as Locke, Johnson, and Carl Van Vechten, not only decided who benefited from patronage, publishing contracts, and grants but also socialized with each other in environments, like bars and cabarets, where many black women did not feel comfortable, concerned as they were with "counter[ing] negative stereotypes of themselves as low and sluttish" (12). Even women with influential positions, like Fauset's editorship at the Crisis, could be defeated or dismissed by the outright male misogyny, a factor in her resignation in 1926.⁸ In addition, the Harlem Renaissance writers produced a masculinist figure of the artist; one example, not coincidentally, is the essay which helped define the movement's aesthetic project, Locke's "The New Negro," from his 1925 anthology of the same name. As Cheryl Wall points out, the essay's gendered pronouns, use of men as representative examples, and imagery of "industry, technology, and war" all point to a male-centered artistic ideology, like Locke's assertion that the New Negro "has idols of the tribe to

smash” (Women 4; “New” 8). Carla Kaplan similarly defines “the contestational aesthetic of the Harlem Renaissance, [as] an art and rhetoric based . . . on themes, images, metaphors, and discourses drawn directly from combat and warfare and dependent upon a grounding in normative masculinity” (Erotics 109).⁹

Given this masculinist focus as well as the emphasis on uplifting the race through moral motherhood, Hurston’s and Larsen’s focus on lower- and middle-class women’s lives outside their mothering role in Quicksand (1928), Passing, and Their Eyes Were Watching God generated the perception that their work did not seriously address the Renaissance’s political purpose. Of Larsen’s contemporary reviewers, Robert Bone’s assessment is typical: “striving valiantly to preserve the genteel character of Negro fiction, . . . [Larsen] allowed a diluted version of Negro nationalism to influence [her] work” (97-8). A 1929 review of Passing in Opportunity even stipulates themes for Larsen’s future fiction: “I wish . . . that instead of bringing forth another novel next year, Mrs. Imes would, after a decade of brooding, give the world its needed epic of racial interaction between thinking members of the American social order belonging to both African and European stocks” (Labaree 210). Richard Wright’s oft-cited review of Their Eyes is also worth repeating: “Miss Hurston seems to have no desire whatever to move in the direction of serious fiction. . . . The sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought. In the main, her novel is not addressed to the Negro, but to a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy. She exploits that phase of Negro life which is ‘quaint’” (75-6). These examples suffice to point to the criticism’s main themes: by focusing on women’s lives, Larsen and Hurston, by definition, are not political writers, do not, as Locke said in his review of Their Eyes, produce “motive fiction and social document fiction” (18). As these comments suggest,

their aesthetic projects are also not sufficiently radical, either too “genteel” and bourgeois or too “quaint” and “folkish.” Even Du Bois’s praise of Passing sounds patronizing, complimenting “its sincerity, its simplicity and charm” (239). Larsen and Hurston did deliberately avoid outright, propagandistic statements of racial solidarity and uplift in these novels and criticized such efforts elsewhere, but clearly their gender and the novels’ focus on the female experience encouraged a simplistic or negative reading of their work as non-political, an interpretation I dispute in chapters 3 and 5.¹⁰ Biased readings similarly plagued contemporary criticism of Hurst and Cather as well, as I discuss in chapters 4 and 6, reductively interpreting their novels as domestic dramas without appreciating their insightful explorations of female sexuality as a potential avenue to autonomy and self-determination.

Chapter 3 examines Larsen’s 1929 novel, Passing, which situates one African American woman’s psychic breakdown within a larger context of this period’s expectations of female sexual propriety. As a member of the black bourgeois, the main character, Irene Redfield, has only limited sexual autonomy within its definition of moral motherhood, so she has long repressed her sexual desire and supplanted it with the consumer goods and social connections necessary to maintain her status as a bourgeois wife and mother. But after reuniting with an old schoolmate, Clare Kendry, and encountering her vivacious and sensual personality, Irene feels her first stirrings of desire. Eventually, unable to fully acknowledge her sexual needs, she becomes violently jealous of Clare and convinced that she’s having an affair with Irene’s husband. Yet Larsen’s astute social critique is even more ambitious as she explores how race shifts expectations of sexual morality through Clare, who has been passing for decades as the wife of a white man unaware of her racial heritage. Using Irene’s memories of Clare in

their youth as well as her observations of Clare as an upper-class matron, Larsen contrasts the differing reactions between the black and white community to Clare's sexually open nature, first the black middle-class bias against working-class female sexuality and then the new validation of public sexual experimentation for white women. In other words, the flapper's carefree and playful attitude towards sexuality is more readily accessible to Clare as an adult despite her marital status because, as a member of the upper-class white community, the flapper persona has given her license to merge sexual expression with social respectability, a combination unavailable to middle-class black women during these decades. But Larsen ultimately disputes society's ability to limit desire within certain racial and class parameters by indicating how Clare is able to manipulate such parameters and even move beyond them. Therefore, Larsen critiques the limitations of these white standards of female sexual propriety by revealing that Clare's sexual freedom is dependent upon her status as a well-kept wife and mother and how much more dangerous her sexuality would become if she completely rejected her role as a white bourgeois wife and returned to the black community.

Larsen's ambitious study of female sexual desire is furthered by her innovative narrative style, which enables her to render Irene's repressive nature and the conflicts which begin to tear apart her identity. In this way, Larsen affirms the importance of female desire by demonstrating the disastrous consequences of repressing it. As I explain, Larsen's interest in psychoanalytic theory and modernist aesthetics gave her the tools to present Irene's internalization of black bourgeois standards of female propriety and the breakdown that results when Irene begins to experience desires that she cannot contain in this framework. This depiction of desire is, in fact, quite complex, for Larsen is not content to offer a simple tale of jealousy but implies that part of Irene's confusion

lies in her inability to distinguish between her desire *for* Clare and her desire to *be* Clare, not to mention her desire for Clare's *desire*, that is, Clare's ability to express desire that Irene, as a middle-class black woman, is incapable of. Integrating, then, the new recognition of the feminine, and therefore invisible, lesbian, Larsen also suggests that the fluidity of sexuality cannot be contained within strict definitions of hetero- and homosexuality just as she sees it as unable to be contained within strict dichotomies of race and class as indicated by Clare. And finally, through the violent ending, Larsen reveals the costs of regulating sexual desire for Irene and Clare.

In Chapter 4, I look at this study's best-selling novel, *An Imitation of Life* (1933), which also became a movie sensation the following year directed by John Stahl. Almost unknown to modern critics, the author, Fannie Hurst, penned numerous best-sellers in a career that spanned four decades and was also well-known in her day as a social advocate for various causes, including labor and racial relations. The novel is a fascinating commentary on sexual and racial dichotomies with its focus on two sets of mothers and daughters, one white and one black. Unlike the film, the novel offers a liberal and sympathetic portrayal of female sexuality, particularly for the black mother and her daughter, who, like Clare, eventually marries a white man unaware of her racial heritage. Granted, Hurst may have been unable to render a realistic account of black female interiority, but her affirming view of black female sexual autonomy as a white author puts her in a unique category during these decades.

The novel follows its white heroine, Bea Pullman, from naïve teenager through her short, unhappy marriage to a much older husband and then into her long widowhood during which she builds a successful business career as a restaurant entrepreneur and

raises a daughter. The title alone is an unavoidable hint that despite her phenomenal success, despite a life of material comfort, despite her amenable domestic companionship with her loyal maid Delilah Johnston, her life is still an “imitation” without a heterosexual relationship, thus confirming that the female libido did not disappear in the more conservative 1930s but, in fact, was more visible than ever. Although this brief outline, in addition to the novel’s overwhelming popularity, may suggest that the assessment of one contemporary reviewer is correct – the novel is “sentimental hokum,” – it is also a sophisticated analysis of the gap between feeling sexual desire and acting upon it (Winsten 197). In Bea’s case, she falls in love with a young business associate after decades of sexual repression but then, relying only on visual clues of her sexual desire rather than an articulation of her feelings, Bea ultimately loses him to her eighteen-year-old daughter. Thus, Hurst critiques popular culture’s excessive emphasis on the importance of sexual desirability by exposing it as an inadequate substitute for actual sexual desire and its satisfaction. Like Larsen, she also endorses the relevance of sexual autonomy for the older, mature mother, not only the young, carefree flapper.

Hurst explores these issues with her black female characters as well, even Delilah, who initially seems to be a stock character of black abjection as an overweight, religious, dark-skinned maid, a familiar persona to Hurst’s readers. But Delilah is the novel’s most vocal champion of carnal pleasures, constantly admonishing Bea to get herself some “man-lovin’” even if she does not have any sexual relationships of her own. Granted, disturbing racist connotations remain in Hurst’s characterization and the film’s, which added scenes that underscore qualities of the mammy stereotype that Hurst perhaps purposefully omitted. Similarly, unlike the film’s limited exploration of Delilah’s daughter’s racial malaise, Hurst uses Peola’s desire to pass to hypothesize that race is

socially, not biologically, constructed and to confront the dilemma of middle class black women when they are unable to reconcile social respectability with sexual expression, two aspects she also shares with Larsen.

Unlike Imitation, the novel examined in Chapter 5 continues to generate substantial commentary for literary critics. Zora Neale Hurston's novel Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) has gained prominence in the last few decades for its affirming vision of black rural life and of one woman's journey to self-realization over the course of her three marriages. Yet the novel's view of the African American community is, upon close inspection, actually a critique of the same class constrictions that Larsen and Hurst examine. Hurston more readily challenges the traditional presentation of working-class black sexuality as licentious through the characterization of her heroine, Janie Starks Woods. Janie's childlessness also highlights Hurston's refusal to confine her character to the stereotype of moral motherhood, implicitly asserting that a woman's search for sexual and personal autonomy is an endeavor worthy in itself.

After an idealistic, although strictly heterosexual, sexual awakening, Janie confronts the reality of sexual practice and immediately falls victim to her community's requirements for proper female expression when her grandmother marries her to an elderly farmer to avoid any stigma of extramarital sexual relations. Janie's second marriage explores the African American idealization of middle-class standards of female sexual propriety, again questioning the legitimacy of such beliefs when they not only restrict Janie's sexual autonomy but also require her complete mental and physical subjugation to her husband's will. This marriage also contests the era's assumption that female sexual desirability is an avenue to economic and social status and sexual

autonomy as exemplified by the flapper. Even though Janie's third marriage finally offers her an outlet for her sexual autonomy, Hurston again criticizes the influence of communal norms with an episode which demonstrates that male violence against women is not just merely tolerated but even expected as a sign of proper gender roles. Through Janie, Hurston similarly rejects stereotypes of the tragic mulatta while offering a critique of the African American community's investment in white standards of beauty. Thus, Janie's continuous conflict with her community over its standards of female behavior reveals this period's incredible pressure on black women to conform to racial unity even at the expense of their own needs and desires and in doing so, Hurston reveals the constraints in the dominant models of female sexuality for white *and* black women. In fact, Hurston avoids a simplistic dichotomy between conservative social expectations and Janie's liberal attitude by revealing that it is Janie's internalization of traditional morals that often produces internal conflict between her desires and her behavior.

The other modern theme Hurston explores in this novel is the ability of a modern woman to express and satiate her sexual desire with a loving partner. Through Janie's relationship with her last husband, Tea Cake Woods, Hurston simultaneously offers a liberating view of black female sexual autonomy as Janie finally experiences the joy of a satisfying sexual union -- a confirmation that black relationships too should be included in perceptions of the modern marriage -- and also questions the price that a woman must pay for sexual affirmation when modern expectations of female sexual autonomy are maintained within heterosexual relationships still defined by conventional notions of gender power. Although, like Larsen and Hurst, she does not offer any alternatives to the quandaries a modern woman faces when reconciling sexual, economic, and social independence, the novel's ending, when Janie returns home after being forced to kill her

rabid husband to save her own life, suggests that women may only be able to find the perfect, complementary heterosexual relationship in the abstract. This pessimism may indicate Hurston's belief that sexual relationships cannot exist outside of class and gender hierarchies. Most explicitly of all these authors, then, Hurston demonstrates that sexuality is not a transhistorical experience but one that is always confined by social constrictions and outside interpretations as Janie's control over her sexuality is often co-opted and determined by others, and her male partners treat her in a manner that reflects their investment in gender relations in order to maintain power in the black community.

Chapter 6 focuses upon Willa Cather's last novel, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (1940), a seemingly anomalous choice for this study given its traditional interpretation as a semi-autobiographical historical novel. As the title indicates, the tale examines the relationship between a mistress, Sapphira Colbert, and her slave, Nancy Till, and can be read as a valid critique of the evils of slavery that influence even the most familial of settings. This study, however, contends that the novel's main story, Sapphira's plot to deflower Nancy by encouraging a nephew to rape her, can be placed in a modern cultural context as its attitudes towards race and sexual desire are reflective of the shifts occurring in the 1920s and 1930s, since Sapphira's conspiracy is dependent on revising the community's evaluation of Nancy from good girl to licentious black seductress, a concern which would be irrelevant in the 1850s when the novel takes place. In fact, Cather's characterization of both the white mistress and the black slave rely on modern views of femininity, for both exhibit the ability to express and fulfill their sexual autonomy and thus validate the view that black and white women have the right to control their own sexual needs even if, like these other authors, Cather is unable or unwilling to present an egalitarian heterosexual relationship where this autonomy can be

fulfilled. If Sapphira, as a confident, assertive, and even manipulative character, is more clearly a prototype of modern female independence, Nancy's own autonomy skills eventually evolve despite her upbringing as a naïve and passive young girl, making her transformation all the more stunning and admirable even before her triumphant return in the epilogue as a sophisticated modern woman.

Like Imitation, certain moments in Cather's novel reveal the limitations that a white author may have had in trying to depict black female characters, but Nancy, at first glance a vapid, immature, and timid girl, offers a ground-breaking interpretation of black female sexuality. By incorporating components of the tragic mulatta stereotype to justify Sapphira's intentions, Cather then refutes many of these assumptions by showing how Nancy seizes control of both the public perception of her sexual worth and the private dominion over her sexuality, first by avoiding her would-be rapist and then leaving her family and home to flee to freedom in Canada. Granted, it is difficult to assess how consciously Cather constructed her novel to present an affirmation of black female sexuality, yet given her ambiguous depiction of Sapphira Colbert, a woman both admired for her independent and forceful nature and despised for her evil plan, perhaps Cather willingly composed complex central characters who defied simple explanations for their motives and a plot that requires close analysis to move beyond the surface tale of jealousy and deceit. Therefore, as with Hurst, we can maintain a realistic view of the limitations of Cather's black characters while admiring her willingness to confront traditional stereotypes of black sexuality during a time period when popular culture insisted that female sexual autonomy could not exist for a moral and kind-hearted lower-class black woman.

In the end, the question remains whether these affirmations of female sexual autonomy do indeed override the limitations inherent in the flapper persona when none of these authors is willing or able to present a heterosexual couple that fits the period's model of an egalitarian, companionate marriage. And yet, if these explorations offer a negative assessment of the overall gains made during the flapper age, their emphasis on the relevance of female sexual autonomy in the life of any black or white woman demonstrates their commitment to creating strong and complex female characters who helped to change the standard of female sexual behavior during this period.

By offering a cultural context for these novels, Chapter 2 provides the background necessary to recognize the significance of these achievements. The public affirmation of female sexual autonomy was, as I explain, a radical departure from earlier decades and gave many American women the cultural license they needed to explore their sexual needs. And yet, by analyzing the factors that contributed to the flapper's rise, we can see why these authors perhaps did not simply want to recreate the sexual relationships depicted in so many venues, fictional and non-fictional, since so many too often relied upon traditional hierarchies of marriage, heterosexuality, and white superiority.

Notes

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- ¹ James Joyce, Ulysses (New York: Vintage, 1961) 366.
- ² qtd. in Patricia Raub 3.
- ³ Phyllis Blanchard and Carlyn Manasses, New Girls for Old (New York: Macaulay, 1930) 196.
- ⁴ Many of these historians are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2 and include Ruth M. Alexander, Joan Jacobs Brumberg, Erin G. Carlston, George Chauncey, Jr., Nancy F. Cott (Grounding), John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman, Lisa Duggan, Lillian Faderman, Linda Gordon, Pamela S. Haag, Sharon Harley, Gloria T. Hull, Sherrie A. Inness, Regina G. Kunzel, Mary E. Odem, Kathy Peiss (Hope), Martin Pumphrey, Rayna Rapp and Ellen Ross, Christina Simmons (“Modern”), Carroll Smith Rosenberg, Siobhan B. Somerville, Cheryl A. Wall (Women), and Kenneth A. Yellis.
- ⁵ The New Woman is a complex figure and my use of the term here is necessarily simplified in order to characterize the change in cultural perception of the modern woman that occurred for the generation which came of age prior to suffrage and the generation which came of age in the following decade.
- ⁶ Other theorists whose work has inspired my approach include Joseph Allen Boone, Susan Gubar, Jackson Lears, Marilee Lindemann, Walter Benn Michaels, and Nina Miller.
- ⁷ Critical assessments of the movement also date its ending prior to Hurston’s novel (usually 1929), a somewhat arbitrary limit as many artists crucial to the movement, including Hurston, Hughes, McKay, and Thurman, were very prolific through the 1930s. Robert A. Russ’s “Chronology of the Harlem Renaissance” is similarly broad, dated 1917-1940.

⁸ Thadious M. Davis asserts that Charles S. Johnson was anti-feminist, as does Hull about Locke (Larsen 159-60; 7-8).

⁹ Trends in modern Harlem Renaissance criticism have similarly distorted the participation of women in the movement. Houston A. Baker, Jr's ground-breaking book, Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance, like earlier Harlem Renaissance criticism by Nathan Irvin Huggins, David Levering Lewis, and Arthur Davis, effectively erases women's participation altogether or limits them to editors and cheerleaders. Other critics, like Michael North and George Hutchinson (in Harlem), provide a more accurate picture of the movement but too often dismiss gender and sexuality as significant factors.

¹⁰ Hurston's participation in the magazine Fire! in 1926 is a oft-cited example of her decision to distance herself from the Du Boisian rhetoric of the older generation, and is, according to Robert E. Hemenway, representative of her attitude that "racial appeals would compromise [her] art" (Zora Neale Hurston 42). She criticizes Du Bois directly in a 1927 letter, calling him "a propagandist with all the distorted mind of his kind" (Kaplan, Hurston: Life 108; see also 140-41 and 234-35). Larsen's indictment of the racial uplift movement is found most vividly in Quicksand, but also, according to Thadious Davis, in various personal statements, as when she says that "recognition and liberation will come to the negro [sic] only through individual effort" (qtd. in Davis, Larsen 244).

Chapter 2: The Flapper as Icon and Practice

“The sexual is flaunted everywhere and through constant view of the suggestive and salacious, the public conscience, seared or paralyzed, takes it now as a matter of course”

Llewellyn A. Wilcox, Pacific Union College, St. Helena,
California, “The Case Against the Younger Generation,” (1922) p.
52.

The twenties’ sexual revolution was not, of course, an immediate revolt in values or practice but the culmination of a broad spectrum of cultural change that had been brewing for decades. Yet, as Wilcox suggests, we can also see this decade as the saturation point when the overwhelming influence of scientific, social, and economic changes forced the American psyche to accept a new standard of female sexuality. This chapter analyzes some of those influences, focusing on three broad themes which contributed directly to the flapper’s rise as cultural icon. As I suggested in Chapter 1, the flapper encapsulates the various factors within this new public conception of female sexual autonomy, including its strengths – a daring sexual independence, a modern conception of the libido, and a willingness to flaunt one’s sexual needs – and its weaknesses, particularly its emphasis on heterosexual normativity, white superiority, and conspicuous consumption as a requirement of sexual desirability. But “flapper” itself was an unstatic term that circulated in public discourse for a few years despite the fact that the model of behavior it represented began prior to its common usage and lasted far into the next decade.

“Flapper,” in fact, originated not in America but in 1910s England, according to historian Kenneth A. Yellis, initially referring to girls “of the awkward age, the mid-teens. The awkwardness was meant literally, and a girl who flapped had not yet reached mature, dignified womanhood” (49). Then, in 1915, H.L. Mencken used the phrase in Smart Set magazine to describe a young woman with liberal ideas:

She has read [English feminist] Christobel Pankhurst and [Swedish sex theorist] Ellen Key, and is inclined to think that there must be something in this new doctrine of free [voluntary] motherhood. She is opposed to the double standard of morality, and favors a law prohibiting it. . . . This Flapper has forgotten how to simper; she seldom blushes; it is impossible to shock her. She saw [the controversial anti-prostitution play] “Damaged Goods” without batting an eye, and wondered what all the row was about. (qtd. in Staiger 3)

Other phenomenon specifically associated with the flapper began prior to the twenties, like her distinctive bob, introduced in the mid-1910s by dancer Irene Castle and actress Pauline Frederick, and her “boyish rather than womanly” figure, which an American article noted as the new fashion in 1916 (McGovern 325, 324). Overall, however, the term gained currency after F. Scott Fitzgerald’s Flappers and Phibsophers (1920) and This Side of Paradise (1920) were published, and Fitzgerald is often associated with its appearance even by his contemporaries. By the early 1920s, articles entitled “Flapping Not Repented Of” (New York Times, July 16, 1922) and “This Flapper Age” (Forum, August 1922) reveal the term’s cultural caché.

At the same time, Fitzgerald and Mencken appropriated the term to summarize changes which were already affecting the ongoing debate over proper female sexual

behavior, from smoking and intimate dancing to profanity and sexual experimentation. For instance, historian Lewis A. Erenberg has described how, “the fact that respectable women danced forms originating among inferiors, sensual blacks and Latins, moved critics to envision the enshrinement of undisguised sexuality and lower-class behavior,” in articles like “Revolt of Decency” (Literary Digest, April 9, 1913) and “Where is Your Daughter This Afternoon?” (The New York Times, January 17, 1914) (81). Similar protests over upper-class women drinking and smoking in public reveals the new lenient atmosphere in urban cafes and cabarets (Erenberg 134-35). As I later discuss, cosmetics and revealing fashion were also topics of scrutiny in the 1910s. The cogency of this earlier public discourse is a crucial factor to explain why, by 1922, young women like Ellen Welles Page felt compelled to argue in “A Flapper’s Appeal to Parents” that her “bobbed hair, . . . fringed skirts,” love of dancing, and attendance at “hops, and proms, and ball-games, and crew races, and other affairs at men’s colleges” do not mean that she is “fast,” decisively stating, “I don’t pet” (607). Although similar defenses were written by the male authors like John F. Carter, Jr.’s “These Wild Young People By One of Them” (1920), although the press analyzed the subject, as did The Literary Digest, as “the present relaxation of morals and manners among young men and women,” and although both young men and women could be castigated by terms like “jazz babies” or “flaming youth,” the popularity of “flapper” to describe shifting sexual morals reveals the crux of this anxiety: women (qtd. in “Is the Younger” 11).¹ Therefore, my use of the phrase indicates not merely a desire to recall a popular cultural icon but also an insistent reminder that changing sexual standards during this period meant changing attitudes towards *female* sexual autonomy and behavior. Furthermore, her emblemization as modern womanhood can also be understood as the appropriation of the established habits

and behaviors of the masses by the dominant class which then reinterpreted sexual morality in order to maintain the hierarchical status quo.

As with most cultural phenomena, to best conceptualize the radical changes in female sexuality during these decades, we must impose artificial divides between cultural influences and overlay general models of female identity upon the lives and perceptions of millions of individuals. I must also reiterate that this study offers an analysis of female sexual autonomy as it was addressed in popular discourse with the understanding that female sexual autonomy in practicality includes its practice by women in both the boudoir and the nightclub. In other words, a sexually autonomous woman *feels* sexual desire but may *express* it and *fulfill* it in a variety of ways in both her public and private life, and one of the most conflicting messages in popular discourse during these decades was the view that sexual desirability bridges this gap between emotion and action when, in fact, sexual desirability is but one facet of public expression. I now turn to the first major influence in this new perception of female sexual power, one that constituted a revolution by itself, the popularization of psychoanalytic theory.

“The First Requirement”: Science Demands the Female Orgasm

“A fertile ground was ready for the seeds of Freudianism, and presently one began to hear even from the lips of flappers that ‘science taught’ new and disturbing things about sex. Sex, it appeared, was the central and pervasive force which moved mankind. . . . The first requirement of mental health was to have an uninhibited sex life.”

Frederick Lewis Allen, Only Yesterday: An Informal History of the 1920s (1931), p. 85.

To Americans in the twenty-first century, notions of instinctual drives, repressive motives, the libido, and the unconscious are inseparable from our culture. Such beliefs fit ideologically within political and economic philosophies constructed to encourage and reward individual ambition. Technology has furthered the pursuit of self-gratification by transforming the luxuries of previous generations, from air conditioning in summer to fresh produce in winter, into everyday needs, and the Internet in particular has reduced the lag time between desire and fulfillment to nanoseconds, altering personal communication, achievement, and privacy in the process. If the 1920s seemed shockingly modern when newspaper columnists offered candid advice on petting or advertisements bared thighs to sell appliances, how many would conceive of a society where orgasms are discussed daily in sitcoms and chatrooms, television shows are centered on the question, “Are You Hot?”, and Congress cannot even legally define parameters to slow the flood of unsolicited pornography into our homes? Recognizing the impact of this culturally validated self-awareness is the first step in assessing this vast transformation of sexual mores. As historian John C. Burnham has summarized, the popularization of psychoanalytic tenets shifted our conception of the self “from the progressive idea of service to the postwar idea of discovering one’s wants, needs, and desires (usually in the hidden self or primitive chemical and reflex systems) and gratifying them,” a revolutionary concept that included female sexual desire in the equation, insisting that it was not merely allowable but, in fact, required if women wished to lead a healthy life (81).

The migration of psychoanalysis from scientific theory to popular doctrine accompanied a larger cultural shift in the 1910s and 1920s which viewed human behavior less as a question of religious morality and more like a scientific conundrum. The

Progressive era's reform movement, tailored for Christian values by evangelical societies like The Salvation Army and Women's Christian Temperance Union, lost ground as the war, the rise in higher education, and scientific advancements led to the establishment of professions, including social work, psychoanalysis, and sociology, which focused on the social issues previously considered the reform movement's domain.² These professionals infiltrated fields like criminal rehabilitation, mental health, and education and generated new standards while creating a need for their own expertise by denigrating religious or communal solutions to traditional social ills and raising the mantle of science as the proper response to modern problems. Of course, recasting definitions from sin and salvation to health and disease did not ameliorate the stigmatization of conventional social anxieties like homosexuality, extramarital pregnancy, or prostitution but instead provided a new vocabulary to determine behavioral norms and shifted the burden of regulation away from religious agencies to scientific professionals and the state. Moreover, once private areas of daily life like marital relations, childbirth, homemaking, and child-rearing now required the expert advice of professionals, easily accessible through self-help manuals, advice columns, and public health pamphlets.

This scientific approach to social ills and everyday life contributed to a franker public discourse on sexuality in a number of ways. First, European psychoanalytic theory, like the sexology movement a few years before, disseminated initially through the American scientific community which permeated higher education, transforming the professional training in a variety of fields.³ In turn, these graduates led public health campaigns on issues often deemed unmentionable in nineteenth-century polite society, like birth control, sex education, and sexually transmitted diseases. Even though many of

these advocacies were decades old and influenced by other political and social factors, science provided a secular rationale for combating such problems and generated a broad base of support, converting, for example, the century-old religious campaign against venereal disease and prostitution into the social hygiene movement.⁴ Thus, as historians like James R. McGovern now acknowledge, the 1920s explosion in public sexual expression had been building for years and finally began to saturate so much of public discourse that even the most conservative members of society were forced to take notice (316).

Secondly, the popularity of psychoanalysis among Greenwich Village intellectuals like Mabel Dodge Luhan, Floyd Dell, and Max Eastman contributed further to its increasing influence since intellectuals propagated these ideas through popular, political, and artistic outlets, including magazine articles, novels, and plays.⁵ As Nathan G. Hale, Jr. has summarized, intellectuals diverged from stricter interpretations favored by analysts to advocate a more liberal and even happier view of the psyche, where “sexuality . . . was something sacred, to be enjoyed, not elaborately controlled” (59). This overemphasis on the necessity of sexual expression fit within the bohemian penchant for rejecting traditional ideas and embracing more equality between the genders, although much of the experimentation in the 1910s was deliberately, in Linda Gordon’s view, “anticommercial” as well as “self-conscious and ideological” -- precisely the opposite of what it would become for the general public in the 1920s (187).

Before continuing my focus on the impact of psychoanalysis upon public discussion of sexuality, I want to reiterate why we cannot overestimate the widespread acceptance of psychoanalytic concepts across American culture. As historians like Hale, Linda Gordon, and Joel Pfister have documented, Americans were beset on all sides by what Pfister

calls, “a full-fledged pop psychology essence-and-identity industry” (168). For instance, by the 1920s the average American could study self-help books on Your Hidden Powers (1923), Unmasking Our Minds (1924) and Psychoanalysis and Love (1922), psychoanalyze historical figures like Abraham Lincoln, Margaret Fuller and Theodore Roosevelt,⁶ attend hit plays about psychoanalysis like Rachel Crother’s Expressing Willie (1924) and Eugene O’Neill’s Strange Interlude (1928), and peruse numerous articles like “Is Your Mind like an Iceberg?” (1922), “Your Other Self” (1928), and “How It Feels to be Psychoanalyzed” (1925). “Little Blue Books,” a series of cheap paperbacks, published a number of psychoanalytic titles over the decade, including How To Psychoanalyze Yourself (1924), Sex in Psychoanalysis (1926), and Psycho-Analysis: The Key to Human Behavior (1924). Psychoanalysts appeared in newspaper stories and in court, commenting and testifying in some of the most sensationalist trials of the decade. They famously proclaimed the teenagers Loeb and Leopold on trial for murder in 1924, “emotional infants,” while Ruth Snyder, a woman who bludgeoned her husband to death with her lover’s help, was exonerated by the defense as a victim of the Oedipal complex and execrated by the prosecution as a “victim of sexual thralldom right out of Freud’s ‘Taboo of Virginity’” in 1927 (qtd. in N Hale 92; Douglas 126). Their influence on fiction is reflected in the popular novel The Plastic Age (1924) by Percy Marks, where the hero insists, “love was nothing but sexual attraction anyway, and that all the stuff the poets wrote was pure bunk. Freud said something like that, and he thought Freud knew a damn sight more about it than the poets,” and another novel, Ludwig Lewisohn’s The Island Within (1928), features the analyst as hero, boldly diagnosing the source of his patient’s impotence in one session before proclaiming, “You’re probably cured now” (qtd. in N Hale 77, 95). Dramatic psychoanalytic scenarios filled other popular novels

like The Closed Garden (1928), The Painted Room (1926) and All Kneeling (1928) (Blanchard and Manasses 225-26).

Advertisers in particular seized upon these concepts, publishing articles like “What Psychology Can Teach Us” in Printers’ Ink by 1910 (Lears, Fables 208). Their contribution to the popularization of this new psychology is indisputable, producing the modern version of psychological advertising so familiar in the twenty-first century. Cultural historians Roland Marchand, Jackson Lears and Juliann Sivulka have analyzed this new “therapeutic ethos,” defined by Lears as “the promise that the product would contribute to the buyer’s physical, psychic, or social well-being; the threat that his well-being would be undermined if he failed to buy it” (“From Salvation” 19). As the primary target of advertisers, women were thought especially vulnerable psychologically, possessing, in the industry’s words, a “well-authenticated greater emotionality” and a “natural inferiority complex” (qtd. in Marchand 66).⁷ Allegedly female subjects, mainly child-rearing, homemaking, and fashion, then dominated the pages and air waves, one 1928 estimate placing women as the target of 97 percent of ads, and throughout the twenties a number of fictional experts were introduced as if the modern world was too complex and hazardous for the average housewife to negotiate alone, including Betty Crocker, Postum’s Carrie Blanchard, and Nurse Ellen J. Buckland for Kotex (Pumphrey 184; Marchand 353-55). The rhetoric of reassuring scientific opinion was particularly apparent in ads which invoked, and then solved, embarrassing ailments which could harm the consumer’s social appeal, from body odor and blackheads to athlete’s foot and dandruff; a typical 1925 Listerine ad blamed halitosis as the reason one girl is “often a bridesmaid but never a bride” despite the fact that “no one possessed more grace or charm or loveliness than she” (qtd. in Sivulka 160). Advertisements similarly

incorporated psychoanalytic jargon to further validate their authority, like a 1931 Luz soap ad that reassures, “no woman need have an inferiority complex. . . . You see, it isn’t just a matter of saying to yourself, Pollyanna fashion – *I am charming, I am desirable*. No, you must have the deep sure, inner conviction. And that’s what you get when your clothes are just right!” (qtd. in Marchand 354). Copy such as this played a key role in the philosophical shift from “character” to “personality” as identified by Warren I. Susman, who summarizes the conundrum as the “singular emphasis not only on the need for self-confidence but also on the importance of not feeling ‘inferior.’ . . . there [are] constant warnings against the dangers of feeling inferior (if one harbors such feelings, one can never impress others and will also exhibit, as a result, a weak personality)” (278-79). And, as such examples demonstrate, the prominence of sexuality in the basic tenets of psychoanalysis insured that women in particular would become more and more focused upon their sexual desirability as a reflection of their self-worth and as an avenue towards fulfilling their sexual needs, as I explain in third section.

Finally, the popularization of psychoanalytic theory also generated the assumption that open sexual expression was necessary for a healthy psychic outlook, as Allen summarizes in this section’s epigraph. Psychoanalyst Samuel D. Schmalhausen similarly asserts in “The Sexual Revolution” (1929) that psychoanalysis “has done the world a marvelous service . . . in making it overwhelmingly evident to all of us that sex fulfillment is indispensable to happy and satisfying living” (382). Granted, this viewpoint had been promoted by professionals in previous decades, notably sexologists Richard von Krafft-Ebing and Havelock Ellis; the latter offered a scientific defense for why sex is “the chief and central function of life. . . . all that is most simple and natural and pure and good” (qtd. in D’Emilio and Freedman 224). However, psychoanalytic

theory further distanced its advocates from sexology's more spiritual interpretation of sexual relations as, "a true union of souls, not merely a physical function for the momentary relief of the sexual organs," as Margaret Sanger claims, by providing them with a more clinical approach which justified sexual experimentation and a variety of partners (142).⁸

Sex, in other words, became the quintessential modern experience exemplified by scientific discovery, one to be sought and enjoyed lest one reveal an unhealthy repression of a natural drive. Furthermore, these theories taught both genders that sexual expression was their purview; women, for the first time, could be active sexual partners responding to their own needs, not just passive participants satiating stronger male urges. Yet this newfound autonomy was based on a contradictory premise: an active sexual life was acceptable because sexual desire was an instinctual drive that required expression to avoid the dangers of repression. In short, women gained the right to a conscious sexual autonomy based on the belief that the libido was an unconscious drive that was unhealthy to disobey. Moreover, as I later explain, psychoanalysis and sexology did not equalize sexual relations nor suggest that male and female sexual drives were the same, and such theories brought additional sanctions against those traditionally "unnatural" urges, homosexuality and interracial relationships.

To fully appreciate the impact of this scientific affirmation of female desire, we must briefly review the previous generations' models of female sexuality. The flapper's ardent sexual autonomy was in stark contrast to the nineteenth century's "Angel of the Household" or True Woman, defined by her passivity, frailty, and passionlessness, characteristics accepted as not merely religious propriety but also inherent, physiological facts. As historians Nancy F. Cott ("Passionless") and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg have

documented, in this era woman was deemed intellectually and physically subordinate to man and suited only for domestic activities like marriage and motherhood even if a great number of women were excluded from this “natural” category: any woman who worked outside the home, who was not a mother, or who demonstrated intellectual or physical independence or strength. Remnants of the True Woman filtered into the twentieth century through various outlets, such as Southern plantation fiction, but this study will later discuss her incarnation in black middle-class ideology.

The next dominant female persona, the New Woman of the turn of the century, returned women to the public sphere but did little to advocate a modern sexual independence. A symbol of broader educational and career opportunities for primarily white middle- and upper-class women, the New Woman entered the American imagination as the fun-loving, attractive Gibson Girl who, as Lynn D. Gordon has summarized, attended a single-sex college to find a gender-appropriate career like teaching or nursing that would conveniently end with marriage.⁹ These characteristics were necessary to refute Victorian medical experts who claimed intellectual pursuits disrupted female physiology by shifting energy from the reproductive organs to the brain, causing “neurasthenia, hysteria, [and] insanity” (Smith-Rosenberg 258). However, in reality many female college graduates often chose career over marriage and family, with only 40 to 60 percent of white graduates marrying between the 1870s and 1920s, compared to 90 percent of the general female population (Smith-Rosenberg 253). Meanwhile, the birth rate for white women declined 24 percent between 1880 and 1920, and the divorce rate shot up during the same period despite a tightening of restrictions in many states, reaching 16.5 percent for every 100 marriages by 1928 (Kessler-Harris 344 n1; Streissguth 39). Such developments, though, should not suggest that New Women

were advocating sexual freedom.¹⁰ Instead, these career women relied on traditional interpretations of female strengths to justify their transition into the public sphere, arguing, in Lois Rudnick's summary, that "the values of community, compassion, love, and sympathy needed to be extended beyond the home" (74). And yet, threatened by this increase in divorces, a declining birthrate, and new female economic and political power, the male-dominated establishment began a new tactic to discredit these New Women.¹¹ Using European theories of sexuality, American scientific discourse in the 1910s began to target white professional women as a threat to the norms of heterosexual monogamy.

Sexology, led by Krafft-Ebing and Ellis, shifted the definition of "deviant" or non-heterosexual practice away from religious morality and into the scientific realm in conjunction with the overall trend. Much of this medical discourse relied on the theory that homosexuals demonstrated the physiological and psychological traits of the opposite sex as "inverts," as Ellis explains: "the chief characteristic of the sexually inverted woman is a certain degree of masculinity" (qtd. in Newton 288). As a result, any "unfeminine" behavior could be categorized as deviant or even pathological, often linking, in Smith-Rosenberg's words, "women's rejection of traditional gender roles and their demands for social and economic equality to cross-dressing, sexual perversion, and borderline hermaphroditism" (272).¹² In short, this scientific shift now defined non-normative sexuality within the realm of personality, not in the practicalities of practice, a crucial rebalancing of power that allowed the conservative dominant society to target any female challenge to male economic, social, or political power as a threat to the health of society regardless of factual evidence of non-heterosexual acts.

Given the transformation of the fresh-faced Gibson college girl into an aggressive, mannish lesbian, the 1920s promotion of female sexual autonomy thus focused almost

exclusively upon heterosexuality. Psychoanalytic theory reinforced heterosexual normativity by characterizing homosexual urges as a stage in adolescent development rather than an aberration in one's psyche, a shift from sexology's definition of homosexuality as, "an inherited diseased condition of the central nervous system" (qtd. in Faderman, Surpassing 241). In other words, as Christina Simmons summarizes, homosexuality became "a condition which developed in specific relation to heterosexuality, namely through the failure or deprivation or rejection of the latter" ("Companionate" 500). Inversion characteristics were still an indicator of homosexuality but overall, as George Chauncey, Jr. explains, "once all women were considered able to experience and act on sexual desire, medical concern shifted logically from the *fact* of women's sexual activity to their *choice* of sexual and social partners" ("Sexual" 106). Like other psychoanalytic theories, new views on homosexuality disseminated throughout public discourse, becoming so widespread that, as Lillian Faderman states, "it would not have been necessary to read Freud's essays on 'The Sexual Aberrations' or 'The Psychogenesis of a Case of Homosexuality in a Woman' in order to know that love between women was now an indication of childhood trauma and arrested development" (Surpassing 315).¹³ In fact, even in communities associated with the growing visibility of lesbians, notably the Greenwich Village, intellectuals and artists maintained this bias by accepting homosexuality as youthful experimentation but rejecting the possibility that it could be a normal woman's permanent orientation. As Faderman makes clear, sexual liaisons with women were tolerated by liberals only if its participants acknowledged that "lesbianism was just a phase some women went through and while it was all right to express it in order to get rid of suppressions, it must not become arrested as a way of life" (Odd 85).¹⁴

At the same time, without requiring visible inversion characteristics, new theories of homosexuality, as Sherrie A. Inness summarizes, “were perceived to be far more threatening to the social order,” since, by being a stage of development, lesbian tendencies must be more prevalent than previously estimated and less easily detectable (26). Environmental factors thus became even more significant in identifying potential deviance, particularly single-sex communities and groups. In her 1929 book, Factors in the Sex Life of Twenty-Two Hundred Women, Katherine Bement Davis, for example, rationalizes that homosexual practices are “common in boarding-schools and colleges exclusively for girls and women and in penal institutions of all types,” while claiming, “in the majority of cases, . . . these are substitutes for more normal [heterosexual] relationships” (245). Such thinking prevailed throughout the 1930s, as George W. Henry’s “Psychogenic Factors in Overt Homosexuality” (1937) attests: “boarding and non-coeducational schools are more likely to favor a homosexual development. It is generally recognized that any segregation of the sexes is likely to bring about overt expression of latent homosexual desires” (902). Such assumptions not only discouraged women from forming their own social and political groups, but, as Sarah Jane Deutsch notes, “some young women even feared to share apartments with each other lest they be suspected of homosexuality” (439).

Moreover, accusations of sexual deviancy were still levied at women who challenged traditional bastions of male power, but now they were often defined as psychologically stunted, using masculine interests like careers and intellectual avocations to shirk natural feminine responsibilities of family and home. For instance, physician John W. Meagher asserts in 1929, “the driving force in many agitators and militant women who are always after their rights, is often an unsatisfied sex impulse, with a

homosexual aim. . . . so-called emancipated women are usually frigid, and usually have little unselfish maternal feelings” (qtd. in Carlston 181). W. Beran Wolfe likewise argues in 1935, “the normal adolescent stage of homosexuality could become an evasion of marriage and motherhood” (Carlston 180). Overall, then, lesbians continued to suffer social stigmatization, and all women were penalized because, as historians Rayna Rapp and Ellen Ross recognize, they “lost the diffuse homosocial and homosexual milieus within which earlier generations of women had operated” (101).

And yet the decrease in inversion theories of lesbianism and rise in acceptance of homosexuality as a stage in normal psychosexual development began a cultural discourse about the commonality of homosexual attachments, and contemporary studies confirmed the notion that lesbian relationships were, indeed, everywhere. Katherine Davis concludes, for instance, that over 50 percent of the 1200 unmarried women in her study have had “intense emotional relations” with other women, and half of this group had “overt physical practices” with another woman, while the correlations for the 1000 married women were 32 percent and 16 percent respectively (277, 298).¹⁵ Significantly, she also discovers that almost a quarter of the unmarried women with previous physical relationships continued such practices to the present time as did two percent of the married women (K Davis 252, 298). A 1929 study by psychiatrist G.V. Hamilton of 100 married couples under the age of 40 similarly produced the startling figure that 37 percent of the wives had a physical homosexual experience, 26 percent since age 18, and 21 percent are still attracted to women (497, 492-93, 496). In their survey of 252 single women ages 15 to 26, “divided between the school and working groups,” Phyllis Blanchard and Carlyn Manasses also find one-third admit crushes on women and more than one-fifth prefer women over men (178, 99). Furthermore, the flapper, with her

emphasis on carefree sexual experimentation, most likely continued to encourage homosexual experiences even though she was at least partially conceived to refute their existence.

As we shall see, popular culture similarly constructed female sexual autonomy upon a racial hierarchy, an outlook affirmed by psychoanalytic theory. As Sander L. Gilman notes, since the eighteenth century Europeans have interpreted the “voluptuousness” of African women as a sign of “a degree of lasciviousness unknown in our climate,” and scientists continued to assume that black women and lesbians possessed “an abnormally prominent clitoris” well into the 1920s (qtd. in Gilman 292; qtd. in Somerville 27). Sexologists and later psychoanalysts were also influenced by Krafft-Ebing’s degeneration theory which linked homosexuality and black lasciviousness to primitive societies and placed white heteronormativity at the top of the evolutionary scale.¹⁶ Such theories were particularly useful to counteract the presumption of earlier decades that interpreted any sexual desire in women as immoral and primitive, resituating the libidinous black temptress as the inverse of white female sexuality even as the white model of womanhood shifted from the passionless Angel of the Household to the sexy and sexually knowledgeable flapper.

In addition, in Queering the Color Line, Siobhan B. Somerville insists after the 1910s, “two tabooed types of desire – interracial and homosexual – became linked in sexological and psychological discourse through the model of ‘abnormal’ sexual object choice” (34). In particular, anxieties about environmental influences on lesbianism became intertwined with traditional fears regarding interracial sexual relations as seen in a number of reports about interracial romances among women. In her tellingly entitled essay “A Perversion Not Commonly Noted” (1913), Margaret Otis documents widespread “love-making between white and colored girls” in boarding and reform

schools and then attributes the attraction to racial origins by commenting that one white girl “admitted that the colored girl she loved seemed the man and thought it was so with the others,” as does a 1915 report on these practices at a New York prison: “there is no denying that the colored girls are extremely attractive to certain white girls and the feeling is apt to be more intense than between white girls alone” (66; qtd. in Alexander 91). These beliefs continued into the 1920s, Charles A. Ford claiming that in such relationships “one [woman] assumes the role of husband and the other the wife,” offering as an example a prison couple where the white “wife” calls her black lover “my dearest and only husben [sic],” while Katherine Davis makes a comparable observation: “one of the most frequent reasons given for the segregation of negro girls and women in these [penal] institutions is that the racial difference appears to increase this homosexual attraction” (71, 72; 245). Thus, theoretical assumptions about deviant heteronormativity and non-white sexuality helped to justify a number of social agendas that worked to limit interracial sexuality even when miscegenation was not a potential outcome.

Finally, psychoanalytic theories encouraged female sexual autonomy even for white, heterosexual women only within certain contexts, notably, one of loving monogamy. Again, this issue also arises within the popular culture as I will later analyze in detail, but here I will explain how it was disseminated by scientific professionals directly to the American public through marital advice literature. I offer a close review of this genre as it popularized psychoanalytic theory while alleviating anxieties generated by popular culture’s increasing obsession with female sexuality. In turn, the overwhelming popularity of these manuals suggests that the general population yearned for didactic professional advice on their intimate lives. A number of studies of sexual habits are included as well since they too explicitly offered readers professional advice by

characterizing “healthy” behavior. These texts also demonstrate that liberal attitudes towards sexuality continued to circulate publicly in the 1930s, a period otherwise defined as more conservative than its preceding decade.¹⁷ In short, these advice manuals and studies greatly contributed to the validation of female sexual autonomy yet also attempted to curtail its practice by advocating sexual relationships that did not threaten the traditional bulwarks of marriage and romantic love with limited results, as I will also discuss.

Although marriage manuals had previously existed, a new type became common during this period, one that encouraged a marital relationship based upon sexual intimacy rather than family responsibilities.¹⁸ According to historians Michael Gordon and Steven Seidman, marital advice books incorporated psychoanalytic findings on sexuality to argue that marital sex was necessary for a loving and bonding relationship, not for procreation.¹⁹ For example, in Happiness in Marriage (1926), Margaret Sanger insists that for marriages, “contracted with a frank recognition of the central importance of the beauty of sex in life alike, in its physiological, psychological and spiritual aspects, happiness is an art” (17-18). M. J. Exner similarly contends in The Sexual Side of Marriage (1932), “the basic marriage bond is sex attraction, the sex urge; and this being an inborn drive, its normal satisfaction becomes . . . a condition for the sustained harmony and mutual satisfaction in all the other areas of the marital relationship” (qtd. in Seidman 76). One of the period’s most famous authors was Judge Ben B. Lindsey, who, with Wainwright Evans, advocates in Companionate Marriage (1927) for a new legal partnership which would recognize how, “sex fulfills purposes in human life which go far beyond the mere function of procreation” (227). His definition of companionate marriage is, “a state of lawful wedlock, entered into for love, companionship, and

cooperation by persons who, for reasons of health, finances, temperament, etc., are not prepared at the time of their marriage to undertake the care of the family” (Lindsey and Evans 175). Contemporary surveys by physicians likewise rate couples’ happiness based on sexual competency; one study by Robert Latou Dickinson and Lura Beam entitled A Thousand Marriages: A Medical Study of Sex Adjustment (1931) calculates that on average their patients have intercourse two to three times per week, but wives who are sexually adjusted have the higher average, while Louis M. Terman decides in his study of 2,484 upper and middle-class Californians in 1938, the majority under age 40, that spouses who both achieve “optimum satisfaction” between the frequency of sexual relations and their desire for sex have “the highest happiness means” (57, 58; 284).

Concurrent with the significance of sex in marriage came the significance of marriage for sex, as marriage professionals stressed that marital love – as a legal, monogamous partnership – still provided the most fulfilling sexual relationship, so that, in historian Paula S. Fass’s words, “sexual exclusiveness became the capstone of expressive love” (75). One example is A. Herbert Gray’s Men, Women, and God (1922) where he maintains, “sexual intimacy is not the perfect and sacramental thing which it is meant to be unless both parties come to it with free and untroubled minds, feeling that what they do is a right and happy thing. But in the union of unmarried persons there generally lurks some half-hidden sense of shame . . . and even love cannot dispel the shadows thus created” (qtd. in M Gordon 65). In What is Right With Marriage (1929), Robert C. and Frances W. Binkley insist, “the exploration of the aesthetic possibilities of sex is an excellent coeducational experience to be reserved for the threshold of domestic life” (191). Ernest W. Burgess follows this reasoning in his essay, “The Sociological Aspects of the Sex Life of the Unmarried Adult” (1934), arguing that one of the

conceptions which has “shaped and will in all probability continue to shape the sexual and familial behavior of our people [is] . . . [t]hat the highest personal happiness comes from marriage based upon romantic love” (153). Rather than the conventional view that marriage legitimized sexual relations for the benefit of society, then, these professionals utilized the period’s emphasis on the fulfillment of psychological needs in order to argue that marriage serves a psychological purpose which enhances the individual’s sexual experience.

At the same time, a few marriage professionals were willing to acknowledge extramarital sexual relations and condemn society’s efforts to regulate them. For example, the Binkleys state, “when circumstances, either temporary or permanent, bring it about that the maintenance of sex monopoly imposes a real sacrifice upon one or the other partner, husband and wife might well be free to agree whether the sacrifice imposed does not outweigh the advantage to be derived from monopoly” (215-16). Lindsey and Evans claim, “it is no function of society to discriminate against those who have such [extramarital] inclinations provided they duly respect and consider the genuine rights of other people. Within that limit, their conduct is as much a personal matter” (82). Other commentators insist adultery is inevitable, such as Schmalhausen in Why We Misbehave (1928): “Insatiability of marital ties is the outstanding fact. Infidelity is no longer deemed a violation of a sacred vow. A kind of loosening of the old erotic bonds is occurring among all strata of the population” (67). His frequent collaborator V. F. Calverton likewise notes in The Bankruptcy of Marriage (1928) that due to birth control, “marriage thus is rapidly coming to lose sexual significance for women as well as men. The sexual element in life can be satisfied outside of marriage and without many of the impediments which the marital life enforces upon the man as well as the woman” (122).

Yet few professionals challenged marriage's domination in the social sector and even fewer suggested that its decline would stabilize social mores.

Perhaps the most liberal shift from earlier manuals was the emphasis on female sexual satisfaction as an integral component of marital happiness and adjustment.²⁰ Wilfred Lay's A Plea for Monogamy (1923), for instance, claims that only if "in every love episode the husband's erotic acme follows . . . the wife's, can the spiritually deleterious results of mentally autoerotic simultaneity be avoided. Only thus can the most inexpressible joy be experienced for both husband and wife," as does Sanger, who counsels, "the true wife will not be ashamed to give expression to her passionate love for her husband. For in so doing, she may assure that . . . its full-flowered expression will intensify and increase his love manifold" (155; 140-41). Contemporary studies of sexual habits, like Terman's, similarly argue that even when the husband has a balance between desire and satiation, "if the wife suffers marked sex hunger . . . , the husbands as well as the wives have a moderately low happiness mean" (284). Dickinson and Beam find that 42 percent of their female respondents usually or always had an orgasm and 26 percent never did, later concluding, "the habit of not-orgasm has as corollary some grade of negative feeling which eventually turns against coitus, perhaps also against the husband, in other aspects of marriage" (62, 438).

At the same time, the majority of marriage professionals concede that male and female sexual drives are different, although some, like sociologist Ernest R. Groves, stipulate that this difference, how "[female] desire for primary sex experience, that is, coitus, may not be felt so quickly or so consciously as man's," does not mean that "the physical appetite is for her something artificial or that it has a less substantial nervous basis than in the case of man" in his 1933 book, Marriage (235). Sanger asserts that "the

sex nature of woman is more deeply hidden in the mysterious recesses of her being. More deeply concealed, it is not so immediately susceptible to stimulation, is far slower in response and thus is not immediately ready for the act of love” (127). In Love and Life (1928), Don Cabot McCowan argues in the same vein, “as man’s erotic nature is usually more quickly and easily aroused than woman’s, they neglect the preliminary loving so necessary to women, to prepare them for the full pleasure and gratification of their sex life” (qtd. in M Gordon 70).

Therefore, like McCowan, most authors presume that the onus of the female orgasm lays with the husband; as Groves maintains in his 1928 book American Marriage and Family Relationships with William Ogburn, since the wife “is permitted to face consciously her sex needs, and without feeling that she is abnormal or guilty of offense to endeavor to use to the full her sex inheritance as a means of satisfaction. . . . she is putting new demands on her husband, . . . who now faces the necessity of satisfying both her and himself” (54). In Sex Habits: A Vital Factor in Well-Being (1933), German physicians Abraham Buschke and Friedrich Jacobsohn concur: “when the male partner is delicate in his advances and is genuinely affectionate, a woman who has regular experience of sexual intercourse will sooner or later begin to experience the orgasm” (125). Exner likewise warns, “male ignorance and disregard of women’s sexual capacities and needs is obviously a prime factor in the apparent coldness of women” (qtd. in Seidman 86). At least one clinician, however, ridicules this assumption, for in Modern Woman and Sex: A Feminist Physician Speaks (1933), Dr. Rachel. T. Yarros insists that the modern woman “is not ashamed of passion, and is not averse from taking the initiative in sex matters. . . . She demands equality and full control of her own body. She does not care to be a mere instrument in the pleasures to her husband or lover” (15).

Eventually, professionals, particularly physicians, became more explicit when describing love-making techniques, Michael Gordon noting that a focus on “positions in sexual intercourse . . . tends to set off the books of the thirties from those of the twenties” (72). There is a notable shift from Lay, who in 1923 merely counsels the husband to avoid a hasty orgasm, otherwise only stating cryptically, “as much time as possible should be given to each detail of the love episode,” to Dutch physician Theodore Van de Velde’s Ideal Marriage: Its Physiognomy and Technique, translated in 1930 for American readers, which provides detailed instructions, including “local [digital] stimulation,” the “genital kiss,” and “converse” and “averse” sexual positions (137; 164, 169, 212).²¹

What conclusions can we draw from this new marital philosophy? On one hand, elevating the value of female sexual desire to such a prominent place not only in an individual’s interest but also in society’s, such as to decrease the divorce rate, gave unprecedented validity to female sexual autonomy.²² Such an attitude was revolutionary in America’s history of sexuality when, as recently as a few decades before, women were alternately denied sexual desire or depicted as sexual aggressors out to undermine social stability. This view also contributed directly to the period’s increase in birth control use by married couples, as Fass suggests: “women had become eager to have sexual relations released from the burden of conception so that they could more freely engage in the sexual side of marriage. . . . contraceptives could enhance women’s self-awareness and control and therefore their potential for sexual response” (78). Married manuals routinely advocated for birth control availability, including Lay, Lindsey and Evans, and Groves, and surveys indicated their widespread usage (298; 242; Marriage Crisis 100).²³ For instance, 86 percent of the married couples in Dickinson and Beam’s study use some form of contraception, while Hamilton places this estimate at 99 percent, albeit both

examine a highly educated population (213; 98). Katherine Davis finds 76 percent of married college graduates practice birth control compared to 65 percent of those with less than a high school education (14). In the 1930s rates climbed even higher and spread to more sectors of the population, with 70 percent in a Gallup poll and 63 percent in a Fortune survey in 1936 in favor of open information and availability of contraceptives (Bromley and Britten 12).²⁴

On the other hand, to paraphrase Nancy Cott, the parity achieved in the bedroom did not readily transfer into political and economic power (Grounding 156). In fact, Simmons believes that “mainstream marriage ideology [was intended] to adapt to women’s perceived new social and sexual power” by reorienting it to the domestic sphere (“Companionate” 498). Yet we can just as easily see this professional bias for marital monogamy as a reaction against an increasing acceptance of extramarital sexual desire. Indeed, studies of extramarital experimentation often reveal the extent to which women were utilizing their sexual autonomy.²⁵ For example, Katherine Davis deduces that while only 11 percent of unmarried women admitted having sexual intercourse, 19 percent believe that a woman was justified in having premarital sex under certain conditions and another five percent found premarital sex excusable; 21 percent even justified female adultery under certain conditions (232, 351, 354). Albert Kinsey’s groundbreaking study, published in 1953, likewise estimates that 27 percent of their married female respondents born before 1900 had premarital intercourse and 22 percent of wives have had extramarital intercourse, rising to 30 percent for women born between 1900 and 1909 (D Smith 328; Kinsey et al 422).²⁶ Hamilton also discovered that 18 percent of wives were willing to admit such extramarital relations (350). Although one might assume that, given the emphasis on the importance of sex for a healthy marriage, sexual intercourse

after engagement would logically become the most acceptable type of experimentation, as Fass has pointed out, other studies indicate the reverse (274). Hamilton discovers that of the 35 percent of women who had premarital intercourse, the majority, 27 percent, had it with men other than their spouses, and Terman calculates that “five times as many of the youngest wives [born after 1900] as the oldest have had premarital intercourse with other than husband,” and were more than twice as likely to have premarital sex with both their spouse and someone else, rising from 22 percent to 52 percent (146, 350; 323, 321). As evidence of the more liberal thirties, the wives born after 1910 had the highest percentage of premarital intercourse at 68 percent (Terman 321). Dorothy Dunbar Bromley and Florence Haxton Britten’s 1938 study of almost 1400 college students likewise asserts that of the 24 percent of the women who admitted to premarital intercourse, only a third were then engaged, and 62 percent of all the women found premarital intercourse acceptable (4, 70-1). As high as these statistics may seem, one modern historian argues that they indicate an even greater prevalence of premarital sex. Daniel Scott Smith, in a comparative study of Terman’s, Davis’s and Kinsey’s findings, concludes that such statistics are low as they reflect the experience of college-educated, middle- and upper-class women who “maintained conservative sexual standards longer than the remainder of the population” (329).

The rise in premarital relations is particularly evident in surveys of the college-age population, perhaps because female interviewees were usually younger than 23 and found in peer communities which condoned such behavior. Most reviewers calculate that at least half of their respondents have sexually experimented, such as Ira S. Wile, who in 1934 cites one undated study that places sexual experience for women under 18 at 18 percent and at 61 percent for women 18 to 22, and in his essay “Sex Morals and the

Unmarried Adult” (1934), Horace M. Kallen recalls his survey of unmarried college-educated adults under 28, when he found half of the women have had sexual intercourse, the majority “deny[ing] any feelings of guilt about their sex-ways” (33; 246). He mentions another study by G.V. Hamilton published in 1929 which asserts that 61 percent of women born between 1891 and 1895 had premarital intercourse (Kallen 248). Using their extensive questionnaires, Bromley and Britten similarly contend that twenty-five percent of the unmarried college women who had sex did so without “an illusion of love” (88).

Petting, sexual experimentation that presumably stopped short of intercourse, was also popular among the young. A 1924 study concludes that 92 percent of its college women had tried petting at least once, while Blanchard and Manasses find 23 percent of their unmarried respondents accept petting as standard dating practice, one girl explaining, “when a boy takes a girl out and shows her a good time, why shouldn’t she be willing to be agreeable and pet a little?” (Fass 265-66; 66, qtd. in 65). A 1928 study of 23 colleges confirms this practice, one woman noting that at her coeducational university, “among the majority [of women] a ‘petting’ party is the right thing to do,” with another agreeing, “most popular girls permit [sexual] liberties” (qtd. in Edwards, Artman and Fisher 190, 218). The popularity of petting, though, also arose from the continuing double standard which judged sexual intercourse more harshly for women. For example, 30 percent of 3000 Syracuse University students surveyed for a 1931 report supported the double standard, and in a study of four university campuses (1922-23), both men and women rank sexual experimentation as “the worst practice among women,” with men condemning sexual promiscuity in women more harshly than the women did (Kinsey et al. 309 n24; Fass 451 n14, 452 n15). Therefore, petting was another way for women to

gain sexual autonomy for it allowed sexual experimentation with little social castigation; as Bromley and Britten point out, “that a girl should feel she can give within limits or permit exploratory intimacies without compromising her essential virginity, is one of the phenomena of the contemporary younger generation’s mores” (64-65). Clearly, then, many women still felt free enough to fulfill their sexual desires outside of marriage regardless of the professional emphasis on marital monogamy, a sure sign that the psychoanalytic emphasis on sex as a requirement of psychological health was not lost on the modern young woman.

Careers, Cabarets, and Cloche Hats: The Influence of Women and their Money

“This overthrow of old customs and sex ideals must be chiefly attributed to the economic independence of women brought about through the industrialism of our age.”

Beatrice M. Hinkle, “New Morals for Old: Women and the New Morality” (1925), p. 541.

These trends in sexual experimentation indicate that women in the twenties and thirties felt a growing sense of sexual independence thanks to changing conceptions of psychological needs. Now I will examine another factor, women’s growing economic independence, which in turn fueled an increasingly female-oriented popular culture. In short, shifts in women’s economic viability and freedom helped alter women’s understanding of themselves as sexual beings; ironically, however, popular culture began to interpret female sexual expression, notably sexual desirability, as the avenue to greater

economic power through the traditional site of women's economic dependence, marriage, and still maintained a bias against lower-class and non-white women. Even if some of these gains were more symbolic than actual changes in women's legal status, their influence should not be disregarded as even these symbolic gains, by shifting the profile of women in the public sphere, contributed to a greater sense of sexual freedom and validation of female sexual autonomy.

The socioeconomic influences which encouraged a new female sexual autonomy arose first for working-class and black women in the decades prior to the 1920s. First of all, female sexual icons in earlier eras were, as I mentioned, unavailable to these women due to their race and economic situations. For one, black women had always been more likely than white women to work outside the home, particularly after marriage. At the turn of the century, single black women were three times more likely to work than single white women, and the number rose to five times more likely for married women (J Jones 113). The professional gains made by white New Women were also generally unavailable to black women. By 1920, 75 percent of working black women were still employed in agriculture, laundry, or domestic service despite the fact that five times as many black women worked outside the home than for any other racial or ethnic sector (J Jones 162; Kessler-Harris 237). Black women usually could not even break into manufacturing jobs dominated by native women in the south and foreign-born women in the north, and when they did, as historian Jacqueline Jones explains, they "remained at the lowest rungs of the ladder in terms of wages and working conditions" (167). Wealthier black women could attend one of the two black women's colleges or, by 1910, one of the 100 black colleges or white schools which allowed limited black enrollment, including Oberlin, Radcliffe, and Barnard, Zora Neale Hurston's alma mater, but after

graduation they were still restricted by race to specific professions and opportunities, often, like Nella Larsen, teaching or nursing in black communities (D Brown 146).²⁷

Working-class women similarly did not fit cultural expectations by having to supplement the family income with menial wage labor. During the first decades of the twentieth century, 20 percent of white married working-class women were employed versus about 12 percent of all white married women (Tentler 137; Degler 384). This percentage of married workers is misleading, however, as studies often did not include in-home work, such as lodging, industrial home work, building housekeeping, or laundry, by some estimates bringing the percentage of lower-class working wives to over fifty percent (Tentler 144). Although native-born whites had the advantages of race and language which presumably could be facilitated by education, working-class children were often routed into vocational schools for domestic services; in 1910 Boston, for example, girls were trained as household servants, cooks, nursery maids, dressmakers, laundresses, and hospital attendants (Kessler-Harris 176). This focus limited access to white-collar office jobs because such jobs required, in one 1911 report's words, "business 'college' courses in stenography and typewriting," or department store sales positions which likewise demanded "learned and cultivated" applicants (qtd. in Tentler 96; qtd. in Rothman 55). Furthermore, due to their families' economic hardship, many girls left school to find employment by fourteen or, thanks to stricter laws, by sixteen in the 1920s, with estimates as high as 73 percent in large cities (Tentler 93, 95). Once in the workplace, women faced routine discrimination and often endured deplorable conditions in factories and home sweatshops that damaged their mental and physical health.²⁸

Despite the exploitation of low wages and dreadful environments, working women during the early twentieth century found new opportunities in employment, especially in cities where the anonymity of the streets, housing outside of traditional family structures, a youthful peer group, and more job opportunities gave them a freedom their mothers never experienced. As historian Linda Gordon points out, “no single factor did more to change the sexual behavior of unmarried women than their entrance into the labor market, especially if it meant living away from home” (200). Without the supervision of family or small-town communities, young women were free to indulge in the amusements available in many Northern cities, including pool halls, dance halls, theaters, and department stores, which provided them with the opportunity to spend money and mingle with the opposite sex, one African American migrant to Chicago admitting, “I make more money here than I did down South, but I can’t save anything out of it – there are so many places to go here” (qtd. in J Jones 192). Constant interaction with peers at work and at play gave these young women, in the words of Leslie Woodcock Tentler, “an authentically contemporary model of adolescent culture” in which the focus was on romance, fashion, and social events (68, 71-71). At the same time, given the broad range of spending opportunities but relatively low wage for women workers, sexual experimentation became not merely a romantic break from daily toil but also an economic adjustment. As Kathy Peiss has documented, gender mixing in the workplace and amusement centers created a new standard of behavior that “tolerated, and at times encouraged, physical and verbal familiarity between men and women, and stressed the exchange of sexual favors for social and economic advantages” (“Charity” 62). Linda Gordon asserts that even clerical workers, forced to spend more of their salaries on appearance than other employees, similarly “had to count on being taken out to dinner

several nights a week in order to make ends meet” (201). Thus, thanks to a disposable income and an array of cheap entertainment and fashion, thousands of women found sexual freedom, including a willingness to exploit sexual favors for material gain, even before the flapper provided mainstream affirmation of the same freedom and the same exploitation (Peiss, “Charity” 64).

The flapper’s overwhelming popularity, in fact, indicates just how much the experiences of middle-class women became like non-white and working-class female populations, as many began to join the work world in the 1920s. As a result, the cultural perception of the middle-class working woman changed, replacing the spinster professional of the earlier generation with the young stenographer and department store clerk whose stint in the work world was a stage prior to marriage rather than a lifetime career choice. By 1920, more employed women, 27 percent, were in white-collar office positions than any other sector, making up 14 percent of all professional workers by 1930 (Kessler-Harris 224; Degler 414). Viewing female wages as disposable for single women or secondary for wives was convenient for employers who then could justify a lower wage and promotion rate than male counterparts. Despite the positive press coverage of female executives, which Fannie Hurst accurately documents in Imitation of Life, women often had trouble moving up, and the professional opportunities, which raised the number of female professionals from 9 percent of the total workforce in 1910 to 14 percent in 1930, were mostly not in business, law, or medicine but in the female-dominated sectors of teaching, nursing, and social work (Dumenil 116; Harris 138). The majority of middle-class white women, then, remained in typing, stenography, and filing, but such positions also attracted women who otherwise rejected domestic and manufacturing jobs, perhaps because clerical work was, like nursing and teaching, considered an acceptable

gender parallel to male white-collar professions like business manager, doctor, and principal, not to mention an convenient avenue to meeting these very suitable mates. Furthermore, these occupations were viewed as extensions of women's "natural" talents; secretarial work in particular was characterized as excellent wifely training for the good secretary, in one's opinion, "thinks *with* her employer, thinks *for* her employer, thinks *of* her employer" (qtd. in Kessler-Harris 234). Once again, then, middle-class women redefined the ideal of womanhood to seize the gains made by women outside of the mainstream while continuing to maintain their alterity. Movies made in the 1920s reflect this trend as 28 heroines are stenographers and 114 are secretaries, the majority, like Soft Living (1928), concluding with the heroine's escape from the work world through marriage (Ryan 375, 376). Another 49 female leads are sales clerks, the flapper's other stereotypical occupation (Ryan 375).

The Depression forced more women into the workplace despite some social commentators who saw women as direct competition for more deserving male breadwinners.²⁹ Historians estimate that many wives entered the job market, 75 percent of whom had never worked before, overall raising the total of working wives from 29 percent in 1930 to 35 percent in 1940, and the total number of women working in 1940 was 25 percent higher than in 1930 (Kessler-Harris 259; Degler 415). Granted, this influx of native-born white women pushed others, like black and immigrant women, further down the job scale to domestic and agricultural work or even, as a study by Lois Rita Helmbold demonstrates, out of the job market altogether (636). Black unemployment, in fact, rapidly increased to an average of thirty percent in northern cities and over seventy percent in southern cities, reaching 58 percent in Chicago and 75 percent in Detroit for black women alone (Mintz and Kellogg 141). But this continued

influx of women into the marketplace forced society to recognize their contributions outside of the domestic sphere and most likely contributed to the increasing public acceptance of birth control.

Although the growing numbers of employed women did not automatically foster acceptance or equality, it did alter public views on what a woman can and should do in life. In other words, images of working women in popular culture like the flapper gave women real freedom as they validated women's desire to move out of the home and into the public sector even when those women did not fit the flapper ideal. As historian Alice Kessler-Harris explains, "access to the business world legitimized the goal of independence. Once present, it could neither be confined to the unmarried nor removed from those who took husbands" (226). Contemporary Clement Wood echoes a similar sentiment: "Woman today is increasingly becoming a wielder of the financial whip. . . . Her body's usage is no longer her sole coin for buying bread and butter; whether the token was stamped sacred by a marriage license or not. She can now increasingly buy her will of the world" (69).

This independence thus transformed women's experience as it gave millions the opportunity and economic ability to access what was more and more becoming a youth-oriented, public culture. The movie houses, cabarets, and dance halls that had previously been the center of working-class neighborhoods now became available and acceptable to women of all classes.³⁰ College women were similarly affected as coeducational institutions and pastimes were encouraged by administrators, in part due to the previously mentioned concern with "unhealthy" single-sex environments and in part to provide campus alternatives to public amusements centers. Nor were married women left out of these sites of leisure; during the previous decade, dancing had been introduced as a

symbolic romantic escape for married couples, and popular culture, as I later discuss, now made nightlife a requirement for the modern wife.³¹ Not only could classes, genders, and, as I discuss below, races mix in the public atmosphere of cabarets and clubs, but the mix was also a part of the attraction; the previously secluded upper classes were now able, as Erenberg asserts, “to enter a public world where they could draw on people of impulse from whom they were no longer so rigidly separated to construct a world of personal choices and experiences removed from private convention and institutional roles” (141). Armed with a new psychological rhetoric that encouraged self-expression and self-fulfillment, women moved more freely in this public world of work and leisure and demanded access to realms of entertainment and business that had previously been designated inaccessible or inappropriate.

As Erenberg’s quotation unfortunately implies, whites often associated the relaxed sexual morals of public entertainment with lower-class or non-white “people of impulse.” This bias is the most evident in the white infatuation with Harlem nightlife. As historians have suggested, the spectatorship atmosphere of nightclubs, cabarets, and cafes reconfirmed class and racial boundaries as whites were able to participate in the more liberal sexual environment from a safe distance, particularly in clubs like the Cotton Club and the Everglades where blacks were not admitted as audience members.³² Many shows deliberately recalled the stereotype of the black primitive, as one 1925 guidebook demonstrates: “[The black performers’] unflinching sense of rhythm, their vocal quality, something primitive, animal-like and graceful in their movements, . . . combine to make their performances interesting” (qtd. in Chauncey, *Gay* 247). Scantily dressed female performers and sexually suggestive lyrics and dances similarly played upon conceptions of unfettered black sexuality, as a 1927 Cotton Club review deliberately recalls: “The

almost Caucasian-hued high yaller girls look swell and uncork the meanest kind of cooching ever exhibited to a conglomerate mixed audience” (qtd. in Streissguth 120). Other venues, like the charity ball recounted in Passing, gave whites more opportunities to enjoy quasi-sexual interracial contact. In a sense, like the appropriation of lower-class amusements, the white upper classes commodified the public sexual expression associated with the non-white and lower-class populations to such an extent that the public sexual expression of these populations literally became another commodity.

This exploitative relationship does not preclude the possibility that black women themselves could benefit from public displays of sexuality. For one, some critics maintain that blues discourse was a liberating site for heterosexual black women as blues singers were able to, in Hazel V. Carby’s words, celebrate “their sensuality and sexuality out of the private into the public sphere” (“It Jus,” 339). For example, Bessie Smith’s “Young Woman’s Blues,” announces, “I’m a young woman and ain’t done running around. . . . I ain’t gonna marry, ain’t gonna settle down. . . . I’m a good woman and I can get plenty men” (qtd. in Batker 203). Mary Dixon’s “All Around Mama” similarly proclaims, “I’ve had men of all sizes, had ‘em tall and lean / Had ‘em short, had ‘em flappy, had ‘em in between” (qtd. in duCille 74). But as representatives of a working-class tradition, blues singers, as Carol Batker insists, positioned themselves against middle-class ideals which implicitly reaffirmed the stereotype of working-class promiscuity (202). Moreover, Ann duCille questions the site of their sexual agency as it is built upon, “the racial and sexual iconography that cast the African woman as hypersexual primitive” (74).

For another, critics Eric Garber and SDiane A. Bogus have asserted that Harlem’s nightlife provided a refuge for black and white homosexuals thanks to, in Garber’s view,

“a culture that accepted sexuality, including homosexual behavior and identities, as a natural part of life” (320). And yet homosexual acceptance was dependent on class as many of the self-identified lesbians were lower-class entertainers, like Bessie Smith and Mabel Thurman, compared to upper-class male artists like Countee Cullen, Langston Hughes, and Wallace Thurman, reiterating the bourgeois assumption that lower-class women were more likely to be sexually deviant. The Harlem elite also campaigned against the area’s reputation as a gay haven, famed minister Adam Clayton Powell utilizing the pulpit and the press to denounce such “immorality” and declare homosexuality a threat to the black family, “causing men to leave their wives for other men, wives to leave their husbands for other women, and girls to mate with girls instead of marrying” (qtd. in Chauncey, Gay 254-55). Consequently, those few Harlem Renaissance works which explore homosexual themes usually focus on gay men, such as Bruce Nugent’s “Smoke, Lilies and Jade” (1926) and Thurman’s Infants of the Spring (1932). As this comment by Powell suggests, female homosexuals were perhaps considered *more* threatening to the stability of the African American family and hence the community due to racial discourse that constantly stressed the necessity of family life to uplift the race, a topic I explore in detail in the next section.

Despite their new familiarity with the working class and their pastimes, upper-class whites continued their bias against working-class sexuality and targeted working-class employment, leisure, and family life as unsavory and dangerous even as the middle-class experience became more and more similar. As historians Mary E. Odem, Regina G. Kunzel, and Ruth M. Alexander have claimed, in previous eras working class women, particularly prostitutes and unwed mothers, were tagged as victims of sexual exploitation by reformers who wished to control their sexual autonomy even as they promised to save

them from male sexual aggression. By the 1910s and 1920s, however, focus had shifted to blaming female sexual expression as well as male lasciviousness, and social workers, sociologists, and psychologists now reported on the conditions which made young women criminal “delinquents,” sexually promiscuous even without evidence of prostitution.³³ For instance, a social worker argues in 1930 that, “sex irregularities may be traced pretty directly to unsupervised dance halls, amusement parks, low-grade theaters, and excursion steamers” (qtd. in Kunzel 58). As a result, this period saw a huge increase in institutional treatment of female immorality, including juvenile facilities, penitentiaries, and foster homes, and led to new laws to fill those institutions, like New York’s Wayward Minor Law of 1923, which allowed girls under 21 to be committed to the legal system solely based on the testimony of their parents or guardians (Alexander 51-52). Girls also entered the system through a new network of neighborhood outpatient psychiatric facilities, over 470 by 1928, under referrals for sexual misconduct by parents or teachers (Alexander 63). Professionals similarly defined single mothers in voluntary maternity homes as agitators in the reshuffling of social morals, one sociologist derisively stating in 1926, “everything that makes for the gratification of the sex instinct apart from family responsibility strikes at the very root of the family itself” (qtd. in Kunzel 52). Once in the system, women often had to conform to their patron’s middle-class notions of propriety as not only visitors and unsupervised excursions were prohibited even in voluntary maternity homes but also “profane language,” “fancy dress,” and “paint, powder, jewelry, and the like” (qtd. in Kunzel 31). Therefore, as Alexander summarizes, “it was usually girls of low status who suffered public reproach. Unlike the affluent young women . . . who escaped legal sanction though they patronized cheap dance halls, entertained men in their rooms, and indulged in premarital sex,” working-class girls

became criminals or even medical wards of the state, for Elizabeth Lunbeck documents how the overwhelming majority of women committed to Boston Psychopathic Hospital between 1900 and 1930 for sexual deviancy were working-class, often placed there due to “the readiness of [middle-class] professionals to consign them, on the thinnest of evidence, to the ranks of the promiscuous” (12; 201). Working-class women may have read the same romance magazines, saw the same movies, wore the same fashion, and enjoyed the same dance halls and amusement parks as their upper-class sisters, but their implementation of the same sexual freedom carried a higher level of danger, one that required legal intervention rather than an endorsement by popular culture.

The influx of migrating young women into urban areas raised class issues about female sexual propriety within the African American community as well, leading to the establishment of organizations like The Association for the Protection of Colored Girls and the Colored Mission to guide women to wholesome activities and employment positions.³⁴ Granted, black reformers like Jane Edna Hunter who strove to protect “the young Negro girl pushed from the nest by economic pressure, alone and friendless in a northern city; reduced to squalor, starvation; helpless against temptation and degradation” did so with justification, as black women were suffering disproportionately under the legal campaign against female delinquency (qtd. in Carby, “Policing” 25-26). They were often targeted by vice squads as prostitutes, particularly in New York City where women could be arrested by undercover police officers based on testimony of the officers trying to entrap them with offers of sex.³⁵ Yet, like their white counterparts, black professionals encouraged conventional middle-class behavior in order to counteract what they defined as immoral cultural messages of sexual freedom and experimentation, such as a 1927 study of black urban recreation which concludes that dance halls were bastions of crime

and “illicit sex behavior” and cabarets sites of “social demoralization” (qtd. in Carby, “Policing” 33). Hunter, founder of the Working Girls’ Home Association, in the same way condemns nightclubs as “an exhibition of unbridled animality, . . . the jungle faintly veneered with civilized trappings” (qtd. in Carby, “Policing” 28). The reformers’ tendency, in Carby’s words, to believe that “black female sexual behavior, because . . . it is degenerate, threatens the progress of the race” severely limited black women’s sexual autonomy even as it sought to redeem them from a racist establishment (“Policing” 27). As I later explain in more detail, black culture in general encouraged such restrictive notions of black female sexuality.

The notion that the dominant culture could appropriate the practices and beliefs of marginalized groups while maintaining a hierarchical status quo is certainly not unique to this period nor limited to sexual autonomy, but notably during these decades, the broader American culture popularized and commodified culturally-specific aesthetics from jazz and gospel to dialect poetry and primitivist art. In a sense, then, the ascension of the flapper was another exemplar of modernist appropriation that benefited the white upper class both economically, with her emphasis on conspicuous consumption for personal and social benefit, and ideologically, since greater sexual expression and experimentation were reinscribed within traditional ideals about heteronormativity and economic advancement. Yet she could not fully escape her non-mainstream origins, and the pressure exerted across the culture to assert these conventional norms indicate that her message of sexual autonomy could not be contained nor limited to only the whites, heterosexuals, or the upper-classes.

Before I turn to specific media to explain how black and white popular culture reinforced this middle-class bias in the expression of female sexual autonomy, I present

an analysis of fashion since women's growing economic power greatly affected the industry which then became the means by which all women could proclaim their sexuality in public. Once again popularizing lower-class aesthetics and lifestyles, fashion became a common expression of female sexuality not coincidentally at the same time that public modes of entertainment stressed the performative qualities of female sexual desirability. Whether at the cabaret, in the movie theater, or within the pages of a romance novel, women, as I explain in the next section, were deluged with role models that emphasized the link between female sexuality and a conspicuous display of consumption and endorsed a specific manner of female sexual desirability embodied in the figure of the flapper, implying that female sexual power was not merely the right to display one's sexuality publicly but also an effect of this public display.

Women's needs have always affected the marketplace, but their growing economic power during this period contributed to the dominance of the fashion and cosmetics industries. Female appearance had, of course, been a major public concern for decades, and fashion began its ascendancy in the 1880s with widespread changes in production and distribution, but by the twenties the industry was dominated by mass-produced, ready-to-wear products for women, a full 76 percent of the total garment industry (Ewen and Ewen 185). Even though shops had sold the same styles to the upper-class matron and the lower-class working girl since the turn of the century, during the twenties the market began to shift in order to reflect the tastes, and needs, of the working girl rather than the socialite (Douglas 189). A contemporary observer notes in 1922, "fashions in this country are no longer ruled by a few leaders of society. They are determined by the purchases of several million working women, . . . The girl with the pay envelope sets the style for the women who dressmake at home" (qtd. in Latham 46).

Fashion thus shifted to reflect the working girl's youth, lifestyle, and attitude. First of all, the fashion industry appealed to the modern woman's sense of freedom and choice even as it highlighted the dangers of the wrong soap or cheap stockings, as Stuart Ewen summarizes: "the consumption of goods was described by business as a creative and directive enterprise" (168). A vast wardrobe was one symbol of smart consumerism, for women now required outfits for every activity, such as the Lenox ulster car coat, proper athletic attire, or dresses for tea (Joselit 23). A 1925 Vogue article argues that a modern woman "needed a minimum of fourteen dresses, six hats, six coats, eleven pairs of shoes, plus underwear and accessories" (Pumphrey 186). Color coordination was another thanks to color ads and magazine layouts, requiring a matching hat, purse, and shoes for each dress, not to mention silk stockings, now available, as one ad proudly proclaims, in "orchid," "peach," and "cream silver" (qtd. in Latham 42). A constantly updated look was a third method to encourage a modern female shopping attitude, the impact of which is noted by fashion critic Elizabeth B. Hurlock in her 1929 book, Psychology of Dress: An Analysis of Fashion and Its Motive: "Never in history has fashion held such power as it does today. Never has fashion been so varied and fleeting. Never has fashion's sway been so universal that to be out of fashion might literally be interpreted to be 'out of this world'" (qtd. in Ewen and Ewen 215). The effects of this newfound freedom in commerce, the empowering and non-stop choices in fashion, meant that women had to devote more time and money to maintaining their sexual desirability and modern style, a 1927 Survey questionnaire revealing women spent 46 percent of their income on clothing (Latham 41).

Secondly, new daring styles accentuated a woman's open sexual disposition as they emphasized the female body as never before. Clingy fabrics such as jersey and silk were

cut short to expose the leg up to the knee, sheathed in silk stockings and elongated by high heels, while evening gowns were often sleeveless or cut daringly low in the back. These styles provided a drastic change from the previous generation's outfits, when most middle-class women, as Steven Mintz and Susan Kellog document, wore "up to twenty-five pounds of petticoats, bustles, hats, and ankle length skirts," and reduced the yardage of a woman's dress from nineteen to seven yards (110, 111). Skirt length was a hotly debated topic throughout these decades, with groups ranging from the Catholic Church, the YMCA, the Kiwanis Club, and the Orthodox Jewish Congregations of America issuing edicts against, in the latter's words, the "degree of nudity and bareness of dress" (qtd. in Joselit 70). The government even entered the debate; historian Angela J. Latham reports that at least twenty-one states proposed bills to delineate skirt length (48). This connection between sexual propriety and dress, then, was made explicit throughout social discourse, demanding that women take a stand on whether they prefer to advertise their sexual desirability, if not their sexual habits, through their choice of outfits.

Finally, this new emphasis on revealing wear required a youthful body type: slim, boyish hips and bosom and long, lean legs. The decade's fashion authority, Vogue, elucidates this image in 1928: "The 'ideal' modern figure, from a fashion point of view, will be found to fulfil[1] the acrobat's dream of fitness. . . . A really supple and muscular young body, with no spare flesh on the well-made frame" (qtd. in Latham 30). An adolescent build, in other words, became the standard; as one brassiere ad proclaims, "modish lines are lines of youth" (qtd. in Latham 31). Consequently, this decade saw a rise in dieting, one famous dieter, Fannie Hurst, commenting in 1935 that "out of the stuff of enameled rolling-pins for kneading too, too solid lady-flesh, rubber reducing girdles, bathroom scales to match any color scheme, reduction salts in the pastel shades, electric-

light cabinets, rowing-machines, *et al*, new industries were born” (No Food 12).³⁶ Smoking, another new fad, is explicitly connected to dieting in ads like the one by Lucky Strike that declares smoking, “a new-day and commonsense way to keep a slender, fashionable figure” (qtd. in Kitch 133). This emphasis on a leaner, more slender build also appeared in black publications, the fashion magazine Half-Century Magazine proclaiming in 1924, “you must look boyish this season” (“What They are Wearing” 7).³⁷ Fashion therefore encouraged women to exhibit a youthful body in order to be modern, a visible counterpoint to a modernly youthful attitude towards sexuality.

Cosmetics, another debated symbol of female sexual propriety, began as well as a lower-class habit, previously associated with loose morals by the upper classes. As late as the 1910s, employers regulated makeup use, legislators proposed bills to limit it, and readers responded overwhelmingly against the Baltimore Sun’s question, “Should Women Paint?” in 1912, one stating, “every painted or flashily dressed woman is deemed by most strange men to be of questionable character” (Peiss, Hope 55, qtd. in 56). Yet thanks to technological advances, better production and distribution venues, and a marked increase in advertising, the cosmetics industry rose in value from \$14.2 million in 1909 to \$141 million in 1929, making cosmetics usage, in the words of Martin Pumphrey, “the norm rather than the exception, a sign of youth and up-to-datedness, a gauge of a modern woman’s independence” (Peiss, Hope 97; 189). Given its previous association with sexual impropriety as well as its artificial enhancement of a woman’s eyes and lips, cosmetics became a visible sign of a woman’s assertive right to accentuate her sexual assets. As Fass argues, “the use of cosmetics symbolized the woman’s open acceptance of her own sexuality. . . . By appropriating the right to use such sexual aids, respectable women proclaimed that they too were endowed with a sexual personality”

(283-84). Frederick Lewis Allen notes the decade's willingness to accept visible makeup by comparing two ads in the Ladies' Home Journal, one for rouge in 1919 that claims it is "imperceptible if properly applied," the other for lipstick in 1929 which promises, "the alluring note of scarlet will stay with you for hours" (qtd. in Allen 93). By the end of the decade, American women spent \$700 million per year on cosmetics and other beauty services, while a 1931 survey of college women found 85 percent wore a full face of makeup (Peiss, Hope 97, 171). Cosmetic use continued to increase in the thirties so much that by 1941 even two-thirds of rural farm women were wearing makeup daily, according Farm Journal (Peiss, Hope 170).

Like short skirts and slim waistlines, cosmetic usage quickly moved from being representative of a woman's sexy modern style to being a requirement that defined what it meant to be modern or sexy. In other words, makeup was not only essential for a youthful and beautiful appearance but such an appearance was also necessary for romance and social worth, as some articles, like "I Cured My Pimples – and Became a Bride" (1919) or "How a Wife Won Back Her Youth – A Surrender to Ugliness That Nearly Cost a Husband's Love" (1923), proclaimed (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 184). A Camay ad in 1933 warns, "the eyes of men . . . the eyes of women judge your loveliness every day. You can hardly glance out of a window, much less walk in town but that some inquiring eye searches you and your skin. This is the Beauty Contest of life," while a 1922 ad for Woodbury Soap similarly counsels, "All Around You People Are Judging You Silently" (qtd. in Marchand 178; qtd. in Scanlon 209). The importance of attracting and keeping a man is repeatedly emphasized, whether subtly in a mascara ad that promises "eyes that charm" or a perfume advertisement which explicitly contends, "*the first duty of woman is to attract. . . . It does not matter how clever or independent you*

may be, if you fail to influence the men you meet, consciously or unconsciously, you are not fulfilling your fundamental duty as a woman” (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 142; qtd. in Ewen 182). Such ads, Peiss asserts, “endlessly reminded women that they were on display . . . and thus urged [them] to transform the spectacle of themselves into self-conscious performances” (Hope 142). Modern womanhood, then, was not just being sexual in the bedroom but performing a specific type of sexuality on the street.

Cosmetics ads and beauty advice in black periodicals likewise encouraged women to recognize their potential as visual spectacles, as did beauty contests, like the Chicago Defenders’ Prettiest Girl contest in 1925 or The Half-Century Magazine’s 1921 competition which proclaims its winners will show whites that “all beautiful hair is not straight, that all beautiful skin is not white, that all beauty profiles do not belong to members of the white race” (“Chicago Quintet”; “Do you” 8). Again, beauty standards were explicitly connected to success and modernity, particularly as more and more blacks moved North. As Peiss summarizes, “as they left behind the world of servility and inferiority, consumers adopted beautifying as an essential aspect of becoming modern African-American women” (Hope 235). Visually, however, black periodicals often sent a contradictory message of what it meant to be “beautiful” or “modern” by consistently using models who were light-complexioned with, in Paula Giddings’ view, “Anglicized features,” including thin lips and thin noses (186).³⁸ In fact, cosmetic products in black periodicals included powders and creams to lighten the skin, encouraging, as does a 1919 Plough ad, “Bleach your Dark Skin; Race Men and Women Protect Your Future,” and were often accompanied by hair straightening products in another imitation of white beauty (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 42). More common in earlier decades, most manufacturers slowly substituted copy that only guarantees, as does a 1920 Golden Brown powder ad, a

“soft, light, bright, smooth complexion,” even if they still invest in the reader’s prejudice with synonyms for light brown tones, like “bright” or “High-Brown,” the name of an Overton-Hygienic powder (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 213, 223, 216). Cosmetics models were also often light-skinned with straight, flowing hair throughout this period, from a 1919 Nile Queen cosmetics ad to a 1938 Eau Sublime hair cream advertisement (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 219).³⁹ A 1928 ad for Madame C. J. Walker’s beauty products promising a “velvety-smooth complexion” and “silken hair, lustrous, soft and glowing” offered a similar model, a striking juxtaposition to the company’s pro-race rhetoric.⁴⁰ Despite public pronouncements on the beauty of African American women, a hierarchy of beauty continued in black periodicals, reinforcing the message that in order to duplicate the flapper’s modern look, black women had to replicate a white, upper-class style as closely as possible.

This public emphasis on female sexuality was therefore complex. On one hand, the continued ascension of women in the business sector reinforced an economic independence that paralleled their growing domination of the consumer market, a domination that began with the lower classes and reflected their needs, particularly their sexual assertiveness in manner and in dress, resulting in an upper-class modern icon whose popularity fed the public’s interest in, and anxiety about, a perceived laxity in sexual morals that reflected a leveling of attitudes across the classes. As one critic complains, “young girls, in particular, in their dress and their attitude toward young men, are often without the restraints or modest reserve that were formerly deemed indispensable . . . [due to] a pernicious near-cult of what might be called flapperolatry” (qtd. in “The Case” 58). On the other hand, this newfound freedom *was* mainly a revolt in morals and behavior, not a concerted effort to expand political or social demands like

the previous generation's suffrage campaign, as feminist Lorine Pruette explains in "The Flapper" (1930): "the flapper knows nothing of that tedious world against which the old-line feminists rebelled. She knows nothing of the fight and cares less. 'Feminism?' she asks nonchalantly. 'Oh, you mean anti-man stuff? No, I'm not a feminist'" (587).

Without expanded legal rights, from no-fault divorces to equal wage protection, women's relationships with men could only change so far, and, as I discuss in the next section, a continued emphasis on middle-class monogamy helped regulate the domains of this expanding sexual freedom and reoriented female sexuality towards marriage by interpreting female sexual power as an avenue towards greater economic and social power as a wife.

"This Flapper Age": The Flapper in Popular Culture

"Can we expect young men and young women to rise above the conditions in which society has surrounded them, in the way of jazz music, modern dance-halls, public swimming-pools, auto joy riding, luxury and freedom, the sensual and suggestive movies, where they learn to see nakedness and where immorality does not seem so bad?"

Dean Eva M. Blue, Gooding College, Iowa, "The Case Against the Younger Generation," (1922) p. 54-55.

Almost everywhere one looked during these decades, the flapper's modern attire, carefree lifestyle, and enthusiastic heterosexuality were advocated with varying degrees of intensity. Her proliferation across popular culture was extensive and, overall, continued to offer a variety of women a model for sexual autonomy. Moreover, these values continued into the thirties for even the Depression could not turn back the clock

now that women had been given cultural license to experience sexual desire. A closer look at the major media that came of age in this period, notably film, true “confession” stories, and popular fiction, reveals the extent to which women were encouraged to gain control of their sexual desire and to exalt it through visible sexual desirability, from the sexually carefree flapper to the modern wife and companion. Unfortunately, these media also reveal society’s continued investment in marriage, white superiority, and heterosexuality.

Popular fiction gained notoriety in the 1920s for its risqué sexuality, such as F. Scott Fitzgerald’s This Side of Paradise (1920), Warner Fabian’s Flaming Youth (1923), and Gertrude Atherton’s Black Oxen (1923); in the latter, for example, the flapper’s modern attitude toward sexual experimentation is endorsed even by her father, who insists, “The emancipated flapper is just plain female under her paint and outside her cocktails, . . . More so for she’s more stimulated. Where girls used to be merely romantic, she’s romantic . . . plus sex instinct rampant” (qtd. in Simmons, “Modern” 157). Other popular novels tamed the model somewhat by presenting an idealistic young flapper who flirts with romance but does not damage her chances for a good marriage with promiscuity and is thus rewarded with a good man, including Temple Bailey’s The Dim Lantern (1923), The Blue Window (1926), and Little Girl Lost (1932), and Kathleen Norris’s Harriet and the Piper (1920), The Seagull (1927), and Passion Flower (1930). At the same time, many of these plots still testify to the changing belief that “good” girls can be sexual beings, and their sexual experimentation is recounted in sensual prose, such as Norris’s description of a couple’s first kiss: “for a long minute they clung so, the girl’s slender body close to his, their hearts beating together, and all the world whirling about Juanita in a storm of ecstasy and fear and joy” (qtd. in Raub 12). Even more traditional

venues, like Ladies' Home Journal, came to affirm female sexual autonomy, such as one 1923 story where the married protagonist discovers that, at age 38, she has denied her own needs. By putting her own priorities first, here represented by a new dress, her choice of dinner, and a trip to the movies alone with her husband, she is able to rekindle the romance in her marriage and become, in Jennifer Scanlon's words, "radiant and sexy" again to her husband (155). A modern companionate marriage is also the goal in many of Bailey's novels as well as Dorothy Canfield Fisher's, particularly her daring The Home-maker (1924) in which spouses switch roles after the husband's disabling accident and find them more satisfactory. Furthermore, as Sally Ann McNall attests, the heroine's sexual attractiveness in these novels is continuously emphasized, regardless if she is the unwed flapper or the modern wife, and often the consumerist aspect of desirability is represented by her physical transformation thanks to a new and expensive wardrobe, found in novels like Olive Higgins Prouty's sensationalist bestseller Stella Dallas (1923), Grace Livingston Hill's Crimson Roses (1928), and Norris's Heartbroken Melody (1938) (70). Similar examples of romance narratives combined with bourgeois aspirations can be found in the black periodical The Half-Century Magazine. For instance, "A Colored Cinderella" by Annie Pearl ends with the engagement of the good-hearted heroine to an upwardly mobile young man, while the protagonist of Anna Adams' "The Worm" wins the love of her longtime friend Al after being transformed by a new wardrobe and fashionable hairstyle.

Vina Delmar's best-sellers, Bad Girl (1928), Kept Woman (1929), and Loose Ladies (1929), demonstrate the continued popularity of flappers who actively pursue extramarital sexual affairs, as does Lorelei Lee, the heroine of Anita Loos' Gentleman Prefer Blondes, a best-seller in 1926 and hit movie in 1928. Lee flaunts her sexuality for

material gain with numerous admirers, then adopts an old-fashioned demeanor to win a rich husband (Raub 6). According to Mencken, Gentleman “makes fun of sex,” but its popularity reveals its resonance with the female audience (qtd. in Erens 132). 1930s novels also presented women whose extramarital affairs did not prevent them from finding true love, like Pay for Your Pleasure (1937), Woman with a Past (1940), and Tabloid Love (1936), reiterating the message that, as McNall explains, “unfeminine, immoral, criminal behavior, all can finally be swept away as if they had never been, by the girl’s tenacious hold onto one love object” (92). In fact, one study found that extramarital affairs were condoned in 45 percent of movie or magazine fiction in 1932 versus only 3 percent of popular magazine fiction between 1900 and 1905 (Bromley and Britten 9). Popular fiction, therefore, by and large offered an incredibly detailed look at female sexual autonomy, affirming the average woman’s sexual needs and presenting sexually autonomous models that included the wife and mother as well as the coed or working girl.

Overall, then, public culture affirmed the psychological tenet that sexuality is a critical part of one’s well-being yet added the necessity of a public sexual life, one that involved conforming to a modern conception of conspicuous sexual desirability while participating in public leisure activities like nightclubs and dances. Ironically, this message was reiterated in advertisements for products associated with the private domain: household goods and services. As Lears summarizes, advertising built upon theories of “democratic social engineering” to depict women as “efficient managers” of the home, harnessing their education and intelligence for domestic gain (Fables 188). But with household science reaching a new level of technical sophistication, housework was portrayed as less toil than duty, less backbreaking labor than resourceful

maintenance, so women were encouraged to utilize the extra time to maintain their status as modern wives: sexually desirable, stimulating, and gracious. Historian Stuart Ewen has pointed out that “if consumption management was a *role* of [house]work, sexuality was, for women, a *duty* of leisure” (182). Marchand in the same way concurs that women were told to “preserve their youth so that they could beautify their husbands’ lives and keep pace with them during evenings of dancing and theater” (175). “Drudgery” thus became a code word for both outdated housekeeping methods and the toll they took on a woman’s appearance, from hunched backs to unsightly chapped hands. A 1920 Libby food ad portrays such a victim in “The Woman Who Never Went Out”: “It hurt – that sudden flash of seeing herself as others must see her. A drudge – that’s what she was. One of the army of women past whom the world whirls gaily, while they grow older and more faded and colorless” (qtd. in Sivulka 172). Youthful beauty and household work are also explicitly connected in a 1929 Hoover vacuum ad: “I was the woman . . . whose youth was slipping away from her too fast. The woman whose cleaning burdens were too heavy. . . . I have discovered that youth need not go swiftly – that cleaning duties need not be burdensome. For last Christmas, my husband did give me a *Hoover*” (qtd. in Ewen 161). A 1920 advertisement for a laundry service owners association, titled “Just what is it to be a Good Wife in this Modern Age?”, similarly provides a detailed portrayal of modern wifely duties:

In the world of Business, men have banished the dragon of Drudgery. But what of *your* world? Are you still hampered by heavy household tasks that take your time and sap your strength? . . . Are you passing up enjoyable, stimulating, youth-bringing pleasures and pastimes because of this heavy burden? . . . see for yourself just what the modern laundry has to offer. In place of drudgery you are

given a full day of freedom; happy hours for those pleasant pursuits – those gracious arts – that make one a truly good wife – a worthy companion of the twentieth century husband. (qtd. in Marchand 174)

In addition, the female body became an accessory to emphasize the modernity of a household product, whether posed, clad in scanty evening clothes, next to cutlery of the same size for Community Plate or grouped in admiration around a Hoover vacuum or a Crosley refrigerator, again in sleeveless evening wear (Marchand 182, 273, 272). All of these figures, in full-length or almost full-length proportions, draw the consumer's gaze to the female model instead of the product, as if the woman's appearance is as critical as the product's even when she is not necessary to demonstrate its usage. As a result, these images of female beauty, as Ewen explains, "encourage self-comparison and to remind women of the primacy of their sexuality" no matter the product focus (179). The practice continued into the 1930s, incorporating even more salacious images to sell goods. The first full frontal shot of a woman's nude body, according to Sivulka, was in a 1936 Woodbury soap ad, and other advertisers soon offered similar layouts, such as a 1937 Simoniz car polish ad with the caption "Your Car's No Nudist" (214). These women, almost always white, thin, and upper-class, connected female sexual desirability to not just the product but to the lifestyle it represented – modern, upper-class, and sexy. The prominent use of evening wear in ads for mundane products also reaffirms the necessity of a public sexual identity for the modern wife, making even her appliances appropriate accessories.

While advertisements and fiction had been a feature of women's magazines throughout the nineteenth century, the 1920s saw the development of new trend which was just as attractive to the modern woman: the confessional non-fiction magazine.

Magazines like True Confessions and True Story churned out stories entitled “The Primitive Lover,” “Her Life Secret,” and “Indolent Kisses,” while even more reputable newspapers had access to these scandalous treats through the American Weekly, a Sunday supplement for all Hearst newspapers, with articles like “Killed Herself to Spite the Man Who Spurned Her Love” and “Married the Chimney-Sweep’s Daughter” (Marchand 61). A rejection slip to a would-be author emphasizes one magazine’s focus: “Live Stories is interested in what we call ‘sex adventure’ stories told in the first person . . . [which] present situations of high emotional character, rich sentiment. A moral conclusion is essential” (qtd. in Lynd and Lynd 241). Remarkably, True Story increased in circulation from 300,000 in 1924 to almost two million in 1926 and True Romance, the publisher’s second enterprise, soon caught up by the late 1920s (Allen 87; Rapp and Rose 100). By 1927 True Story was challenging stalwarts Ladies’ Home Journal and McCall’s for the front lead in women’s magazine circulation, and women’s magazines then dominated the market, making up six of the top eight best-selling magazines in the 1920s, each with a circulation of more than a million readers (Marchand 54; Pumphrey 184). These magazines were also popular in the black community, according to a study of four southern cities in 1929-1930, with romance magazines read by 4 percent and home advice magazines read by 10 percent (P Edwards 179). Another new phenomenon, the tabloid newspaper, jumped on the bandwagon by publishing readers’ romantic exploits in “Real Love Stories” for five dollars apiece (Marchand 60). Advertisers even adopted the copy of these articles, using lurid titles like “Because I confessed . . . I found the way to happiness” to sell Eagle Brand Sweetened Condensed Milk or “Some wives do it but I wouldn’t dare” for Wheatena breakfast cereal (qtd. in Marchand 57, 58).

Although these titillating confessions of extramarital affairs, love triangles, and other scandals often ended, as Marchand points out, in “punishment, physical or moral,” they not only aired such tawdry tales in detail but also reassured the reader of the commonality of such incidents, a confirmation, in the words of True Confessions’ editors, of an “experience [that] is very like my own” (54; qtd. in Burnham 78). In Burnham’s view, the popularity of the true confession genre might be due to how “variations from mass society conformity appeared more common – and easier for the reader to deal with in himself – than might otherwise be the case” (78). Yet, more specifically, these magazines endorse a female sexual subjectivity that appears all the more legitimate given its “true” origin. As Patricia S. Haag summarizes, “the typical 1920s True Love plot charted a working girl’s fitful progress from instinct to a sexual consciousness sanctioned by the talisman of true love” (184). These tales thus confirm the prevalence and growing acceptance of extramarital sexual experimentation and similarly testify that female sexual autonomy was now rationalized as an outgrowth of traditional narratives of love, as if a woman’s libido became attached to her heart in such a way that to repress the former is to deny the latter.

Films were another new medium that came to dominant popular culture, spreading across America during the 1920s when ticket sales rose from \$35 million in weekly sales to \$80 million, meaning more than fifty percent of the American population attended the movies weekly by the end of the decade (Erens 131). Their popularity with females is evident in one survey which estimates girls eight to nineteen attend the movies on average 46 times per year, while another revealed the connection between movies and romance for high school girls, reporting that two-thirds admitted the “scenes of love-making, kissing and marrying gave them the most intense thrills to be gained from

motion pictures” (Ryan 367; Blanchard and Manasses 172-73). The sexual appeal of movies for all women is noted by critic Lloyd Lewis, who observes in 1929, “an American woman . . . can let her fantasies slip through the darkened atmosphere to the screen where they drift in rhapsodic amours with handsome stars. . . . the deluxe [movie] house has dissolved the Puritan strictures she had absorbed as a child” (qtd. in Ewen and Ewen 104).

Clearly, then, the sexual themes and sensual visuals of films like Forbidden Fruit (1921), Sinners in Silk (1924), The Temptress (1926), and Flesh and the Devil (1927) lured female moviegoers, enticed by posters, like the one for Flaming Youth (1923), that offered, “neckers, petters, white kisses, red kisses, pleasure-mad daughters, [and] sensation-craving mothers” (qtd. in Lynd and Lynd 266, 151). Despite objections to such depictions, such as a Los Angeles judge who argues that movies are “cheapening, debasing, distorting adults until they appear in the eyes of the young people perpetually bathed in a moral atmosphere of intrigue, jealousy, wild emotionalism, and cheap sentimentality,” their popularity indicates a continued interest in sexual subjects (qtd. in Lynd and Lynd 268 n22). In fact, many did not focus on youth at all, like Cecil B. De Mille’s films which stress the need for wives to exude romance and sexual desirability. One, Why Change Your Wife? (1920), ends happily with the reformed wife, now clad in a revealing dress and bobbed hair, foxtrotting with her husband while the caption reads, “Ladies, if you want to be your husband’s sweetheart, you must simply forget when you are his wife” (qtd. in May 211). The premise that a dowdy wife can transform into a modern sexual star soon became so common that by 1926 one reviewer found His Secretary, another such tale, “clichéd and worn” (qtd. in Ryan 371).

Such themes reiterate the messages films sent about female sexuality. As a visual medium, film unsurprisingly stressed the power of visual sensuality almost from its inception, yet DeMille broke new ground in Male and Female (1919) with his lingering shots of Gloria Swanson's bathing body, a scenario that recurred in so many of his films that he is hailed by one film historian for making "the bathroom a delightful resort . . . a mystic shrine to Venus" (qtd. in Ryan 369). Besides bedroom and bath scenes, the power of female sexual desirability is also made evident in situations where the heroine, thanks to a new dress style or walk, gains the attention of male admirers and often a future mate, as does Madge Bellamy, the shop clerk in the revealingly titled film, Ankles Preferred (1926). A willingness to trade on one's physical charms was not lost on young female viewers, one of whom told an interviewer, "I'll bet every girl wishes she was the Greta Garbo type. I tried to imitate her walk" (qtd. in Ryan 372).

As in fashion, sexual allure in these films is usually tied to consumption, equating desirability with high-priced attire and lifestyle, so that, as Lary May contends, the audience's "working or middle-class women were supposed to think that the way to attract successful men was to surround themselves with an aura of luxury" (213). For example, Claudette Colbert does not find true love in Imitation of Life (1934) until the latter half of the film when she glides around her large New York mansion in her clingy evening gowns and abundant jewelry, and a new type of movie heroine arose, the fashion model, appearing in 38 films of the decade (Ryan 373). Detailed publicity stills and magazine layouts of movie stars' lifestyles further exemplified the connection between modernity and conspicuous consumption, for stars were consistently characterized as flappers, in May's words, "breaking from the past, symbolized by the latest outfits, hairdos, and more opulent surroundings" (232). Consequently, as Fass contends,

“interest in the fashions of the glamour queens of the cinema was great” among college students, who then imitated their heroines (281). One girl admits about Joan Crawford, “I watch her every little detail, of how she’s dressed, and her makeup, and also her hair,” while another acknowledges that films taught her “how to put on makeup and how to do different ways of makeup and how to make my makeup and clothes go together” (qtd. in Ryan 372; qtd. in Peiss, Hope 191).

Three actresses symbolize the changing standards of female sexuality during the film industry’s dramatic increase.⁴¹ Theda Bara’s first film, A Fool There Was (1914), introduced the actress’s vamp persona, dominating and destroying men with her sexual drive, and her later films were aptly named The She-Devil (1918), The Unchastened Woman (1925) and Madame Mystery (1926). Even though the vamp represented the dangers of unrestrained female sexuality, Bara herself recognized the liberating potential of her characters, noting, “Believe me, for every woman vamp there are ten men of the same . . . men who take everything from women, love, devotion, youth, beauty, and give nothing in return. . . . The vampire that I play is the vengeance of my sex on its exploiters” (qtd. in Ewen and Ewen 97-98). Besides her sexual assertiveness, the vamp’s power, then, derives from her challenge of the double standard as a woman willing to satisfy her sexual needs at men’s expense, yet it also costs her female companionship since other women are sexual rivals, not allies, in these love triangles.

More light-hearted flapper movies arrived with Clara Bow, whose quintessential flapper persona was developed in Black Oxen (1924), The Plastic Age (1925) and It (1927). As Patricia Erens observes, Bow’s characters are intentionally “the girl next door, or down the block, or at the office,” from the coed and store clerk to the waitress, all sexually provocative but still moral girls seeking love with the right boy (134).

Similar roles with other actresses can be found in Five and Ten Cent Annie (1928) and The Girl from Woolworth's (1929). These flirtatious young women with short skirts and bobbed hair are not punished for their sexual experimentation but often rewarded, as May states, with “the attraction of a successful man who also wants fun in leisure and can afford to support [their] emancipation,” an obvious outcome for films entitled Mantrap (1926) and Get Your Man (1927) (219). Bow’s impact on young moviegoers is summarized by one seventeen-year-old girl, who gushes, “No wonder girls of the older days, before movies, were so modest and bashful. They had never seen Clara Bow and William Haines. . . . If we did not see such examples, . . . where would we get the idea of being ‘hot’?” (qtd. in Rapp and Ross 103). Bow’s flapper, however, differed from Bara as her sexual autonomy is depicted as flirtatious and fun, an unthreatening desire and desirability that lead to marital happiness, not supplant it, but female friendships are still diffused through a heterosexual milieu as “a supportive by-product of heterosexual relations, not as a primary female bond,” in Mary P. Ryan’s words (380).

Bow, in turn, paved the way for a more intense female sexual persona, Greta Garbo’s *femme fatale*, who also reinforces the significance of female sexual autonomy but widens the scope of sexual experimentation. Playing strong and sexual female characters well into the 1930s, Garbo enjoys premarital affairs in The Mysterious Lady (1928), A Woman of Affairs (1929), Inspiration (1931), and Grand Hotel (1932) and extramarital affairs in Love, The Kiss (1929), The Painted Veil (1934), and Conquest (1937), but her erotic power is less carefree and playful than brooding and often self-sacrificial (LaSalle 49). At the same time, in one film critic’s view, the majority of her films “assert the divinity and soul-enriching power of erotic love” (LaSalle 52). Garbo, therefore, demonstrates the importance of sexual love in a woman’s life like any flapper,

even suggesting that its value is so great that a marriage might be sacrificed, and, like Bow, encourages her audience to explore their own sexual autonomy, albeit restricted to heterosexual relations and often with love, and ultimately marriage, in mind.

Taken together, the trajectory of the female sexual drive between Bara, Bow, and Garbo demonstrates the draw and drawbacks of cinematic sexual role models. The vamp may have utilized her sexual wiles to tempt other women's men, but she also calls attention to the sexual double standard and gives women an avenue to redress these wrongs, at least if they are willing to incur social scorn. The flapper's sexual needs are no less manipulative even if presented in a more positive light for she similarly competes with other women in utilizing her sexual desirability to capture male sexual partners but under the pretense of love, all the while presenting her economic and social dependence as a liberation of her leisure and consumption. And finally, the femme fatale may have revived a hint of danger toward male self-interest in her willingness to ignore legal rights to pursue her own needs, but the resolution into a familiar trajectory of overpowering love returns gender relations to their traditional distribution of power. Although all of these characters encourage and validate female sexual autonomy, none of them fully challenge the cultural emphasis on middle-class monogamy and heterosexual normativity.

The period's cinematic depictions of black female sexuality likewise promote these traditional values but have even fewer positive attributes. Film historians Donald Bogle, Daniel J. Leab, and Thomas Cripps have documented the industry's most common stereotype of blacks as happy "darkies" content to serve whites. The most common black female character was Mammy, visible in antebellum nostalgia films like Hearts of Dixie (1929), The Little Colonel (1935), Rainbow in the River (1936), and Gone With the

Wind (1939), or transformed for contemporary pieces into a heavy-set maid, such as in She Done Him Wrong (1933), Belle of the Nineties (1934), and Love in a Bungalow (1937), making Delilah in Imitation a recognizable standard. In fact, films with black women as mammies or maids were so numerous in the 1930s that one historian terms the decade “the Age of the Negro Servant” (Bogle 36). Mammy was already a familiar figure to audiences having figured so prominently in popular southern Reconstructionist literature by Thomas Dixon and Thomas Nelson Page, and, as historians Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, Grace Elizabeth Hale and Patricia A. Turner have demonstrated, she surfaces in national advertising campaigns by Campbell’s Soup, Crisco, and, most famously, Aunt Jemima pancakes, looking as always, in Hale’s view, “competent and capable and yet subservient and inferior” (164).

Beyond such one-dimensional roles, more diverse female characters can be found in all black films but often still within dichotomous stereotypes of female lasciviousness or passionless piety, even in those produced by the fledgling black film industry.⁴² One successful all-black film, Hallelujah (1929), by the white director King Vidor for MGM offered two such characters to tempt the hero, his little-seen pious girlfriend from back home (Victoria Spivey) and Chick (Nina Mae McKinney), a beautiful gambler. As a dangerous temptress, Chick may encourage a Bara-like sexual agency, but her unrestrained emotions, heightened sexuality, and light skin actually epitomize the mulatta stereotype, whose conflict is caused by her racially mixed background; as Bogle notes, “the white half of [Chick] represented the spiritual; the black half, the animalistic” (33). The most successful black studio film of this period, The Scar of Shame (1927), replays similar stereotypes about black female sexuality, focusing on a lower-class black woman named Louise who still cannot rise above her station even though she wins the love of a

gentleman. Instead of blaming racism, the plot explains her fall, notably sexual in nature, within the tragic mulatta tradition as Louise cannot overcome the shame of her origins and so leaves her true love to take up with a criminal and become a scantily clad cabaret singer. Both films, then, offer images of modern black beauty, albeit of beautiful young women with light complexions, yet, like other flapper films, suggest that a woman's sexual desirability is best used to secure a stable home and loving husband. These films also reflect the black community's emphasis on marriage as a capstone for the race's advancement, a focus which further limited depictions of black female autonomy in the public sphere.

Redeeming negative images of black female sexuality was similarly a primary objective of black periodicals, which rose to an unprecedented level during these decades. Even though black newspapers had existed since the 1820s, this period was the first to see economically viable publications, beginning with the Chicago Defender, which, with a circulation of 280,000 in 1920, was the largest black newspaper in the U.S. (Fay 47). Other black newspapers like the Baltimore Afro-American, the Washington Bee and New York's Amsterdam News dominated urban markets, and by 1930 a government study counted a total of 114 black newspapers (P Edwards 171).⁴³ Black magazines also began to increase in circulation and variety during these decades, yet, unlike most of their white counterparts, the majority stressed their readers' political and social engagement. Most, in fact, were funded by political organizations (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for the Crisis; National Urban League for Opportunity; and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters for the Messenger). These magazines never reached the same circulation levels of the black newspapers; the Crisis, the most popular, peaked at 95,000 in 1919 and Half-Century Magazine, the period's only magazine geared

to black women, followed at 47,000 for the same year, but their contribution to racial affinity cannot be disputed, as they were, in Michael Fultz's view, "the means through which the black middle class and professional group defined their vision and disseminated their views" (Johnson and Johnson 35; Fultz 100, 102).

Black periodicals contributed to the reevaluation of black womanhood already begun by the community in earlier decades to combat centuries of denigration. In addition to Mammy, a symbol of blacks' allegedly natural servitude and inherent docility, racist ideology constructed an image of rapacious, primitive female sexuality in order to justify sexual exploitation. As historian Patricia Morton has explained, "Jezebel" is a passionate, oversexed, and immoral woman who "invites the white man's sexual attention" (10). Jezebel, like her counterpart, flourished in the Reconstructionist mythology of the turn-of-the-century period and continued into the twentieth century in successful films like Birth of a Nation (1915) and novels, notably Julia Peterkin's Scarlet Sister Mary, which won the Pulitzer Prize in 1928.⁴⁴ To counteract such images in the dominant press, black newspapers by the 1880s and 1890s began to encourage an image, in Bess Beatty's words, of "a beautiful but frail woman, . . . whose highest mission was caring for her home and children, serving as her husband's helpmate, and maintaining the highest standards of morality": in short, a black True Woman (47). Later reformers maintained this ideal in black periodicals, such as John H. Adams, who presented a sketch of the New Negro Woman in Voice of the Negro (1904), a refined, beautiful woman who possesses "the sober consciousness of true womanhood the same as her white or red or olive sisters" (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 205).

The black women's club movement, a group of prominent social organizations founded in the 1890s, also promoted middle-class standards of female propriety, and the

frequent profiling of their work in the pages of the black press, as well as their middle-class images, helped to stress a particular model of sexual behavior for black women. Without a doubt, the black women's club movement was overall an influential and successful network of organizations that provided much needed assistance to black communities, emphasizing education, health information, and an uplift philosophy that encouraged blacks to set a positive example for their good of their race.⁴⁵ But even if their focus on sexual propriety to redeem social ills like prostitution, illegitimacy, and venereal diseases was not specific to their race, the movement stressed a middle-class model of sexual behavior that narrowly defined proper and deviant morality. Seeing female sexual immorality as an outgrowth of social and economic forces was a crucial validation that innate racial characteristics were not to blame but one that still characterized lower-class black women as lacking female propriety and unable to protect themselves from immoral influences. As one famous reformer, Mary Church Terrell, asserts, "policy and self-preservation would demand that we go down among the lowly, the illiterate, and even the vicious to whom we are bound by the ties of race and sex, and put forth every possible effort to uplift and reclaim them" (qtd. in Batker 201). The reality of economic disparity did little to discourage black reformers from promoting a middle-class ideal; Giles B. Jackson and D. Webster Davis insist in their 1919 study, The Industrial History of the Negro Race, "the race needs wives who stay at home, being supported by their husbands, and then they can spend time in the training of their children" (qtd. in Harley 341). Such messages were aired well into the twenties by black notables like Kelly Miller and Alice Dunbar-Nelson throughout black periodicals.⁴⁶

For W. E. B. Du Bois and the older generation of the Harlem Renaissance, the black True Woman also became a powerful figure of black pride and unification. In Anne

Stavney's view, Du Bois emphasized, "the unique qualities black women have developed while surviving in a hostile environment, as well as their more conventionally admirable feminine characteristics – purity, piety, submissiveness, and domesticity" (537). The valorization of the black True Woman was also a focus of The Half-Century Magazine, which in its nine year run (1916-1925) outlined the finer points of a woman's domestic role in columns like "Domestic Science," "Etiquette," and "Beauty Hints" and published numerous articles to proclaim, as one does in 1920, that "motherhood is classified as the highest vocation of womankind," accompanied by a photo-collage of bourgeois mothers and children ("Hand" 7). Overall the magazine, in Noliwe M. Rooks' opinion, "rarely, if ever, discussed interpersonal relationships between men and women . . . [but instead] reinscribed the dominant [gender] positions on its pages" (104). At the same time, by emphasizing fashion and beauty as additional requirements of the modern wife, the magazine fit its message within the larger context of the flapper-wife phenomenon. Fiction similarly affirmed the traditional avocation of womanhood, ranging from Frances Harper's Iola Leroy (1892) and Pauline Hopkins' Contending Forces (1900) to Jesse Redmond Fauset's There is Confusion (1924) and Plum Bun (1928), and even more experimental Harlem Renaissance artists captured this image. One famous example is Winold Reiss's illustration in Locke's The New Negro (1925) entitled Brown Madonna, a figure which, in Stavney's opinion, represents "non-sexual, modest womanhood," as well as the positive mother images found in the poems of Claude McKay and Countee Cullen, among others (545). Stressing motherly devotion, loyalty to the family, and an educated morality, this black True Woman developed into a persona Stavney has also identified as the "moral mother" (534). Of course, sympathetic visions of black motherhood was a forceful strategy to confirm the humanity of African

Americans in the eyes of the dominant society, but the price was great for black women who wished for more.

I should note that an idealization of working-class female sexuality is found in the texts of some Harlem Renaissance artists. Intentionally working against this middle-class ethos of family and uplift, these younger artists focused upon an image designed to embody the spirit of past African glory. The result is a persona critic Nina Miller has defined the “Brown Girl,” “the primitive African American woman, magnificently sensual, regal and mute, in whose rapturous ‘barbaric’ dance was embodied the mystery of the racial past and the vitality of the racial future” (155).⁴⁷ She appears in many Renaissance works, such as Jean Toomer’s Cane (1923) and the poems of Helene Johnson and Gwendolyn Bennett, as well as a number of periodical covers which explicitly connect black womanhood with Africa, like the Crisis in January 1928 which, in Stavney’s view, “associates the black woman with the natural, elemental world” (549). Similarly, another 1928 cover depicts a head shot of a woman looking both like “a pre-Christian Cleopatra and a 1920s flapper,” an association also made by Nile Queen advertisements, which juxtaposes the two figures to explicitly insist on the continuing legacy of legendary beauty from Cleopatra to the modern black woman (Stavney 549; Peiss, Hope 219). Despite the positive connotations about black beauty integrated into the persona, the Brown Girl relies on stereotypes of black primitive sensuality and sexuality that had dogged African American women for centuries, and some male Renaissance writers even reproduced licentious black female characters, most famously the prostitutes in Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (1928). Thus, the duality of the modern and the primal sent conflicting messages to black female consumers, suggesting

perhaps that modern fashion and accoutrements could not hide either the beauty of the African race or its inherently primitive nature.

Such pressures can be found in Larsen's Passing, as the next chapter contends. A fan of psychoanalytic fiction, Larsen offers an intricate portrayal of female sexual desire but in a contradictory fashion. Rather than producing a protagonist who establishes her right, as a black woman, to female sexual autonomy, as Hurston does, Larsen instead focuses on a bourgeois woman's psychological breakdown when confronted by her own desire as well as her jealousy for another woman's very visible sexual autonomy.

Through these two characters, Larsen can affirm the importance of this newfound sexual autonomy for women while questioning the limitations society places upon its practice, particularly its emphasis on heterosexuality and middle-class monogamy, and how desire often cannot be contained within the parameters designed by society to define it.

Notes

¹ Not coincidentally, the series of articles in which The Literary Digest debated this topic in 1921 and 1922 offered photos or drawings only of young women and mentioned men more often as either the cause or the victim of increasingly lax female morals. The magazine analyzed the popular and university press for views on this issue and also conducted its own survey of educators, clergy, and college student editors. See “Is the Younger Generation in Peril?”, “The Case Against the Younger Generation,” “To-day’s Morals and Manners – The Side of ‘The Girls,’” and “In Favor of the Young Folks.”

² For a general overview of the Progressive era reform movements, see Carl N. Degler (298-327) and Karen Manners Smith (385-405). For a discussion of how World War I advanced ideas of psychoanalysis and psychiatry, see Nathan G. Hale, Jr. (13-24).

³ For example, just a few years after Freud’s first U.S. lectures in 1909, the American Psychoanalytic Association, the New York Psychoanalytic Association, and the Boston Psychoanalytic Society were founded, and hospitals in New York, Baltimore, and Boston all established psychiatric practices, as did prestigious Schools of Social Work like Smith, New York, and Pennsylvania led by A.A. Brill and James Jackson Putnam. For an overview of this period, see Nathan Hale (23-37) and Sanford Gifford.

⁴ The social hygiene movement of the 1910s was influential for utilizing scientific rhetoric to combat venereal disease and prostitution and to advocate sexual education; see John C. Burnham (150-69, 199-202); Barbara Epstein (124); John D’Emilio and Estelle B. Freedman (203-215); Linda Gordon (201-202); and Howard I. Kushner (450-52). The birth control movement, another example, was a familiar topic in the later nineteenth century and regained popularity as a socialist cause; see Linda Gordon (183-242, 269-

86); D'Emilio and Freedman (222-23, 231-33, 243-46); and Sheila M. Rothman (188-209).

⁵ Nathan Hale provides an analysis of Dell's and Eastman's essays as well as others by Theodore Dreiser and Theodore Schroeder (59-69, 81-83; see also Joel Pfister 170-71). Dell, Sherwood Anderson, and Ernest Hemingway are common examples of psychoanalytic novelists, while Pfister analyzes a number of playwrights, including Rachel Crother, Eugene O'Neill, Susan Glaspell and George Cram Cook (171-77).

⁶ Pfister claims Katharine Anthony, author of Margaret Fuller: A Psychological Biography (1920), was "one of America's first psychobiographers" (180), while Nathan Hale mentions George S. Viereck's Theodore Roosevelt (1919) and A. A. Brill's diagnosis of Abraham Lincoln as "manic depressive" (81).

⁷ For a discussion of how advertisers turned to women as the primary decision-makers and consumers of most goods, see Jackson Lears (Fables 209); Roland Marchand (66-69); and Juliann Silvulka (150-63).

⁸ As Linda Gordon explains, Sanger was greatly influenced by Havelock Ellis's work after spending time with the sexologist and his colleagues in Europe in 1914-1915 (220-221).

⁹ For an analysis of these opportunities, see Degler (311-15; 376-94); William Henry Chafe (99-104); Rothman (36-60); Alice Kessler-Harris (116-119); and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg (247-57).

¹⁰ Of course, during this period many women radicals, such as Emma Goldman, Margaret Sanger or members of the Heterodoxy Club, which included Fannie Hurst, advocated precisely this idea, but overall, I refer here to the generation of women who came of age prior to World War I. Some historians, like Lois Rudnick and Smith-

Rosenberg, call them first generation or Progressive New Women to distinguish them from the second generation or Radical New Woman I call flapper (71; 283-84).

¹¹ George Chauncey, Jr., following the work of Joe L. Dubbert, has convincingly argued that the turn-of-the century focus on lesbianism in academic circles followed a general “masculinity crisis” in which these and other factors prompted the male scientific community to attempt to resituate traditional gender roles through allegedly objective scientific analysis (“Sexual” 103).

¹² For additional information on sexology’s inversion theories, see Chauncey (“Sexual” 88-92); Lillian Faderman (Odd 45-48); Sherrie A. Inness (16-18); and Esther Newton (286-89).

¹³ Two popular examples are examined by Inness, Edouard Bourdet’s play The Captive (1926) and Radclyffe Hall’s novel The Well of Loneliness (1928), as well as Mary Lapsley’s The Parable of Virgins (1931) and Kathleen Millay’s Against the Wall (1929) (20-32, 28-43). Phyllis Blanchard and Carlyn Manasses mention other novels which similarly present homosexuality as an adolescent stage (226-27).

¹⁴ For more information on lesbian communities as well as what Faderman terms the “lesbian chic” of the 1920s, see her books Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers (62-92) and Surpassing the Love of Men (360-73); other critics who study the Village as an exemplar of non-traditional sexuality include Chauncey (Gay 227-44); Neil Miller (137-47); and Nina Miller (47-50).

¹⁵ Faderman points out the revolutionary stance Davis takes just by assuming the distinction between emotional and physical relationships as overall, “love between women in the post-sexologist age has become either sex between women or non-existent” (Surpassing 327).

¹⁶ For more information, see Chauncey (“Sexual” 99-100) and Somerville (29-33).

¹⁷ In addition, studies from the 1930s are generally longer and more in-depth, thus providing more specifics on sexual habits. Moreover, as Paula S. Fass has found, surveys of young women were rarely done in the 1920s for fear of “planting immoral thoughts” (275). Of course, 1930s studies reflect patterns of behavior from the 1920s as many of the married couples were single in the prior decade.

¹⁸ I follow the examples of Steven Seidman and Michael Gordon and include not only manuals but also commentaries by sociologists and psychologists on the current state of marriage as the majority stipulate their view on the institution’s ideal state. I have currently have been unable to find any extant marriage or sex manuals written for the black community or research that refers to their existence.

¹⁹ See also Fass (71-78); Sidney Ditzion (376-83); and Rothman (184-85, 192-94).

²⁰ However, many professionals, despite other modern attitudes, still viewed female masturbation suspiciously, connecting its practice by wives to sexual dysfunction and homosexuality like their predecessors. See, for example, Dickinson and Beam (225, 442); Groves (Marriage 243) and Pruette (“Some” 294). For a discussion on nineteenth-century attitudes, see Margaret Gibson (116-117).

²¹ For additional examples of manuals with explicit sexual techniques, see Hannah and Abraham Stone, Millard S. Everett, and Isabel E. Hutton.

²² As Peter G. Filene notes, from 1929-1932, the marriage rate was lower than it had been for decades, but by 1934, it increased until by 1939 “it exceeded any previous year on record” (181).

²³ Of course, early manuals were prohibited by law from providing detailed birth control information, so Lay, for example, ends her book with a short reference to its

deleted chapter on contraception, attributing its censorship to “egoistic-social legislation of fifty years ago,” and Lindsey and Evans can only encourage women to write to Sanger’s Birth Control League (298; 237). However, Ditzion argues that the popularity and academic legitimacy of such manuals partly contributed to a repeal of the Comstock Obscenity Law (1873) in 1937 beginning with a series of court cases in the late 1920s where judges found the texts serious and legitimate in their discussions of sexuality (395-96). The majority of these studies did not investigate birth control use in the unmarried population, but it is reasonable to presume that the increasing rate of premarital sex that I discuss below was partly influenced by the greater access to and information about contraception during this period.

²⁴ As historians like Fass and Linda Gordon have argued, the Depression led to a greater usage of birth control once social workers began to provide information and referrals to their clients as a way to ease economic burdens (397 n33; 309). Other factors included the commercialization of contraceptives, especially condoms, and the increase in birth control clinics, both of which led to the reduction of restrictions by physicians prescribing contraception in 1936 and the legalization of birth control information in 1937 (Linda Gordon 313; Mintz and Kellogg 147).

²⁵ The majority of these studies did not report information regarding extramarital affairs for married couples, including Katherine Davis, but some insist that it is due the respondents’ high incentive to lie since, as Terman points out, “respondents could not but be aware of the fact that admission of extramarital relations could, if known, have serious legal consequences” (335).

²⁶ This first estimate is Daniel Scott Smith’s calculations using data from the Kinsey study. Smith suggests that this statistic may be higher for the general population as

Kinsey's subjects were more conservative, often "drawn more heavily from religious groups instead of universities and clubs" (328).

²⁷ For more on professional black women's experience, see Jacqueline Jones (142-46).

²⁸ Women's experiences in industry in the early twentieth century and their efforts to improve conditions are discussed in detail by Kessler-Harris (108-214) and Leslie Woodcock Tentler (58-80).

²⁹ For examples of this bias, see Kessler-Harris (256-57) and Barbara J. Harris (142).

³⁰ For an overview of the popularization of movies, see Lary May (146-66)) and Lewis A. Erenberg (69-71). Erenberg also examines the cabaret and dance hall as emblematic of the shift in public socialization of the upper classes of New York City (113-45). In general, these sites became available to women in the 1910s but only fully acceptable in the 1920s.

³¹ Erenberg discusses the pre-war dance craze as a prime factor in this reconfiguration of modern marriage (155-70).

³² See, for example, Gilbert Osofsky (179-87), Nathan Irvin Huggins (84-136), Erenberg (254-58), David Levering Lewis (205-6, 208-11) and Jervis Anderson (168-180).

³³ In fact, as Ruth M. Alexander documents, states like New York changed their vagrancy laws in 1915 so that solicitation could be an offense regardless of where it took place (i.e. in a private home) and prostitution could include the exchange of sexual favors even without monetary compensation (56).

³⁴ For more information on the black community's efforts to specifically combat sexual delinquency, see Alexander (44); Regina G. Kunzel (13); and Mary E. Odem (27-28, 118-21).

³⁵ A 1932 study demonstrated that black women were being arrested in New York in disproportionate numbers, and in Chicago, the proportion of black women being arraigned by morals court rose from 16 to 70 percent between 1914 and 1929 (Alexander 58; Staples 81)

³⁶ Dieting is also discussed in Joan Jacobs Brumberg (99-107) and Angela J. Latham (164 n30).

³⁷ From the May/June issue. For similar layouts and advice, see also the same “What They are Wearing” section for April 1922 (7); January/February 1923 (7); and July/August 1924 (7).

³⁸ Such examples are evident not only in black fashion magazines like The Half-Century Magazine (see the examples cited in note 37) but also on the covers of liberal political magazines like the Crisis and Opportunity (for example, see Opportunity’s July 1926, January 1929, and July 1929 covers and the Crisis’s July 1923, July 1925, July 1926, and January, February, and May 1933).

³⁹ The Eau Sublime ad appeared in Crisis 45 (1938): 25.

⁴⁰ The Walker ad appeared in Crisis 35 (Feb. 1928): Back Cover. Like her Poro counterpart, Annie Turbo Malone, Walker explicitly connected the sale and use of her products to the advancement of the race, as in this 1928 ad: “radiate an air of prosperity and who is to know if your purse is lined with gold or not? . . . Look your best . . . you owe it to your race” (qtd. in Peiss, Hope 204).

⁴¹ For a more detailed examination of female sexual stereotypes in the film era prior to World War I, see May (106-09, 118-44); Janet Staiger; and Sumiko Higashi.

⁴² Black-produced films during this period were scarce and, according to film historians, generally negligible. Small, underfunded, and lacking the artistic and

technical expertise to compete with larger Hollywood productions, many filmmakers could not produce quality pictures or ended up with black imitations of generic westerns and gangster movies. For more information on the black film industry, see Donald Bogle (109-16); Thomas Cripps (170-202, 323-338); and Daniel J. Leab (59-81).

⁴³ However, in his groundbreaking study The Southern Urban Negro as Consumer (1932) Paul K. Edwards concluded that white newspapers far outranked black newspapers in black communities, with 88 percent of blacks in four southern cities receiving one or more white newspaper but only 33 percent receiving black newspapers, usually the Chicago Defender, the most popular out-of-town black newspaper (172-73, 176). Many cited local advertisements and classifieds as the reason (P Edwards 170).

⁴⁴ For a full discussion of the racist ideology propagated in this period, generally considered, in Dickson D. Bruce, Jr.'s view, the "nadir" of African American history (1877-1915) (1), see Patricia Morton (27-29); George M. Frederickson (198-319); and Beverly Guy-Sheftall.

⁴⁵ For more on the black women's club movement, see Paula Giddings (17-215) and Eileen Boris.

⁴⁶ See Dunbar-Nelson's essay "Woman's Most Serious Problem" (1927). Miller's essay to The Messenger in 1925 is discussed in Jessie M. Rodrique (142). Additional examples are noted by Anne Stavney, such as articles by Du Bois, Mary Murray Washington, Frances Harper, and Fannie Barrier Williams published in The Messenger, Voices of the Negro, and Crisis (538-39).

⁴⁷ On one hand, the "Brown Girl" is part of a larger phenomenon in which black artists responded to the European movement of idolizing African primitivism, a trend that also influenced a number of American artists. On the other, this particular focus on

female sexual expression places the persona in line with the American obsession with black female sexuality as well as the period's overall anxiety about changing sexual norms for women. For more on the primitivism movement, see Robert A. Coles and Diane Isaacs; George Hutchinson (Harlem 182-89); Eloise E. Johnson (95-124); Tracey McCabe; and Michael North (59-99, 114-122). For a broader interpretation of this trend, see Marianna Torgovnick.

Chapter 3: “So daring, So lovely, and So ‘having’”

The Limitations of Female Desire in Nella Larsen’s Passing

Nella Larsen’s 1929 novel, Passing, is this study’s most ambitious exploration of non-traditional avenues of female sexuality as its main character, a bourgeois African American woman named Irene Redfield, experiences a wide range of desire in her encounter with an old schoolmate, Clare Kendry, now ostensibly living as a wealthy white woman but really living, in a sense, beyond the constrictions of race and class. Larsen utilizes the period’s newfound psychological understanding of sexuality, its possibilities as well as the dangers of repression, to reveal the social pressures of female propriety upon a black woman trapped by the restrictions of her class and her duty to her race. Larsen is therefore able to validate the flapper’s message of female sexual autonomy for all women regardless of race and class while exposing the ultimate infeasibility of attempts to limit any notion of desire within certain racial and class parameters. But instead of affirming black female sexual desire with the presentation of a healthy heterosexual relationship, Larsen offers a more nuanced and complex reading of desire, implicitly suggesting that the models of sexuality for black and white women provide only heterosexual alternatives that are not in tune with women’s actual experience of desire – that desire may instead be the capstone of sexual autonomy because it is, in the end, resistant to classification and possibly even the means to resist.¹

As I explain, the radical nature of the subject matter is also aptly portrayed by the novel’s innovative narrative style. Often judged unfairly as a flawed or conflicted text, the novel accurately portrays this chasm between internal sexual desire and external behavior through the unreliable narration.² In addition, by placing a successful Harlem socialite at the novel’s center, Larsen can critique the extent to which cultural mores

control Irene's attitude and behavior toward sexual conduct *and* sexual consciousness, perceptively analyzing how the black middle class's attempt to revise traditional perceptions of black licentiousness helped to perpetuate a restrictive view of female sexuality. In Clare's character, Larsen demonstrates not only the differences that racial and class privilege have made upon the public perception of her open, sensual personality, but also how Clare has in a way moved beyond racial and class privilege, beyond these entitlements as defined by the flapper. The flapper icon thus informs Clare's presentation of desire, and Larsen most likely anticipated the reader's association between Clare and the flapper phenomenon, but it does not, and cannot, determine how or when or for whom Clare experiences this desire. Moreover, by exposing the configuration of erotic desire along racial and class lines, Larsen is able to present sexuality in all its complex maneuverings, reflecting her awareness of cultural anxieties over race, class, and sexuality.³

Larsen possessed an intimate knowledge of the black bourgeoisie due to her education at Fisk University in Tennessee and New York's Lincoln Hospital and Home Training School for Nurses, her short employment at Tuskegee as a teacher and in New York City as a librarian, and her marriage to the prominent New York physicist Elmer Imes. Her upbringing also gave her a unique perspective into the white middle-class as she lived with her Danish mother after her mother's second marriage in Chicago's white West Side.⁴ A short tenure as a nurse in New York City exposed her to lower-class blacks, while living in the South showed her the great differences in lifestyle between the northern and southern black elite. This variety of life experiences even at such a relatively young age thus gave Larsen personal insight into how class, race, and gender

could affect one's standing and treatment in American society, an understanding found in Passing's detailed exploration of the boundaries of social definitions.

As Chapter 1 discusses, Larsen's work and its reception were also influenced by her position as a female artist during the Harlem Renaissance. Her personal and marital ties made, in Cheryl A. Wall's view, her "New Negro credentials almost impeccable," as she was already a member of the New York City elite through Imes and in the twenties cultivated friendships with Renaissance notables like Walter White, Jessie Fauset, Carl Van Vechten, and Jean Toomer (Women 93). Yet her subject matter and position as a bourgeois matron colored her fiction's reception. Since Larsen did not examine racial prejudice directly nor explore the life of the "folk" as did many of her contemporaries, critics were perhaps confused about the novel's position as a race work despite its plot of passing, for Passing is both praised and castigated for not fully addressing racial issues. In fact, Mary Larabee criticizes Larsen in Opportunity for not yet providing the, "needed epic of racial interaction between thinking members of the American social order belonging to both African and European stocks," a quality that Audrey Bowser then praises her for in Amsterdam News: "The best thing about 'Passing' is that it tells a story for the sake of the story and not for the sake of the race problem" (210; 20). Such opinions are not limited to the black press, for W.B. Seabrook ends his review in The Saturday Review of Literature asserting, "she has produced a work so fine, sensitive, and distinguished that it rises above race categories and becomes that rare object, a good novel," and the New York Times reviewer similarly contends, "she is not seeking the key to the soul of her race in the saxophone to the exclusion of all else" (1018; "Beyond" 14). The tendency to view the novel as racially "neutral" is therefore telling and suggests that its class consciousness somehow washes out its racial distinctiveness, a theme Larsen

explicitly critiques in the novel. That such assessments hurt her recognition within the black literary scene is evident in the fact that, according to biographer Thadious M. Davis, she lost a literary award in 1929 because judges assumed that her “subject matter was merely her own life’s experiences” (Larsen 344). Larsen’s reputation was further hindered by accusations of plagiarism for her short story, “Sanctuary” (1930), published in Forum magazine, even though the magazine and many literary colleagues publicly affirmed her denial. Overall, despite constant praise from some of her contemporaries, later critics shelved Larsen as an influential Renaissance novelist and criticized her bourgeois style until feminist critics revived her reputation in the 1980s.⁵

Larsen’s loyalties could also be mixed. On one hand, she supported the promotion of African American literature and asserted its importance on the broader literary scene, telling one journalist that “even if the fad of our writing passes presently, as it is bound to do I suppose, we will in the meantime have laid the foundation for our permanent contributions to American culture” (qtd. in Wall, Women 95). On the other, according to Thadious Davis, she “viewed uplift and racial organizations skeptically” and was well aware of how literature written as racial propaganda could be dull, mentioning in a letter that the submissions for a black literary contest were presumably so awful, “anything literate is sure to be awarded an honor” (Larsen 172; qtd. in Wall, Women 95). This skepticism is evident in Passing. The novel’s irony places it in opposition to the movement’s definitions of womanhood and race loyalty, for Passing suggests the relativity of truth, success, and happiness, implicitly positing that like its white counterpart, the black community can provide no positive solutions to the modern troubles of any of its citizens, particularly its women.

Disguising to the “I”

The novel’s narrative aesthetics create an often syncopated and emotional text, full of elisions and contradictions which may be difficult to navigate, but they reflect Larsen’s interest in psychoanalytic theory as an insightful method to examine personal conflict.⁶ Like other intellectuals of the period, Larsen studied Freud, Jung, and Otto Rank and so developed innovative narrative techniques such as fragmentation, enactment of consciousness, irresolution, and ambiguity to reproduce the nature of subjective experience, demonstrate its inherent unreliability, and expose the constructedness of race, sexual desire, and gender roles.⁷ In effect, Larsen trains us to read under surfaces and to fill in gaps, to see the larger cultural implications behind the narrative interpretation of one person’s reality. Her praise of modernist authors in her personal and public writing, including James Joyce, Gertrude Stein, Joseph Conrad, Marcel Proust, and Thomas Mann, are another indication that she was influenced by current modernist experimentation and its questioning of the coherence of plot and the human psyche.⁸

The title is an apt starting point as it invites the assumption that the novel is about Clare, the passer, rather than Irene, whose consciousness is the novel’s narrative center. Modern criticism has rightly shifted away from an exclusive focus on Clare, once viewed as the novel’s center in the tragic mulatta tradition, to a more open debate on the connections between the characters, a shift Larsen may have also intended when she changed its original title from *Nig*. Yet too often critics reduce the complexities of this relationship to psychological aphorisms.⁹ A popular synopsis is to see the two as psychological doubles, a neat and convenient equation but one that glosses over the fact that Irene is the novel’s main focus; at no point does the narrative relate another character’s feelings or insights.¹⁰ If the narrative perception is almost exclusively Irene’s,

then, at most, as Jonathan Little states, “Clare is Irene’s projected psychological double,” a characterization which conveys the ways in which I see Clare emblemizing desire in its many forms for Irene, but not the ways Irene also attempts to resist any identification with her and sometimes even resents this lack of identification (177). In fact, Clare’s statements and actions show how her conception of reality is very different from Irene’s; Clare acts on her desires rather than repressing them (as her continued presence in Irene’s life indicates) and recognizes her own internal conflicts, acknowledging more than once her inability to sever ties with the black community despite the risk to her marriage and relationship with her daughter. Before dwelling on Clare’s construction as a character, however, Irene’s complex and convoluted point of view must be fully analyzed, for its very instability in the means through which Larsen affirms female sexual autonomy.

The contrast between Irene’s perception and alternative interpretations begins immediately in the first chapter since her memories of Clare contain so many contradictions, particularly the image of a poor janitor’s daughter now sending “mysterious” notes on expensive “foreign paper of extraordinary size.”¹¹ Given the numerous incongruities in Irene’s description of Clare — simultaneously selfish and warm, affectionate and malicious — Irene’s continued attraction to Clare amidst the numerous negative conclusions is unsettling, but the primary narrative focus on Irene allows only a few strategies for gauging the veracity of her point of view, mainly by judging external dialogue against her internal perspective (144-45). The notion of Irene as an unreliable narrator is a frequent conclusion, yet most critics, like Claudia Tate, argue that Irene begins as reliable but once the novel progresses, “Irene becomes more and more impulsive, nervous and insecure, indeed irrational. . . . which discredits her

credibility as a reliable source of information” (144).¹² However, the text provides compelling proof of Irene’s “irrational” nature almost from the beginning as the first scenes where Clare and Brian each appear demonstrate.

The first evidence of Irene’s deluded outlook occurs in the novel’s second chapter during her reunion with Clare at the Drayton Hotel. After Irene impulsively invites Clare to Idlewild, she immediately regrets it, but not, she tells herself, because “she was a snob, that she cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about; but that she had a natural and deeply rooted aversion to the kind of front-page notoriety that Clare Kendry’s presence in Idlewild, as her guest, would expose her to” (157). Yet the distinction between the two levels of “notoriety” seems somewhat dubious, and Clare’s reason for refusing causes more doubt: “Don’t think I’ve entirely forgotten just what it would mean for you if I went. That is, if you still care about such things” (157). Although Irene presumes that Clare has guessed the latter reason, her deep aversion to notoriety, her assumption is unconvincing; Clare most likely would not see her own presence as notorious but refers to a lifelong trait (since she has not seen Irene in 12 years) that does indeed care about those “petty restrictions.”¹³ Irene’s description of her earlier, snobbish attitude towards Clare (who, she mentions, “had never been exactly one of the group”), as well as how she and “the girls” used to discuss Clare “knowingly,” also support this interpretation of Irene (154, 153). The novel reiterates Irene’s hypersensitivity to social convention a number of times, including the very next chapter. The presence of another childhood friend, Gertrude, at Clare’s tea party makes Irene annoyed, “defensive and resentful” because, as she later decides, she felt “outnumbered . . . in her adherence to her own class and kind” (166). The narrative initially suggests that Irene’s defensiveness stems from the fact that

she alone of the three married within her “kind” or race, but this mention of class takes precedence a page later with her detailed report on Gertrude’s unfashionable dress and appearance, “as if her husband might be a butcher” (167). Placing clear indications of Irene’s social elitism so soon after the initial scene with Clare thus serves to affirm a growing sense of mistrust in Irene’s self-analysis.

Not coincidentally, the following chapter questions Irene’s conclusions again, now focusing on her inability to read her husband’s motives accurately. Brian catches Irene’s outburst to Clare’s letter and replies, not unsympathetically, “You’re not . . . going to see her,” but Irene interprets the statement as “not a question, but . . . an admonition,” an interpretation she clings to despite Brian’s assertion a few moments later: “My dear, you misunderstand me entirely. I simply meant that I hope you’re not going to let her pester you” (184). In other words, Irene misreads Brian’s husbandly concern as an attempt to control her behavior, a characterization of Brian that is ludicrous given Irene’s insistent desire to control him as well as Brian’s general passivity. This moment also undermines Irene’s declaration a few pages later when, contemplating Brian’s “discontent,” she concludes, “she had, actually, a special talent for understanding him. . . . She knew him as well as he knew himself, or better” (187).

The initial impression of Irene’s misguided confidence in understanding her husband leads into the crux of the plot for Larsen provides little evidence that Brian is having an affair with Clare beyond Irene’s umbrage. Once again, if Brian’s actions and statements are set side by side with Irene’s elucidation, her logic seems flawed and even absurd. Prior to the pivotal moment in Part Three when Irene deciphers a head jerk and a “little straightening motion of the shoulders” as a defensive stance, Brian has expressed mainly negative emotions regarding Clare, first to disapprove of the “unhealthy business”

of passing and then to contradict Irene's assessment of Clare's beauty, confidently rejoining, "I like my ladies darker" (216-17, 185, 209). He does dance with Clare at the Negro Welfare League dance, but so do many other men, and the fact that he would invite a friend of his wife's to a party at his house once she has already arrived does not seem suspicious in the least, a point which Irene herself raises (204, 224). Irene's jealous instigation also does not lead to further proof, merely a new analysis of Brian's usual withdrawn behavior and a few glances between Clare and Brian, glances which even she cannot completely construe as fawning or enamored (224, 220, 237). She is even willing to interpret an improvement of his attitude toward her suspiciously, for although "it had been weeks since she had felt the keen edge of his irony. . . . That guarded reserve of his seemed to her unjust, inconsiderate, and alarming" (214). Larsen, therefore, conditions us from the outset to question Irene's perception, to see through Irene's convoluted logic in order to draw our own conclusions about more significant plot points as they develop.

Since the narrative techniques that represent Irene's delusional reality distort and fragment narrative unity, critics sometimes have difficulty describing the novel's narrative components, disagreeing even on whether Larsen incorporates a limited or omniscient narrator.¹⁴ The narrative remains in third-person, past tense and delivers Irene's thoughts almost exclusively without quotations in what Jacqueline Y. McLendon has termed "the disguised 'I,'" providing numerous instances of "stream of consciousness" or internal monologues where Irene's perceptions are rendered free of verb complement phrases (she thought that, she wished that) and with a variety of grammatical markers to encourage the emotionalism and immediacy of her thoughts, including exclamations, adverbs of time, interjections, and incomplete syntactical phrases (99). One example is Irene's reaction in Part 3, Chapter 1 after she drops her tea cup and

Hugh Wentworth apologizes for presumably jostling her: “It hurt. Dear God! How the thing hurt! . . . Damn Hugh! Something would have to be done about him. Now” (221).

At the same time, Larsen adopts a curious strategy by juxtaposing these moments of enacted consciousness with a few first person declarations prefaced by direct quotation indices, as early as Part 2, Chapter 1 (“Irene, watching [Brian], was thinking: ‘It isn’t fair, it isn’t fair’”) and as late as Part 3, Chapter 3 after Irene’s second encounter with John Bellew (“She thought: ‘Why didn’t I tell [Brian]? Why didn’t I? If trouble comes from this, I’ll never forgive myself. I’ll tell him when he comes up’”) (186, 228). Arguably, the effect of the direct internal discourse is to draw attention to its absence elsewhere in the narrative, for even immediately after these statements Irene’s thoughts progress without direct quotation markers. For instance, after the first example from Part 2, Larsen returns to an indirect style with the same methodology: “After all these years to still blame her like this. Hadn’t his success proved that she’d been right in insisting that he stick to his profession right there in New York? Couldn’t he see, even now, that it *had* been best? Not for her, oh no, not for her – she had never really considered herself – but for him and the boys” (186-87). Nowhere is this strategy more evident than in Part 3, Chapter 1, just prior to Irene’s realization that Clare and Brian are having an affair.

She thought: “Bother those people coming to tea!”

She thought: “If I could only be sure that at bottom *it’s* just Brazil.”

She thought: “Whatever *it* is, if I only knew what *it* was, I could manage *it*.”

Brian again. Unhappy, restless, withdrawn. (214, emphasis added)

By placing three direct internal remarks together, all prefaced with the same subject and verb combination, Larsen highlights the contradictory and confusing disorder of Irene’s unhappiness. This arrangement also focuses on a plot point that might otherwise be

hidden: the repeated emphasis on what “it” might be and Irene’s fear that “it” will disrupt the orderliness of her bourgeois life (“I could manage it”). In the next paragraph “it” seems to refer to the source of Brian’s impatient discontent, but the pronoun’s usage sets up a grammatical parallel in Irene’s revelation a few pages later that exposes Irene’s logic more clearly: “Clare Kendry! So that was *it!*” (217, emphasis added). The fact that Irene is referring not to Clare, *the person*, but Clare and Brian, *the relationship*, is reiterated first by the neutral pronoun “it” and then by Irene’s abstract terminology for the cause of her fear, “this thing,” now an almost physical presence in her mind which returns periodically throughout the chapter, including the previously cited quotation from Part 3, Chapter 1 (“How the thing hurt”) (217, 218, 221). The narrative technique again parallels the storyline, since the vagaries of the situation, represented by “it” and “thing,” are not simply a plot contrivance but a recreation of Irene’s refusal or inability to dwell on the specific details of either the alleged affair or its implications on her ordered middle-class security.

Knowing (and Controlling) Love

Once we understand how the novel’s narrative strategy is an experiment in the nature of consciousness, the most fundamental conventions of the novel become skewed since basic assumptions of the genre are undermined. The many blanks in the text spread to cover the most elemental components of plot, characterization, and narrative: Who is Clare Kendry? What parts, if any, of Irene’s self-perception are real? Is Clare having an affair with Brian? Does Irene push Clare out the window? This gap between appearance and perception, between, as Samira Kawash explains, “seeming and being,” and between “suspicion and knowledge,” set the foundation for Larsen’s exploration of sexuality as it

indicates the relativity of human experience, especially sexual desire and the many ways it can be expressed (156, 161). In fact, the ambiguity between appearance and perception question the relativity of social definitions as well: Who is black? Who is white? What does being “black” or “white” mean to one’s identity as a woman? To others’ perception of one as a woman? Or as a woman with sexual desire? Larsen exposes the ways in which race and gender, supposedly biological determinants, are culturally constructed and also reveals the cultural specifications of sexual desire by demonstrating the numerous differences in how women see and express erotic power. Given the flapper’s emphasis on sexuality as an irrepressible drive and an avenue to economic and social power, Larsen questions *what* sexuality is at its core and *what* power women gain if sexual expression is supposed to lead only to marital monogamy.

Thus, the novel’s ambiguous title is again worth mentioning, for it refers to the act, not the actor, suggesting a broad application of the term. The novel may indeed be a conventional tale of jealousy and conflict, as some critics have argued, for it cloaks its controversial ideas on the nature of race and female desire under an aura of respectability.¹⁵ And yet, as this study suggests, Larsen’s willingness to examine the contradictory messages in social discourse about sexual desire, autonomy, and agency places the novel in a specific context in social history. As Chapter 2 discussed, race, gender and class are always factors within public conceptions of female sexuality, yet black female sexuality in particular exposes the interconnectedness of these social conventions since the black community during these decades advocated a middle-class sexual propriety in order to combat the dominant racial paradigm of black female lasciviousness but in doing so reinscribed such imagery upon black women outside of this model of moral motherhood.¹⁶ In short, as Judith Butler first formulated so

articulately in Bodies That Matter, what is crucial for critical analysis in general and for this text in particular is “what convergent set of historical formulations of racialized gender, of gendered race, of the sexualization of racial ideals, or the racialization of gender norms, makes up both the social regulation of sexuality and its psychic articulations” (182). A key issue, then, is Irene’s understanding of erotic desire and, equally importantly, how women are supposed to regulate it, an understanding that is filtered as well through the prism of class, a significant oversight in Butler’s analysis that critics, notably Jennifer DeVere Brody and Anne Stavney, have fought to correct. According to Irene’s personal identification, upper and middle-class black wives do not have sexual needs, and thus Clare disrupts Irene’s psychic homeostasis because she simultaneously *has* a sexual appetite, feels in control of it, and is able to express it, independent of male concerns, including her husband’s. Irene, whose life is based upon discipline and security, feels both attracted to and threatened by Clare because she cannot acknowledge either her own desire and her (lack of) control over it. In a sense, the significance of *who* Irene craves – Clare, Brian, even herself – is secondary to the fact that feeling *any* erotic passion makes Irene feel out of control - so out of control, in fact, she feels murderous rage against the person she blames for her irrational emotions.

The point of departure for an analysis of Irene’s perception of Clare and her erotic drive is an obvious one: who has sexual desire and for whom? This question is multifarious because it is not the same thing for Irene to crave Clare sexually as it is for Clare to represent sexual desire for Irene, nor is it the same to have desire and to express (versus suppress) it. The debate over the nature of Irene’s passion for Clare has revolved most consistently around the notion of lesbian desire since Deborah E. McDowell posited this interpretation in her introduction to the 1986 edition of Passing; notable critics who

have upheld this reading include Corinne E. Blackmer (“Veils”), Ann duCille, and Kawash, since they rightly return notions of race to McDowell’s theory, while disputing critics like Little, Merrill Horton, and Lauren Berlant have introduced some important distinctions between types of desire. Before moving on to a closer examination of these critical ideas, indeed, before we examine *why* Irene desires Clare, I wish to raise a related, but separate, issue of whether Irene feels *any* sexual desire.

Examinations of Irene’s repressed sexual nature tend to refer to her “Victorian” or “Puritan” morality, yet this denial of black female sexual appetency is not Irene’s alone but representative of her historical, regional, and class orientation.¹⁷ As Chapter 2 examined, black uplift philosophy continued to exert a powerful influence on the Harlem Renaissance, particularly in the older generation’s emphasis on the importance of respectability for black women in general and the black mother in particular, and the rise in black periodicals, films, and literature overall reinforced the regulatory middle-class values being transmuted to the American population as a whole. Many critics note that Irene fits the repressive bourgeois standard – she refuses to discuss sex with her husband and denies the importance of discussing the topic with her sons, she sleeps in a separate bedroom from Brian – and Larsen may be recalling the black community’s appropriation of a white icon of Victorian womanhood as a deliberate parallel to the potentiality of appropriating another icon in the flapper. Yet a distinction must be made about whether Irene is obeying rules of decorum or exhibiting deeper sexual inhibitions.¹⁸ One way to assess the difference is to examine the possible reasons behind the Redfields’ sexless marriage, for they are most likely not merely adhering, albeit very strictly, to this model of moral motherhood.

Brian's oft-quoted remark that sex is "a grand joke, the greatest in the world" (189) is used as proof by some critics, such as Blackmer and David L. Blackmore, that Brian may be homosexual ("African Masks" 259; 475-8).¹⁹ The novel does not list almost any physical demonstrations of love or even contact between the Redfields, a telling detail given Irene's often caressing and fawning attitude towards Clare.²⁰ Irene herself acknowledges more than once that Brian does not seem to have any affection towards *her*, referring to her husband's "slightly undemonstrative way" and calling him "remote and inaccessible" and "customarily considerate and abstemious," a characterization which, in light of the other remarks, may refer to the fact that it is her physical affection that he so sparingly indulges in (McLendon 104;190, 224, 214). Even when she agonizes over the possibility of an affair, she concedes, "in all their married life she had had no slightest cause to suspect her husband of any infidelity, of any serious flirtation," indicating that as far as Irene knows, Brian has never expressed any physical interest in another woman, not even in passing (223). Yet Brian never appears to have demonstrated any interest, physical or otherwise, in another *man* either, so perhaps his sexual mien is characterized by apathy and disinterest rather than oriented toward a particular gender. Irene's recognition that to Brian she is "only the mother of his sons" also seems to confirm her awareness that he no longer desires her and instead defuses the meaning of their relationship through the black community's culturally ascribed denotation of asexual motherhood (221).

Conversely, Irene seems to exhibit some vague intimations of longing for Brian, calling him "extremely good looking" and "in a pleasant masculine way, rather handsome" (183, 185). She also professes to be pleased when he dances with Clare for it might prove to her that "some coloured men were superior to some white men," a remark

which could refer to her belief in Brian's superior physical magnetism (204). Finally, when she fully accepts the possibility that Clare and Brian have consummated their affair, Irene concludes, "that she couldn't now be sure that she had ever truly *known love*. Not even for Brian. He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything *more*? Had she ever *wanted* or tried for *more*? In that hour she thought not" (235, emphasis added). This revelation is significant in that it provides evidence, first of all, of Irene's sense that there is something *lacking* in their marriage, something that she covertly calls "love," an ambiguous term which may stand for physical love or sexual desire. Next, Irene is acknowledging that Brian does not fulfill all that their relationship may signify, that there may be "more" he could have been to her; in other words, Brian is her husband but not her lover, the father of her sons but not her intimate confidante. Lastly and most importantly, Irene for the first time is willing to accept that she herself has also lacked something, a yearning for something else, for something "more." Given the fact that she has already confessed that "security was the most important and *desired* thing in life," she now is willing to admit that security is not all she could have desired, that there is "more" she could have wanted (235, emphasis added).

Once again, the novel's narrative construction as the enactment of consciousness draws attention to what is known and what is spoken. In this case, significantly all of Irene's notations on Brian's physical attractiveness occur within her mind, while the majority of her prudish declarations are in conversations with the very person, her husband, who may be the one repressing his sexual urges, whether heterosexual and homosexual. Irene's "Victorian" public face may merely be her willingness to play the hand that has already been dealt to her because without Brian, she has no sexual outlet that is sanctified by her black bourgeois, Christian beliefs. In fact, in this typology Irene

is meant to be satisfied not by sex but by its outcome, her children, yet Larsen provides numerous clues to indicate that the reverse is true, despite Irene's contention, "I take being a mother rather seriously. I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house;" not in the least is her plan to send her sons to European schools in the near future (210, 190). Like her pronouncements against sex, Irene pays lip service to this valuation of motherhood but internally is willing to admit her complicity in Clare's statement, "being a mother is the cruellest thing in the world" (197). Therefore, Irene's rage at the end of the novel may be due to her acknowledgment that her husband could ignore her but still find another woman physically desirable or to her recognition that other women do not feel constrained by the sanctity of marriage or motherhood when quenching their own sexual needs.

At this point, however, the logic of our argument assumes a heterosexual directive which is neither fair nor feasible; even without introducing Irene's desire for Clare, Larsen gives few indications that Irene is jealous that Brian might be having an affair. To the contrary, perhaps what Irene fears is not the expression of Brian's passion for anyone else but a public declaration of that passion, for her initial and painful reaction to "this thing" is eventually contained when she realizes, "she could bear anything, but only if no one knew that she had anything to bear," a sentiment she repeats a moment later: "It hurt like hell. But it didn't matter, if no one knew. If everything could go on as before" (218, 221, 222). Even when her anxiety reaches a climax prior to the Freeland's party, she focuses less on the idea that Clare could win Brian's affections than on the fact that Clare could supersede Irene's position as the doctor's wife, as when she decides that it was "better, far better, to share him than to lose him completely" (235). Indeed, although she now willingly faces the possibility that "everything had happened," her jealousy falls flat,

so much so that she encourages Clare to visit with Brian alone (234). Here, for the first time, she defines her greatest worry as the loss not of her husband's love but of "security. . . safety and permanence" (235). Then Larsen again pushes beyond Irene's conclusions, opening another fissure in Irene's consciousness to expose a deeper meaning with Irene's observation that her primary goal in life is "to be tranquil. Only, unmolested, to be *allowed to direct* for their own good the lives of her sons and her husband" (235, emphasis added). Of all the things she has to lose, it seems, Irene dreads a loss of control the most. Taken together, one can deduce that Irene cares less about the lack of (sexual) control Clare inspires in Brian and its result (the affair) than the fact that Clare makes *Irene* feel less in control. Irene is also confident that this feeling will dissolve once Clare is gone. Thus, behind Irene's rationalizations the root of her anxiety becomes clear: Irene fears not so much the *absence* of her husband or his affections but the *presence* of this dangerous, beautiful woman.

Desire in Black and White

In some ways, then, Clare is the center of the text because she fills ruptures in the novel even when she is not consciously present in Irene's mind. Larsen does make it difficult to conclude how Irene feels about Clare since her emotions shifts from page to page and moment to moment; she doubts her, condemns her, and insists that they are "strangers," but her affection and attraction are repeatedly emphasized (192). As many critics, like Blackmore, have noted, "Irene's descriptions of Clare are exotic, sensual, couched in the discourse of desire," and she is incapable of withdrawing from Clare despite her affirmations to do so (476). Based on such evidence, most critics concur with McDowell that Irene possesses some form of sexual desire for Clare, whether the root of

the desire is lesbian, heterosexual projection or displacement, autoerotic/narcissistic, or all three.²¹ At the same time, McDowell's belief that the homoeroticism is concealed under "the safe and familiar plot of racial passing" is not accurate because the lust rampant in the Irene's consciousness is, in Kawash's words, "part of, rather than disguised by, the passing plot," (xxx, 160). This idea then leads to the question of how race figures in Irene's longing, and, significantly, critics cannot agree on whether Irene desires Clare as a *black* woman or a *white* woman. Yet instead of focusing on such binary oppositions, Larsen emphasizes how it is the arbitrariness of racial definitions that makes Clare's sexuality so attractive to Irene and how Clare's freedom to manipulate conceptions of race is precisely what exposes the racial constructions of sexuality, particularly within the flapper icon, as well as their interdependence

Critics who see Irene's attraction to Clare as dependent on Clare's status as a black woman often conclude that Irene's desire represents her indoctrination into the primitivist notion of the exotic Other. Wall, one of the most forceful advocates of this theory, contends that Irene "is not responding to the person before her so much as to her own notions of Otherness. Clare's 'Negro eyes' symbolize the unconscious, the unknowable, the erotic, and the passive" ("Passing" 108).²² On one hand, I agree that Irene has internalized the dominant society's view of black female sexuality as primal, dangerous, and uninhibited, but on the other, Irene finds Clare dangerous because she actively and openly flaunts her eroticism, making her sexual autonomy perfectly clear, a facet that Wall, by defining the exotic Other as "passive" and "unconscious," overlooks. Another theory propounded by critics is that Irene covets not just Clare's exotic black otherness but also her white beauty. Thadious Davis, for example, argues Irene's lust for Clare is part of a larger "aesthetic attraction to whiteness," including "white standards of beauty"

that Clare's "blond, pale, [and] ivory" body denotes (Larsen 326).²³ Some of these critics have made a convincing argument that Irene craves both Clare's blackness, symbolized by her dark "Negro eyes," and her whiteness, referring to her white upper-class lifestyle as well as her "pale gold hair" and "ivory skin" (161). However, it is my contention that Larsen locates Irene's desire in this space beyond – not space between – black and white, as a close examination of their reunion signifies.

At the Drayton Irene first finds the anonymous, presumably "white" Clare merely "attractive-looking" when she notes her "dark, almost black, eyes . . . against the ivory of her skin," but once Clare's identity has been confirmed, she meditates in almost loving detail upon her representative "black" and "white" features: "the ivory skin had a peculiar soft lustre. And the eyes were magnificent! dark, sometimes black, always luminous, and set in long, black lashes. Arresting eyes, slow and mesmeric, . . . Surely! They were Negro eyes! mysterious and concealing. And set in that ivory face under that bright hair, there was about them something exotic" (148, 161). Crucially, this rumination occurs once Irene has also reassessed Clare's attitude, her "air of indifferent assurance, . . . [a] dim suggestion of polite insolence," against the newfound knowledge that she is passing: "It was as if the woman sitting on the other side of the table, a girl that she had known, who had done this rather dangerous and, to Irene Redfield, abhorrent thing rather successfully and had announced herself well satisfied, had for her a fascination, strange and compelling" (161). Although Butler focuses upon the moment prior to their reintroduction as more significant, this perplexing observation seems to rest once again on what she identifies as "the question of what can and cannot be spoken, what can and cannot be publicly exposed, . . . [and] the larger question of the dangers of public exposure of both color and desire" (177, 169). I would agree as well that this fascination

is connected to Clare's "sexual daring" but not with Butler's view that this daring is tied into Clare's ability to shift her racial identity at will (169). Instead, I see Clare's sexual daring, her willingness to assert her sexual autonomy, as not predicated by the racial and class privilege that connect her to the flapper but by her ability to *deny* racial and class privilege, to move beyond racial and class proscriptions and rest outside of them in an unknown, ambiguous space, indifferent and insolent not merely to social propriety but to the notion that social propriety, notably gender proscriptions based upon class and race, can contain her daring, her desires. Irene's fascination with Clare's disdain of social conventions therefore leads directly not merely into Clare's desire but also into Irene's, from a fascination with Clare's attitude to a fascination with Clare's features that, as she notes, mark her as both black and white and yet neither. Throughout the novel, Irene returns to this blend of Clare's "exquisite, golden" luminescence and the "dark jewels" at the center, unable to separate one from the other (203). Since Irene assumes that others, like Dave Freeland, find the effect of this mixture, such as Clare's "trick of sliding down ivory lids over astonishing black eyes," just as magnetic, she conflates her desire for Clare with Clare's desirability – her ability to incite desire in others (221).

The ambiguous presence of race is thus a pivotal configuration in Irene's homoerotic desire for *Clare* and in her perception of *Clare's desirability*, yet it also plays an important role in Irene's desire for *Clare's desire* - her ability to express desire. As other critics, like Helena Michie, have pointed out, "Irene feels at the same time a desire for and a desire to be Clare," but Michie does not fully explore the differentiation that Clare's inconstant racial identity brings to this equation, nor does she acknowledge that Irene's "desire to be Clare" has multiple connotations (151). A full examination of Irene's singular focus on Clare's "having way" exposes these multiple connotations

because it reveals more about what Irene wants than what Clare does (153). Initially, Irene seems to see this “having way” as denoting a material need, since in their first meeting she notes, “Clare seemed certainly to have succeeded in having a few of the things that she had wanted” (153). Moreover, this refrain allows Irene to deny her own role in creating this materialistic urge in Clare when they were girls, to deny the logical imperative that a poor girl might feel for the financial ease that Clare’s upper-class set takes for granted as well as the conspicuous consumerism which underlies the bourgeois sense of propriety. Such an interpretation also fits logically within these two terms’ usual denotations: Clare’s “having way” indicates her ability to get whatever she wants. Soon, this specification takes on a broader meaning; after the display of Bellew’s racism at the tea party, which Irene assumes leaves Clare full of “mortification and shame,” Irene shifts her view of Clare’s longing (174). Before leaving the party, Irene believes that her “understanding was rapidly increasing, as was her pity and her contempt. Clare was so daring, so lovely, and so ‘having’” (174). Significantly, during the party, even in the guise of recollection, Irene still expresses mainly sympathy for Clare, partly because of her “daring” – her ability to express what she wants, – partly because of her loveliness, literally, her desirability, the fact that others want her, – and partly because of her “having” way – her *assumption* that she can get what she wants. In short, Irene now interprets Clare’s “having way” not as Clare’s material success in fulfilling her dreams but in her conflation of desire and fulfillment, so that, for Clare, “wanting” becomes, in essence, synonymous with “having.”

Granted, Irene’s pity here later turns into anger, which she decides is because Clare subjected her to the “humiliation” of Bellew’s offensive behavior, but Irene makes Clare the source of her “humiliation, resentment, and rage,” not Bellew, a seemingly

contradictory stance that stems from Irene's more generous attitude towards Bellew, whom "under other conditions she might have liked" (178, 145, 173).²⁴ Yet Irene's anger arises not during the party but after Clare's "partly mocking, . . . partly menacing" good-bye look, and exploring possible reasons for this critical shift from sympathy to anger reveals a great deal about the complex configuration of Irene's desire. No critic has posited an explanation for why Irene's emotions turn from pity to anger and fear with this parting glance, and it may indeed be connected to her refusal to confront her own class snobbery, but perhaps Irene is unwilling to concede her envy for exactly the same qualities she earlier pitied. Irene sees the look as "mocking" because she thinks Clare recognizes her inability to acknowledge her own yearnings, including her lust for the "fairly good-looking man of amiable disposition," for his "easy circumstances," even for Clare herself (173). Given the impersonal relations she has with her own husband, Irene may also be envious of Clare's desirability or the desire she so obviously arouses in her husband, however vile it may seem in light of his racism, since Bellew clearly adores her, touching her "playfully" and "doing his best to be agreeable" to her friends (173). The reason Clare's goodbye to Irene is also "menacing" may be due to Irene's guilt for her own jealousy, but there is more in Clare's departing glance, "something else for which [Irene] could find no name" but one that inspires the same "sensation of fear" as Irene had earlier when she was unsure if "that woman" at the other table detected her race (176, 150). Although at the Drayton Irene claims that she isn't "ashamed of being a Negro, or even of having it declared, . . . [but fears] the idea of being of ejected from any place," the fact that Irene is passing at all, even for a cold drink on a hot afternoon, exposes her hypocritical declaration a few moments later that without passing she has "everything I want" (150, 160). Irene's fear and Clare's unnamable look stem from the fact that Clare

is not just implicitly challenging this notion but also challenging Irene to admit that she can, if so willing, express her own needs in order to fill them. As Kawash explains, “Clare produces a wedge between desire and satisfaction” because her passing “undermines the basis of distinction between black and white through which Irene’s world has been ordered” (158, 159). But I would go farther than Kawash to argue that what Irene desires is desire itself, a desire which dramatically exposes this distinction between black and white. Irene craves Clare’s desire, her ability to have it *and* to act on it, and her presumption that her desire is always satiable, as much as she longs for Clare, but Clare’s ability to proclaim her sexual needs is dependent on her shifting racial status from black to white, just as Irene’s inability, or refusal, to exhibit her own is dependent on her predominantly static racial identity as a black woman. In other words, just as Irene finds Clare’s racial ambiguity erotic, she is also jealous of it, for it gives Clare license to act on her libido in ways that Irene cannot. With this complex erotic exploration, Larsen is able to acknowledge how much conceptions of sexual desire are inextricably entangled with notions of class and race, even if her primary narrative consciousness, Irene, cannot.

To do so, Larsen demonstrates how living beyond the restrictions of race and class frees Clare’s sexual autonomy -- her ability to have erotic cravings and, more importantly, to reveal and fulfill those cravings -- a freedom that is not permitted to black women nor the flapper.²⁵ As Chapter 2 explained, through black uplift philosophy as well as dominant middle-class morality, black women were told to suppress their libido for the betterment of the race – to demonstrate their sexual desire was to recall atavistic, primal instincts that implied a lack of choice and a lack of control. Clare expressed her desire when she lived as a lower-class black woman but was consistently censured for it,

while passing has given a public legitimacy to her open, sensual personality, a legitimacy that was denied to her as a lower-class black girl. In this way, Clare epitomizes the fact that black women do not have a history where sexual autonomy is reconciled with respectability and security. Indeed, the only person censured for her brazen dress is Gertrude, whom Irene notes is wearing an “over-trimmed Georgette *crepe* dress [which] was too short and showed an appalling amount of leg, stout legs in sleazy stockings of a vivid rose-beige shade” (167). As a lower-class black woman, Gertrude’s fashion marks her sexuality as conspicuous and unacceptable in Irene’s middle-class sensibility, but, as the novel demonstrates, Clare’s sexual attitudes are also interpreted negatively when she is not shielded by her whiteness.

Yet this newfound validity of Clare’s sexual appetency should not be ascribed solely to her racial and class privilege as an upper-class white woman which would place her squarely within the flapper paradigm. Granted, Clare appears to epitomize the flapper lifestyle in her attitude towards sexual freedom and experimentation, as a few critics have suggested. DuCille has claimed that Clare, “written as part vamp, part flapper, and part femme fatale, . . . reflects the bohemian fascination with sexuality, the Greenwich Village high life, the glamorous, the risqué, the foreign, and the forbidden,” but she does not fully examine how Clare in fact better embodies the flapper persona, no longer a radical lifestyle alternative but a mainstream role model, because she married not a liberal, white bohemian artist from Greenwich Village but a wealthy white businessman from the west side of Chicago (104). Bourgeois socialite Irene also makes note of Clare’s various outfits always with an eye of approval, not Puritan contempt, from her “fluttering dress of green chiffon” and “simple cinnamon-brown frock” to her “stately gown of shining black taffeta,” indicating the connection between conspicuous

consumption and sexual desirability was not forbidden but acceptable female behavior (148, 220, 203). Clare, then, exemplifies this period's conflation of sexual freedom and upper-class luxury, an equation that Irene, with a practiced eye towards bourgeois propriety, appreciates.

Another critical assessment of Clare as flapper is in No Man's Land, vol. 3, where Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar distinguish between Clare, the flapper "passionately committed to sexual experimentation and later to an effort to escape the confinement of marriage and motherhood" and Clare, the "prototypical femme fatale: seductive, conflicted, destructive, and infused with transgressive knowledge" (154).²⁶ Yet, as I later discuss, Clare's sexual autonomy is part of her personality even prior to her assent into the white upper class, and it is critical to explore more fully what makes Clare's sexual attitude so glamorous and transgressive.

Critics have also not interrogated why Clare the flapper, with these trappings of racial and class privilege, so desires to escape them and return to the black community. And, as I discuss below, Larsen does not just emphasize how Clare's "white" race and upper-class status allow her to practice her sexual autonomy openly but how they, in fact, are another type of restriction that Clare seeks to escape in order to be sexually autonomous. But we should not be too hasty to conclude that Larsen is validating the exclusion of black women from modern conceptions of sexual autonomy or presenting upper-class white women as a model to emulate, as the ending will demonstrate.

Although the text's convoluted narrative complicates attempts to specify the racial component of Irene's desire, Larsen clearly shows how Irene constantly tries to reestablish the markers of Clare's racial and class identity, to reassert the social

proscriptions that limit and define Irene's existence, and notably such moments occur when she views evidence of Clare's ambiguous beauty and sexual power. In fact, in the first scene with Clare, Irene's attitude towards even a slight demonstration of Clare's sexual power shifts negatively if she views the same characteristic through a racial lens. After Irene notes the pleasant and attractive demeanor of the woman at the next table, she is disturbed by her "odd sort of smile" at the waiter, deciding "that she would have classed it, *coming from another woman*, as being just a shade too provocative for a waiter" (149, emphasis added). Moments later, following their reintroduction, she reclassifies her previous opinion: "Again that odd upward smile. *Now*, Irene was sure that it was too provocative for a waiter" (152, emphasis added). With this subtle modification, Larsen indicates how race alters complicates even the slightest public demonstration of a woman's sexual autonomy, for Irene's awareness of Clare's "true" race has literally made her into "another woman," a black woman whose smile now assumes a sexual connotation, a coquettish air rather than merely a white woman's "certain impression of assurance" (149). Irene's attempt to reassert social propitious rules of behavior, the same rules that she, as a black woman, must follow, is undone, however, later in this scene once her analysis of her "fascination, strange and compelling" with Clare eventually becomes a mediation of desire (161).

Two other scenes similarly demonstrate how Irene continues to temper her desire and envy of Clare's unencumbered sexual autonomy with condemnations of Clare the "black" woman and denials that Clare the "white" woman changes her viewpoint. The first is Clare's entrance in the novel when she feels free to be seen in a respectable hotel restaurant alone with a man who is not her husband even though she is conversing in intimate tones and conveying a "peculiar caressing smile" (148). The detail that the man

follows her up to the roof to say goodbye lends credence to the fact, as Priscilla Ramsey has suggested, that Clare having an affair with this “stranger” (35). If the scene’s significance is initially missed, Larsen recalls it twice, the second time explicitly when Irene acknowledges to herself that John Bellew is not the same man (170). For the purpose of this discussion, the first, although more implicit, is much more significant. A few pages after she spots Clare with the mysterious man, Irene recollects the circumstances of Clare’s disappearance from their black community; two sightings of a well-dressed Clare with white companions – first in a “fashionable hotel,” then in a “Packard limousine” – led Irene’s social clique, “the girls,” to conclude that “such circumstances could mean only one thing. Working indeed! People didn’t take their servants to the Shelby for dinner” (152-53). To construct a cohesive picture, Irene’s innuendoes must be fully extrapolated. The emphasis on “Working,” the inclusion of details that she was with numerous men, and the significance of seeing her in a hotel (as opposed to an expensive restaurant) discount the perception that Clare is merely the mistress of one white man and suggest that she is, in fact, a prostitute. Irene and her friends also presume that Clare’s lower-class status, her mother’s sexual waywardness (“her mother, they say, would have run away if she hadn’t died”), and Clare’s “having way” contribute to the likelihood of her illicit profession (153).²⁷ However, there is little else in the novel to indicate that Clare was ever a prostitute or that she has even considered the possibility that those who knew her as a girl suspected her of being one. Despite the fact that one of these girls refuses to speak to her at a department store, Clare is later amused at Irene’s suggestion that attending the N.W.L. dance alone would cause others to mistake her for a prostitute, saying that she never has been before, so clearly she does not know that her former classmates once came to the same conclusion (154, 199).

What then does Clare see as the cause of this snubbing at Marshall Fields, the unnamed rumor, the “very thing” that she is afraid to find out if Irene or her mother believe (154-55)? Clare stops her own sexual deviance at extramarital affairs, not prostitution, and thus the contrast between the shamed and hidden young Clare and the public, affectionate older Clare is all the more striking, given that she was more concerned about public perception when she was a unmarried “black” woman than she is as a older, married “white” one. Surprisingly, few critics have acknowledged the impact this early condemnation of Clare must have on Irene’s perception of her, but, as I later suggest, Larsen still defies a simple equation that exchanges “black” shame for “white” freedom by detailing not only the restrictions Clare is now bound by in her upper-class white life but also why she wishes to leave these restrictions behind (153).²⁸

Irene’s conversation with Hugh Wentworth as they observe Clare dancing with Ralph Hazelton is another telling scene regarding Clare’s shifting racial and sexual identity, although the contrast here is that Hugh believes, at least at this moment, that Clare is a white woman, a view Irene willingly entertains for the sake of the conversation. Hugh argues white women find black men more physically appealing than white men and points to his wife as an example, but Irene denies that Clare (as a white woman) has anything more than curiosity, even a slight disgust, for a black man, insisting, “I think what [white women] feel [for black men] is – well, a kind of emotional excitement. . . . the sort of thing you feel in the presence of something strange, and even, perhaps, a bit repugnant” (205). This reply may indicate Irene’s struggle to deny Clare’s attraction to her own black man (Brian), but since it comes before Irene’s acknowledgement of such a possibility, this scene more logically represents Irene’s denial that a white woman possesses more freedom to have and display erotic desire than a black woman, even for

black men. Her earlier insistence that Clare would be taken for a prostitute if she went to the dance alone is an indication that she continues to read Clare as a black woman (since this is what “respectable” middle-class black people would assume about a single black woman they did not know) while Clare, in her “white” world, has not have that problem, as her reply (“I never have been”) also exemplifies (199).

Yet the most explicit way Larsen indicates Clare’s sexual autonomy lies not within her manipulation of her racial and class identity but within her ability to leave this identity unmarked is by indicating that Clare is still unable to fully complete her sexual autonomy even if she fulfills the parameters set by the flapper as long as she is connected to Bellew. In other words, Larsen does not merely expose the racial and class constrictions within the flapper model but also how racial and class constrictions hinder *any* woman’s sexual autonomy. Clare’s most unencumbered exhibitions of sexual power occur, like at the Drayton or at the party with Ralph Hazelton, when she is alone, for Bellew’s presence reasserts her racial and class identity as a white woman.

To fully understand Clare’s quest for autonomy, we must identify the source of Clare’s “wild desire,” since “desire” implies that there is an object to covet or a lack of to be fulfilled (145). Given the novel’s title, it makes sense to assume that the locus of Clare’s desire is not sexual but racial, a return to African American society, but Little points out that Clare’s “vision of Blacks is clouded by romantic sentiment and stereotype,” primarily summed up with the statement, “You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh” (177; 200). Another proclamation on her longing to return is in her second letter, but even there she only vaguely declares that “in this pale life of mine I am all the time seeing the bright pictures of that other that I once thought I was glad to be free of” (145).

Tellingly, Clare's letter becomes less about her pining for this "other" life than pining for Irene: "it's your fault, 'Rene dear. At least partly. For I wouldn't now, perhaps, have this terrible, this wild desire if I hadn't seen you that time in Chicago" (145). Clare specifically wants to see Irene and her social set, so even if on the surface Clare's "wild desire" appears merely as a nostalgia for old acquaintances, she more likely wants, in Martha J. Cutter's words, "to flaunt her position in the upper class in front of her middle-class friends" (91). In other words, there is no notion of blackness, Clare's or Irene's, that is not class inflected. Despite duCille's assertion that Irene is "Clare's . . . connection to the 'primitive' Negro past, gone but too instinctual to be forgotten," Irene's association with blackness, in her own mind and in Clare's, is inextricably tied to her bourgeois class status, demonstrated not only by her servants and other class accoutrements but also in her belief that she can shelter her sons from the everyday realities of racial discord, such as refusing to answer their questions about lynching (105; 231). Even her racial uplift work is, as McDowell points out, "actually self-serving, not undertaken for the good of the race," and regardless of Clare's willingness to mingle with Irene's black servants, she too wishes to attend the N.W.L dance not for its philanthropic intent but for its mix of white celebrity voyeurs (xxv; 198). In a sense, then, Clare's former status as a lower-class black girl undermines her innocent and romantic nostalgia for middle-class black life, while her new status as a upper-class white transforms a seemingly "natural" need to reaffirm her black identity into white primitivist exploitation, mimicking those who, in duCille's words, "enjoy the privileges of white skin by day but flock to Harlem by night to enjoy the pleasures they associate with black flesh" (106).

There are other indications, however, that Clare's desire to visit Harlem is connected less to a vision of blackness, bourgeois or otherwise, than to a need to assert

her will against the proscriptions of others, including the racial and class proscriptions that she has been able to manipulate. In short, Clare's sexual autonomy, although enabled in many ways by her close identification with the flapper model after her marriage, still is not complete as long as she remains within any racial or class categories. Despite her letter's adamant pronouncements, Clare later admits that her hunger to mingle with blacks was instigated not by nostalgia or a need to reaffirm what Mary Mabel Youman calls her "humane, spiritual birthright" but by her husband, yet her wish to be single, to live free of the role of wife and mother, is not merely because this role has, by its very nature, always a specific set of racial and class parameters (241). Her explanation, in which she defies Irene's attempts to stop her from visiting the black community, contains another telling example of what Butler identifies as deliberate narrative ambiguity (168): "It's Jack. I don't blame you for being angry, though I must say you behaved beautifully that day. But I did think you'd understand, 'Rene. It was *that*, partly, that has made me *want* to see other people. *It* just swooped down and changed everything. If it hadn't been for *that*, I'd have gone on to the end, never seeing any of you. But *that* did something to me, and I've been so lonely ever since!" (195-96, emphasis added). Butler also rightly focuses upon the configuration of Bellew's sexual desire "that day" during the tea party as encapsulated in his nickname for his wife, Nig, which she asserts, "sustains his desire as a kind of disavowal, one that structures not only the ambivalence in his desire for Clare, but the erotic ambivalence by which he constitutes the fragile boundaries of his own racial identity," but elides the question of where Clare's desire is located in this relationship by focusing upon Clare's acceptance of the term "as a kind of love toy" that she willingly lets eroticize her (172). In other words, even though the ambiguous "that" in Clare's declaration may very well refer to

her husband's eroticisation of "the uncertain border between black and white" that he sees within her, Clare's anger, not her acquiescence, is what she reiterates multifold later when she cries, "Damn Jack! He keeps me out of everything. Everything I *want*. I could kill him!" (Butler 172; 200, emphasis added).

Ultimately, Clare's final declaration is the clearest explanation for her dangerous trips to Harlem; when Irene finally compels her to consider what would happen if her husband discovers her secret trips, Clare admits she would completely return to the black community: "I'd come up here to live. Harlem, I mean. Then I'd be able to *do as I please*, when I please" (234, emphasis added). In short, Clare did not wish to be free of her husband until she is forced to acknowledge that her sexual autonomy, although liberated by her racial and class associations with the flapper, is still limited because, like her husband's love, it is dependent upon such identity markers even when those markers are unstable. If her longing to "do as I please" recalls Irene's desire for complete control, Clare's focus is always more on the intensity of her yearning, on, in Michael L. Cobb's words, "the desire to get whatever she selfishly desires," and on the intensity of her anger if kept from fulfilling it, than on any one objective, including a return to Harlem (335). In short, Clare's "having way" is so ingrained upon her personality that whenever the chasm between desire and fulfillment is exposed, whenever she merely *wants* but cannot *have*, her yearning becomes all the more intense, focusing upon her desire until she can find a way to fulfill it. Her sexual autonomy, then, is inextricably linked to her personal autonomy in that she is most happy when she can be completely autonomous, unencumbered and able to pursue any of her desires without any social proscriptions to mark her.

Is the ascription of sexual desire to Clare's "having way," then, only an outside interpretation of Clare's "selfish, willful, and disturbing" personality (202)? Even if Irene's own analysis of Clare's drive no doubt reflects more about what Irene wants than what Clare actually does, Larsen does provide at least a few suggestions to demonstrate Clare is aware of the sexual connotation of both her desire and her desirability. One telling moment is the last time that Irene brings up Clare's "having way," at the end of the second section immediately before Irene decides that Brian and Clare are having an affair. Clare, "bemoaning her approaching departure" from New York, insists to Irene, "I'm not like you a bit. . . . to get the *things* I *want* badly enough, I'd do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away" (210, emphasis added). Irene, in response, says little, unable to find "an acceptable term to express her opinion of Clare's 'having' nature" (210). Although Clare's desire here seems material, as the object is represented by the general term "things," there is an indication that one of the things she might "want" is sexual fulfillment and even an hint that Irene picks up the erotic undercurrent. A moment earlier Clare brushes off Irene's suggestion that leaving New York will at least reunite her with her daughter by saying, "Children aren't everything, . . . There are other *things* in the world, though I admit some people don't seem to suspect it," followed by a laugh that seems, in Irene's opinion, to be directed more towards "some secret joke of [Clare's] own than at her words" (210, emphasis added). The fact that Irene follows the sexual connotation in "things" is indicated not just by her answer, "I *am* wrapped up in my boys and the running of my house," but by her awareness of "the slight primness in her words and attitude" (210). Irene denies the importance of these "other things" with her class's emphasis on moral motherhood, but her recognition of the primness of her remarks reveals her awareness of Clare's reference to sexual satisfaction. Making the connection

between these two “things” therefore transforms Clare’s adamant statement into a forthright declaration of sexual autonomy and makes Irene’s shocked response (“what you’re saying is so utterly, so wickedly wrong”) in keeping with her prudish public persona (210).

The novel offers other evidence to suggest that Clare is aware of the advantages her desirability provides her, stemming in part from what Brody calls Clare’s “knowledge of herself as sexual commodity,” yet it is this awareness, more than her appearance or sexual autonomy, that defines her as the quintessential flapper (1061). Like the heroines in films like Ankles Preferred or Mantrap, Clare’s manipulation of her sexual allure has given her access to the privileged upper-class white world, as her marriage and other sexual liaisons with white men indicate. Hugh Wentworth’s reaction to her as “the blonde beauty out of the fairy-tale” follows this pattern, and even Brian, when pressed, admits that she would only be “an unusually good-looking *white* woman” (205, 209, emphasis added). Yet she uses her wiles equally well with some black men, Brian excluded; Clare’s conversational tactics with Dave Freeland, carried on behind a “caressing smile,” certainly seem to demonstrate her artful coquetry, as does Dave’s supposedly enraptured response (221). However, highlighting Clare’s self-conscious sexual desirability as a flapper ideal defines her as only a *heterosexual* commodity. If Clare’s autonomy is most complete only when she is free of racial and class conceptions, then does it also function fully when free of sexual identity conceptions as well?

Despite my belief that Larsen certainly emphasizes with Irene’s character that desire cannot be contained within any social boundaries, the novel still leaves open the

question of whether Clare knows of Irene's homoerotic desire or if she reveals any of her own. The few critics who have insisted that Irene's homoerotic desire is mutual point to what Blackmer calls the "erotic undertones" of Clare's final letter, and, indeed, Clare certainly emphasizes the specificity of Irene's company, decrying, "I am lonely, so lonely . . . cannot help longing to be with you again, as I have never longed for anything before; and I have wanted many things in my life" ("African Masks" 254; 145, ellipses in original). Clare's joke, how the post-office employees think her frequent visits mean "I'd been carrying on an illicit love-affair and that the man had thrown me over," is also often cited by these critics, like McDowell, as part of her "sexual double edge" (194; xxviii; also see Michie 152). Arguably, this joke may instead be additional proof that Clare is well versed on the logistics of love-affairs as well as the fact that, as Blackmer states, "virtually all of Clare's affairs are, in some measure, illicit," particularly when her friendships with blacks and presumably her affairs with men both require deceiving her husband ("Veils" 111). In a sense, then, Michie's declaration that "racial passing is continually eroticized, both by Clare's presumed affair with Irene's husband and by Irene's conflicted desire for Clare" does not account for the fact that Clare eroticizes less her ability to manipulate social markers by passing than her ability to move beyond them; she is well-trained in the art of deception from previous sexual liaisons, well-versed in her seductive powers, and willing to defy all restrictions in order to fulfill her every impulse (150). The configuration of desire is cyclical and, for Clare at least, never-ending; Clare finds the defiance of restrictions erotic and eroticizes her defiance, just as her ambiguous racial identity is both what others find erotic and what allows her to act on her erotic desire without compromising security or social respectability.

Ultimately, given the distorted view of Clare that the novel permits, the question of Clare's own homoerotic tendencies cannot be fully resolved. While Larsen may have been prevented by social convention from depicting an overt lesbian affair, which McDowell has asserted, she more likely would have recognized that Irene's overly conscious bourgeois sensibility would have prevented her from interacting with – perhaps even desiring – Clare if she has interpreted Clare's fulsome and exuberant displays as lesbian desire (xxx). Since, as Chapter 2 discusses, Harlem's elite considered lesbians a threat to black families and communities, Irene would be unable to conceptualize of her desire in this way as it would invalidate the key components of her own identity: her status as a wife, a mother, and a contributing member of her upper-class black community. If Irene's bourgeois beliefs frown upon heterosexual flings outside of marriage for women, she most likely would not have overlooked any indication of more controversial sexual behavior. Despite a number of critics who merge Irene's Victorian attitudes with Larsen's, Irene more likely represents Larsen's keen awareness that neither Harlem's elites nor the artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance found lesbian attachments valid or acceptable. Moreover, her knowledge of psychoanalytic theory is evident in her assertion that either, or both, of these beautiful, feminine women could be lesbians, a suggestion that earlier theories of lesbian sexual inversion would have made impossible.

Since Irene is unable or unwilling to categorize her feelings or Clare's affectionate behavior as homosexual, she instead conflates her own desire for Clare with Clare's desirability, indicated by her constant assumption that people of both genders find Clare as appealing as she does, such as when she claims that Clare adds to any party due to "the aesthetic pleasure one got from watching her" (209). In fact, none of the other black

women in the novel, either in Irene's memory or during the novel's direct action, comment on Clare's beauty, not even in reference to her success as an alleged prostitute or a white society matron. This detail reveals the erotic desire behind Irene's repeated emphasis on Clare's "loveliness" and also better explains the trajectory of Irene's emotions into murderous rage (161). Irene feels threatened not just by her own homoerotic passion but also by Clare's expression of erotic power beyond social constrictions until she learns how to appropriate it for her own and contain it in a respectable and acceptable venue.

Condemnation, Reclamation, and Mutilation

The conclusion of the novel is clearly an indication of Larsen's interest in modernism as a methodology for recreating the human psyche for it is deliberately ambiguous and fragmented in order and style.²⁹ Maintaining an exclusive focus upon Irene's consciousness requires Larsen to subvert novelistic expectations of realism, for she does not clearly depict the sequence of events at the end, forcing critics to decide if Clare jumped, slipped, or was pushed, perhaps by Bellew or Irene. The most common critical consensus is that Irene murders Clare, and the logic of my analysis also follows this conclusion.³⁰ Larsen provides textual confirmation as well, like Irene's repeated and fearful need to rid "from her memory the vision of her hand on Clare's arm" (239, 240). The conclusion is also subversive in its irony because despite Irene's condemnation of Clare's "having" way, this ability is exactly what Irene wants to have and, with Clare's death, what she gets. There is also irony in the fact that Irene is finally feel free to have desire, act on her desire, and even feel desirable because she too is willing to "do

anything, hurt anybody, throwing anything away,” even though what she throws away and hurts is literally Clare and her erotic yearning for Clare. Until she labels and confronts the source of her intense fear and anger, Irene refuses to admit the difference between internal rebellion and discontent and external satisfaction and order, so she is unable to acknowledge Clare’s willful and successful manipulation between what others see and what is “true.” At the same time, Clare represents more than the traditional discontinuity raised by anyone who passes; her lack of guilt, her tremendous success, and, most importantly, her erotic freedom and desire to codify this freedom by living beyond social controls all enrage Irene. Before exploring how Irene regains the control of her sexual autonomy, however, I must explain how Larsen depicts Irene’s growing rage and why this rage rests upon the conflation of her own eroticism with Clare’s.

As previously mentioned, Irene’s longing for Clare rests on how the combination of her “white” features, her hair and skin, and her “black” features, her dark eyes, represents her ability to be indefinable, ambiguous, unmarked. Yet Irene repeatedly emphasizes the attraction of another feature, the “wide mouth [that appeared] like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin” (148). Not only does the color here link to the flame of Irene’s lust, which McDowell has pointed out, but Irene also ties the “brilliant geranium-red” of Clare’s lips to the fact that it is a “tempting mouth,” the origin of her “very seductive” voice and “seductive caressing smile” (xxvii; 161, 165, 169).³¹ Clare’s lips are the agent of her seductive powers over Irene and, of course, lips are the sensual agents of kissing. Her power is exemplified when Irene experiences “a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling” immediately after Clare “drop[s] a kiss on her dark curls,” as many critics have noted (194).³² Another reason for Irene’s emphasis on Clare’s “*disturbing* scarlet mouth” may be due to its visual and metaphorical connection to a woman’s other

red lips or “flower,” her vagina, traditionally the physical center of her sexuality and erotic desire (239, emphasis added).³³ Clare’s lips, in other words, recall the physiological origin of her erotic desire just as they are agents that allow her to act on her desire and the focus of her desirability.

Therefore, a telling shift occurs when, at the moment she begins to suspect the affair, Irene sees her fear “like a scarlet spear of terror leaping at her heart;” the color association clearly connects the spear to Clare in the same way this sentence is spatially identified on the page with her name in the next sentence: “Clare Kendry! So that was it!” (217). The metaphorical transformation here of Clare from “scarlet flower” to “scarlet spear” may itself have a sexual connotation since Clare’s “having, daring and loveliness” have become more and more disturbing, no longer seductive and inviting like a vaginal flower but aggressive and violent like a phallic spear. Before this moment, the feelings of desire Clare has aroused in Irene have only annoyed, confused, and angered her, but now Clare’s sexuality has become threatening to Irene’s sense of security and identity. Michie has argued that the “red spear of anger mimics the red arch of Irene’s lips,” a compatible alternate reading if we recognize that Irene now begins her transformation from inviting, open friend to aggressive and violent rival (153). Significantly, for her final evening Clare is “radiant in a shining red gown,” as if her sexual allure and her scarlet pudendum have spread to cover her entire being, while, of course, the color prefigures her violent end (233).

If Clare represents Irene’s sense of losing control, her violent action at the end of the novel is a logical attempt to regain it and to reestablish those markers of race and class that Clare has escaped. On one hand, Irene is able to do so in one fell swoop, pun

intended. Irene erases the figure of Clare, her potential rival, as well as Clare, her potential lover, negating Clare's power to have and express erotic power over herself and others, while the hand on Clare's arm is now a permanent mark upon Clare's body, defining and constraining her. Irene may also be jealous that *she* is no longer object of Clare's desire; such an interpretation would explain Irene's earlier outrage at seeing Clare flirt with Dave Kneeland as well as her willingness to let Clare be alone with Brian. Kawash has astutely argued that when Irene rushes to over Clare, she thinks, "She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew. She couldn't have her free," repeating the key phrase "'she couldn't have Clare Kendry. . . . She couldn't have her,' . . . [in] the final disavowal of desire" (239; 164). Yet "free" is also significant since without Bellew, Clare will find complete freedom once she is no longer defined as his wife, which in turns defines her class and race as well as her gender role, and this fear also expressed earlier in the same terms (228). In fact, Clare's exposure as "a damned dirty nigger" is less important than the fact that this exposure will lead to her marital independence (238)

Furthermore, this denotation of the murder has led a number of critics to see the ending as Larsen's affirmation of the supremacy or necessity of marriage, heterosexuality, and sexual repression, or all three for black bourgeois matrons.³⁴ Larsen certainly seems to affirm the lack of outlets for black women's sexual desire by not allowing Clare's full return to the African American community, and Clare's extreme and violent reaction suggests the difficulty of importing notions of sexual autonomy into a middle-class black model. Gilbert and Gubar's interpretation of the ending as, "Larsen's view that the black New Woman will be castigated as – and literally transformed into – a fallen woman" recognizes the threat Clare presents to black bourgeois sensibilities (154). But must we assume this return necessitates a reassertion of her black identity? In her

most explicit declaration, Clare tells Irene, “You don’t know, you can’t realize how I want to see Negroes, to be with them again, to talk with them, to hear them laugh,” and later she says that if free, she will live in Harlem in order to “do as I please, when I please,” but in either case never insists that she wants to “be” black again (200, 234). In other words, as Butler has suggested, “what can be seen, what qualifies as a visible marking, is a matter of being able to read a marked body in relation to unmarked bodies, where unmarked bodies constitute the currency of normative whiteness,” so to Bellew, Clare only “becomes” black when she is with blacks, but is this situation reversed (171)? Does Clare’s unmarked body become marked in interracial Harlem when the gaze is African American (or whites like Wentworth), where, like the N.W.L. dance, “in that crowd of that kind [she] shouldn’t be noticed” (199)? In the same way, Irene focuses her fear on Clare’s being free, not on “being black again,” so the possibility of Clare living unmarked is, again, increased if she should leave Bellew.

On the other hand, Irene replicates those qualities that she both fears and covets in Clare – her having, daring, and desirability. In a sense, Clare becomes the symbol and the impetus for Irene’s desire, for she names her craving to rid her life of Clare, then acts on it, and finally reclaims her husband’s desire and with it, her own desirability. As a result, the ending may be less as a condemnation of sexual desire by a black middle-class culture than as bittersweet affirmation of the dramatic lengths one middle-class black woman is willing to go through in order to claim this sexual desire. The moments after Clare’s death require close scrutiny to recognize the empowering nature of Irene’s murderous rage and its result. Irene first allows herself to see Clare in all her libidinous power in a description where, in McDowell’s words, “all the erotic images used to describe Clare throughout the novel converge”: “Gone! The soft white face, the bright

hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry. That beauty that had torn at Irene's placid life. Gone! The mocking daring, the gallantry of her pose, the ringing bells of her laughter" (xxix; 239). The next sentence, however, clearly indicates that Irene is only willing to fully experience her passion because it is over; she is, in fact, stunned at her success as a murderer: "Irene wasn't sorry. She was amazed, incredulous almost" (239). Yet I do not agree with those critics who claim, as Kawash does, that "Clare's death is . . . the end of desire itself" because Irene's act has not so much displaced her passion for Clare onto Brian as it has transferred the symbol of erotic power in Irene's mind from Clare to herself (165). First of all, Irene rushes downstairs not to see if Clare is dead but to find Brian, to bring his coat to protect him from the cold even though she leaves hers in the Freelands' apartment. Secondly, once she sees him, she heads "straight to" him, with "a great *longing* to comfort him, to *charm* away his suffering and horror. But she was helpless, having so completely *lost control* of his mind and heart" (241, emphasis added). These two sentences sum up Irene's attempts to appropriate Clare's erotic capacities: her "longing" or ability to desire, her "charm" or desirability, and her daring, her ability to express her desire and control not only her desire but the desire she arouses in others.

At the same time, Irene has not fully taken Clare's place since she cannot yet demonstrate complete "control" over Brian, and this emphasis on "control" is a reminder that desire must be controlled, aroused only within certain social parameters. Therefore, at the same moment that Irene is, as she says, "helpless" because she cannot regain "control" of her husband's "mind and heart," her physical breakdown accelerates, a contradictory process that parallels the disintegration of her physical being and the

consolidation of her sexual autonomy. Initially, she begins to sob but that only arouses a “slight perfunctory attempt [by Brian] to comfort her” (241). Significantly, here this attempt is only verbal (“There, there, Irene. You mustn’t. You’ll make yourself sick”), for even though Brian has “wrapped his coat about her,” the physical contact is momentary and minimal (241). So Irene’s physical deterioration continues, for now “her knees quaked under her,” although her “numbed mind” is aware enough to deny Brian’s allegation that Bellew is responsible for Clare’s death (241, 242). Then, in the last paragraph, once Irene’s physical and mental crumbling reaches a conclusion, she is still conscious enough to feel “strong arms lifting her up” (242). Even if the narrative does not confirm whose arms these are, Brian is the most obvious candidate, and thus Irene has completed her attempt to regain control of her husband by forcing him to take her in his arms, a gesture that even at this moment of losing consciousness conveys a sexual connotation with its emphasis on “strong” arms that rise up. Society’s control over *her* has also been reestablished, since she is practicing her sexual autonomy within the strictures defined by her class, gender, and race. Returning to this control, in short, is what will lift her up, just as obeying these restrictions will lift up her race.

But what, in the end, does this aggressive reclamation of heterosexual passion really mean? Is Irene a violent bisexual, symbolically destroying her homosexual side to allow the heterosexual one to triumph? Talking about sexual desire this way reveals the absurdity of trying to lock it into definable categories, to presume that the locus of eroticism is not in the individual but in the relationship, the object of one’s desire. The novel is not advocating for a particular expression of desire as much as it is demonstrating that lust is a subjective experience inflected with historical determinants. The irony within novel’s pessimistic conclusion stems from the fact that once Irene

allows herself to feel lust – for Clare, for Brian, for whomever – she must learn to manipulate it within the limited sphere of sexual power for bourgeois African American women. The novel affirms less the importance of marriage for black women, as McDowell and Mary F. Sisney claim, than their lack of options to have and express their desire (xxx-xxxii; 180). Only by punishing a woman who aggressively strives to fulfill her own sexual appetency outside social constrictions is Irene able to reclaim her own; only by acting passive and weak is she able to recapture her husband's affection and attention. The novel's epigraph may well be Irene asking, "What is Africa to me?" since the mythical past of uninhibited black female eroticism exemplified by the Brown Girl does not exist for socialites. If Irene is successful at the novel's end, she is successful in internalizing the forms of desire that society deems appropriate and policing her own accordingly.

Yet where does the text leave Clare, now seemingly powerless with "her glorious body mutilated" on a Harlem street (240)? By placing Clare's murder in the hands of another black woman, not her racist, white husband, Larsen cynically comments on the extent to which black female desire is monitored and contained. In other words, black female sexuality is restricted just as much, if not more, by black women than by white men or black men. The conclusion's condemnation of Clare thus circles back to the beginning, to the "girls" disparaging assessment of Clare and her "having way" (153). But the novel certainly does not hold up upper-class white women as a model for black women. If the qualities of Clare's sexual expressivity are more readily acceptable in upper-class white society due to her fit within the flapper model, her success as an upper-class white woman is also dependent on the flapper's need to exploit her attractiveness for material gain. Clare's economic security is tied as closely to her husband's as Irene's

is, and despite her willingness to risk this security with her excursions into Harlem, her options are similarly limited. The tea-party scene at Clare's hotel therefore signals the conundrum at the heart of Clare's success; the real horror is not Bellew's virulent racism but the fact that Clare must continually invest in his desire for her, must reinforce and exploit his love without which her marriage, her economic status, and her white-based respectability would crumble. At the root of the flapper's sexual freedom, Larsen suggests, is another type of bondage for women as long as marriage remains at the center of male/female relations and as long as the road to marriage necessitates that they exploit their sexual desirability through conspicuous consumption. The flapper is only a flapper because she relies on male money, male social protection, and male affirmation of her sexual desirability. Moreover, Clare's wish to return to the black community exposes her lack of freedom in the white community even as it exposes her false assumption that in Harlem she would be able "to do as I please, when I please" (234). Thus, the ending does demonstrate, to a certain extent, what Butler calls, "the impossibility of sexual freedom for black women," but it also demonstrates the restricted sexual freedom of the flapper (178).

The novel's ending may, in fact, reveal the limitations of the flapper's model of sexual autonomy for *any* woman. This new sexual autonomy is both limited to only certain groups of women and limiting in its prescriptions, offering freedom for only a few types of women and of only some types of sexual desire. Desire, Larsen suggests, cannot be contained, and may instead be a means through which women can pass beyond social restrictions. Passing thus also confirms new notions of sexual desire found within psychoanalytic theory, the thin line that exists between the fun-loving flapper coyly flirting behind her cigarette and the invisible lesbian behind the flapper's feminine

veneer, but moves beyond such theories as well to argue that the either/or equation of sexual orientation similarly cannot contain the actual experience of desire. The next chapter similarly critiques the flapper's dependence on only certain types of public sexual desirability as a symbol of her sexual freedom as well as the black woman's limited sphere of socially acceptable sexual desire. Ironically, white author Fannie Hurst provides a more radical view of passing by allowing her black female character to slip away to enjoy her success as a white woman while insisting that her race is *her* choice to make, not society's. Imitation of Life, though, is not free of stereotypes of black female sexuality, leading to the question of whether any author, black or white, could find a way to present a sexually autonomous black woman without sacrificing either her race or her social class.

Notes

¹ As I discuss in endnote 7, my reading directly contrasts with critics who argue that Larsen is unable to conceptualize of a healthy heterosexual relationship due to her own experience as a married woman.

² Critics who view the novel as flawed include contemporary reviewers as well as later critics, such as Margaret Perry, Cheryl A. Wall, and Charles R. Larson. I use “conflicted” to refer to how critics often either judge Irene’s emotional ambiguity as symptomatic of Larsen’s inability to resolve her own personal conflicts or condemn Larsen for providing conflicting messages about female sexuality as if Larsen herself should resolve what is really a cultural crisis. For example, in addition to Wall and Larson, see Thadious M. Davis (Larsen), Ann duCille, Beverly Haviland, Merrill Horton, Deborah E. McDowell, Mary F. Sisney, Nell Sullivan, Claudia Tate, Mary Helen Washington, and Mary Mabel Youman.

³ A few other critics share my view that Larsen’s depiction of the ambiguity of desire is deliberate but often they either simplify Larsen’s cultural analysis or do not address it at all. See, for example, Corinne E. Blackmer, Judith Butler, duCille, and Helena Michie. Other critics who explore the cultural representation of sexuality but from a strictly heterosexual or homosexual perspective include David L. Blackmore, Jennifer DeVere Brody, Hazel V. Carby (Reconstructing), and Michael L. Cobb.

⁴ Thadious Davis details the confusing facts regarding whether and how long Larsen remained with her mother after her mother remarried, some of which George Hutchinson disputes. See Davis (Larsen 22-50) and Hutchinson (“Nella Larsen” 333-36).

⁵ For instance, Robert Bone dismisses Larsen as one of the authors associated with “the Negro middle class” who, “while striving valiantly to preserve the genteel character

of Negro fiction, . . . made minor concessions to the boisterous spirit of the Jazz Age. . . [and] allowed a diluted version of Negro nationalism to influence their work” (97-98). See also Sterling A. Brown (143); Addison Gayle (114); and Perry (73-77). Other critics focus on Larsen exclusively as an author concerned with the passing motif, similarly limiting the interpretation of her work, such as Arthur Davis (97-8); Nick Aaron Ford (51, 68); Hugh Gloster (144-46); and Nathan Irvin Huggins (236). Significant feminist critics who rescued Larsen from oblivion and reasserted the social and literary importance of her texts include Wall, McDowell, and Washington. However, Larsen’s feminist critics also read the political implications of the novel’s aesthetics mainly from a psychoanalytic or biographical perspective, leading them to conclude that the novel fails on some level when confronted with its ambiguity, irony, or irresolution. McDowell, for example, claims, “Larsen wanted to tell the story of the black woman with sexual desires, but was constrained by a competing desire to establish black women as respectable in black middle-class terms” (xvi). Wall likewise asserts that the death of Clare Kendry and the “inevitable melodrama weakens the credibility of the narrative and diverts attention from the author’s real concerns” (“Passing” 109).

⁶ As a result, some critics have argued that the narration is flawed, such as early reviewers like Mary Larabee and W. B. Seabrook, or lacking depth, like Esther Hyman and Margaret Cheney Dawson. Some modern critics continue to view the narrative style negatively, such as Bernard Bell, Youman, and Wall (110; 241; “Passing” 107).

⁷ See Thadious Davis’ biography of Larsen (Larsen 310, 329). My perspective is a deliberate break from critics who read the novel psychoanalytically as I see this narrative technique as a conscientious decision, not a reflection of Larsen’s own personal conflicts with her interracial family, the African American community, or with the dominant

society at large. For example, both of Larsen's biographers, Larson and Thadious Davis, read the novel as a commentary on Larsen's marriage, suggesting, in Larson's words, that "Passing is an account of Nella's marriage to Elmer Imes and her fear of its eventual disintegration" (86; Larsen 313). However, Davis and Larson rely almost exclusively on Larsen's two novels and Imes's affair which neither dates before the summer of 1929 (Larsen 354; 106). Larson's only other evidence is that one of Imes's students referred to him as "a ladies' man" (86). Davis also contends that the representation of motherhood in the novel is dependent upon Larsen's own "lack of intimacy with a distant mother," referring to her belief that Larsen was abandoned by her Danish mother, an interpretation Hutchinson disputes (Larsen 318). For other examples, see Sullivan (373); Horton (36); Haviland (302); Elizabeth Ammons (191); and McDowell (xvi). Even critics who do not incorporate biographical parallels still see its irresolution as problematic, such as Washington, who identifies "Larsen's failure to deal with the problem of marginality" (164).

⁸ Larsen's letter to Stein reads in part ". . . I have read ['Melanctha'] many times. And always I get from it some new thing – a truly great story. I never cease to wonder how you came to write and just why you and not some one of us should so accurately have caught the spirit of this race of mine," and she mentions Conrad, Proust, and Mann in her letter to Opportunity on Walter White's Flight, originally published in September 1926 (Flowers, 216; 214-16). See Thadious Davis's biography Nella Larsen for mention of Joyce (164, 311), Stein (251), and Conrad (311). Corinne E. Blackmer details the similarities between this novel and Stein's "Melanctha" in her essay "African Masks and the Art of Passing."

⁹ Critics who refer to this tradition include Sterling Brown (142-43); Hazel V. Carby (Reconstructing 171); Barbara Christian (Black Women 48); Arthur Davis (97-8); Gloster (144-46); Huggins (236); and, to some extent, Wall (Women 89).

¹⁰ For example, see Ammons (190); Martha J. Cutter (88); Thadious Davis (Larsen 310); duCille (104-5); Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (153); McLendon (98); and Wall (Women 130).

¹¹ Nella Larsen, Quicksand and Passing (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1986), 143. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

¹² Other critics who refer to Irene as unreliable include Blackmer (“African Masks” 260); Thadious Davis (Larsen 324); Haviland (298); Little (175); and McDowell (xxiv); Horton refutes this interpretation when she claims, “Irene never makes a judgment which is not borne out by the narrative’s action” (43).

¹³ One must decide here whether Clare recognizes the possibility that her former classmates believe she became a prostitute, a possibility that, as I later discuss, I do not.

¹⁴ Brody and Cutter refer to the novel’s “omniscient narrator” (1057; 85) while both Little and Judith Butler differentiate between the narrator and Irene in statements like “Larsen’s narrator serves the function of exposing more than Irene herself can risk. In most cases where Irene finds herself unable to speak, the narrator supplies the words” (Judith Butler 169; see Little 178). Critics who concur with me on a third person, limited narrator include Joyce Ann Joyce, Kawash, McLendon and Anne Stavney.

¹⁵ Hiroko Sato, for example, calls the novel “a case study of a woman’s jealousy” as well as passing in which “the psychology of the two women is coherently expressed,” while Larson says, “the story is an old-fashioned one of jealousy, infidelity, and marital

disintegration,” or what “a woman can be drive to when she fears the breakup of her marriage, the loss of her future” (88, 89; 82, 86).

¹⁶ My analysis is indebted to Stavney’s, who similarly contends that “Passing asks how to reclaim and resexualize the black woman’s body in the face of white racist imaging and black maternal uplift ideology,” but she differs in her interpretation of the source of Irene’s jealousy of Clare as well as in her view of Clare’s sexual agency (553). She also does not address the novel’s narrative construction at all.

¹⁷ W.E.B. Du Bois notably refers to Irene as the “race-conscious Puritan” (239), as does Youman (238); Joyce Ann Joyce, Vashti Crutcher Lewis (“Nella”), McDowell and Stavney rightly connect what Joyce calls the “Puritan ideals of work, cleanliness, and prudery” to the black middle-class (70; 140; xii-xi; 553). Thadious Davis attributes these “Victorian mores and manners” to Larsen (Larsen 328; see also 169).

¹⁸ These critics include Blackmer (“African Masks” 252); Blackmore (475, 479); duCille (105), Horton (39), Joyce (71); McDowell (xxiii); McLendon (104); Donald A. Petersch (193); Stavney (553); and Wall (“Passing” 108).

¹⁹ DuCille, in contrast, uses this same evidence to argue Irene is “the source of Brian’s own sexual disappointments,” a conclusion Horton, Joyce, McDowell and Stavney reiterate (105; 30; 71; xxiii; 553).

²⁰ The only moment of physical interaction between husband and wife is at the very end; Brian first wraps his coat around her (241) and then it is probably his “strong arms” that lift her up (242). The significance of these actions is discussed below.

²¹ Given the text’s modernist ambiguity as well as the elusive nature of desire, I do not think that it is important to choose one category or assume that such categories are mutually exclusive and so follow the trend of recent critics like Blackmer (“Veils” 103),

Judith Butler (169), duCille (106), and Michie (150-51). Berlant denies the homoeroticism in the text but speculates on alternative forms of desire (111). Other critics note that Clare represents sexuality or sensuality for Irene but do not discuss cultural implications or sexual orientation, such as Little (179), Petesch (193), Mary F. Sisney (179), and Sullivan.

²² Wall sees Irene as an extension of Helga, Larsen's heroine in Quicksand, and draws an analogy between how Helga is viewed by the Danes and how Irene sees Clare ("Passing" 109). Other critics who utilize this term in reference to Clare include Sullivan (373-74); Blackmer ("African Masks" 263); and Brody (1055, 1062). Although she doesn't use the term, Judith Butler's discussion of Clare as an "exotic object" also fits this description (172). My discussion of the primitive is clearly simplified here; for more information on how the primitive is often represented in modern culture by feminine or uninhibited sexuality, see Marianne Torgovnick. This term is used repeatedly (and much more accurately) in criticism of Larsen's other novel, Quicksand.

²³ Sullivan integrates Davis's theory into his Lacanian psychoanalysis of Irene's desire (374-5). Brody provides a provocative, though sometimes contradictory, analysis that contends that Irene desires both Clare's blackness from an objective standpoint (she wants Clare as the exotic other) and whiteness from a subjective standpoint (she wants to be Clare as the white society matron). DuCille, in contrast, assigns the notion of the exotic other to Clare's whiteness (104). I discuss the cultural connection between Clare's sexuality and her identity as a white woman below.

²⁴ Irene's generosity toward Bellew is also confirmed when, at the end of the novel, she is unwilling to allow the crowd to believe Brian's conclusion that Bellew pushed Clare out the window and vehemently asserts instead that Clare fell (242).

²⁵ Judith Butler first ties Irene's desire for Clare to Clare's ability to ignore conventional marital constrictions but later she connects the attraction to Clare's "class mobility afforded by whiteness that constitutes the power of that seduction," paralleling Bellew's attraction to Clare's vacillation between black and white as well (169, 170, 172). While she comes close to my point when she states "Irene comes to hate Clare not only because Clare lies, passes, and betrays her race, but because Clare's lying secures a tentative sexual freedom for Clare, and reflects back to Irene the passion that Irene denies herself. She hates Clare not only because Clare has such passion, but because Clare awakens such passion in Irene, indeed, a passion *for* Clare," Butler does not distinguish between desire and its expression and focuses on Irene's homosexual desire as transgressive, not on how race complicates the transgressive nature of Clare's sexual freedom whether heterosexual or homosexual (177-78).

²⁶ Granted, Gilbert and Gubar define Clare not as a flapper but a "New Woman," but they are conflating the previous generation's icon, with its emphasis on career over family, with the flapper, so the latter term is much more in line with my distinction between the two (154).

²⁷ It is also relevant that at least one critic has speculated on the possibility of a history of incest for Clare (Little 175) and another on the possibility that Clare may have stolen from her white aunts (Brody 1056), perhaps an indication of how the connection between sexual morality and other types of deviant and indecent behavior continues to influence social perceptions.

²⁸ Thadious Davis mentions this possibility but does not examine its implications, while Blackmer argues that in Irene's first view of Clare at the Drayton, she could be mistaken for a prostitute without connecting to Clare's earlier behavior (Larsen 322;

“Veils” 108). Vashti Lewis associates Irene’s condemnation of Clare’s “having way” with preconceived prejudices about lower-class black female sexuality but does not connect it to her earlier comment that Irene’s “genteel point of view” interprets Clare’s manner with first the unnamed man and then the waiter as “easy and flirtatious” (“Nella” 141, 140). Tate does argue that Irene “assumes that Clare is involved with the man who escorted her to the Drayton Hotel dining room,” but she does not explain how she arrives at this conclusion, only using it as another of Irene’s assumptions without “tangible evidence” (145). Cutter, in contrast, argues that Clare is cut dead because she is passing for white (93).

²⁹ The ambiguity of the ending has often read as flawed, a criticism that appears in early reviews (such as “Beyond”) and recent criticism, including Perry (274); Wall (“Passing,” 107); and Larson (86).

³⁰ Those critics who conclude that Irene is probably the murderer include Blackmer (“African,” 261); Blackmore (483); Brody (1064); Judith Butler (183); Mary Conde (103); Cutter (96); Thadious Davis (Larsen 319); duCille (108); Addison Gayle (113); Gilbert and Gubar (154); Huggins (160); Larson (86); Vashti Lewis (“Nella” 141); Little (179); McDowell (xxix); McLendon (109); Michie (154); Petesch (194); Sisney (179); Stavney (557); Wall (“Passing” 109); Washington (164); and Youman (235). Both Bell (110) and Tate (145-46) acknowledge Irene’s desire to kill Clare. Others conclude that Clare is pushed by someone but do not choose between Irene and Bellew as the culprit (hooks, Black 18; Hyman 428).

³¹ Little also connects the “the dangers of Clare’s sexuality” in “her full, red lips” (179; Passing 239), while Gilbert and Gubar acknowledge this sexual association

between Clare and the heroine of Quicksand, Helga, who is labeled a “scarlet ‘oman. . . [and] pore los’ Jezebel” (154; Quicksand 112).

³² See, for example, Blacker (“Veils” 111); Kawash (159); McDowell (xxviii); and Sullivan (378).

³³ Two dictionaries of slang define “flower” as “female pudendum” (see J.S. Former and W.E. Henley’s Slang and Its Analogues and Eric Partridge’s A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English). If such a connection seems questionable, a number of critics have accepted McDowell’s interpretation of the first chapter’s opening image of a envelope as a “metaphorical vagina,” a connection I find much more tenuous (xxvi; see, for example, Brody 1053, duCille 103, and Little 178).

³⁴ For example, see McDowell (xxx-xxxi); Sisney (180); and duCille (108).

Chapter 4: Every Woman's Share

The Reclamation of Female Sexual Autonomy in Fannie Hurst's Imitation of Life

For its sheer plentitude, Fannie Hurst's literary career is impressive. With thirty books, including eighteen novels, Fannie Hurst mastered, in one contemporary critic's words, the art of "time-tested sentimentality and time-tested showiness" (Loggins 348). Such assessments help explain why Hurst is largely unremembered today despite the considerable fame she amassed in her fifty-year career from best-selling novels, over three hundred short stories published in popular magazines like The Saturday Evening Post and Good Housekeeping, and the numerous films adapted from her texts. At the start of the twenty-first century she is usually recalled only as the author of the novel, Imitation of Life (1933), which was the foundation for Douglas Sirk's 1959 box-office smash of the same name starring Lana Turner and Sandra Dee, also billed as a remake of the first film adaptation in 1934 by John Stahl.¹ All three versions utilize the same general story of two sets of mothers and daughters, one black and one white, who are joined by economic need and friendship and face the same conflicts of family, career, and racial identity. Sirk's film, a classic melodrama, remains popular with cultural critics who often see it as an innovative commentary on female sexuality against the backdrop of the conservative 1950s, yet Hurst's novel provides a similarly provocative demand for female sexual autonomy a generation earlier. Notwithstanding its sometimes sentimental plot, it offers one of the decade's most complex investigations of female sexual identity. For the purposes of this study, Imitation of Life exposes the flapper's dependence on conspicuous consumption and sexual desirability, challenging the reigning perspective that female sexual desirability is an avenue to sexual autonomy and positing the radical

notion that not only can a woman have one without the other, but that female sexual desirability is essentially a facade without a satisfying sexual life. Moreover, Hurst was one of the first popular white female authors to examine modern black female sexuality with a sensitive eye, and despite her sometimes stereotypical assumptions about black womanhood, she provides a compelling portrayal of an African American single mother and her light-skinned daughter, particularly in how she handles the daughter's wish to renounce her black heredity.

Hurst's status as a best-selling author is partially at odds with another component of her public persona, her reputation as a social advocate for a variety of causes including the labor movement and racial equality. Her activism was not completely unrelated to her fiction since she told at least one interviewer that her literary texts "must have a message . . . because I am so passionately anxious to awake in people in general a sensitiveness to small people," but overall her most explicitly political statements occur in interviews and articles on diverse subjects ranging from the critical, like the anti-lynching campaign, to the trivial, such as a bill to limit press reports of divorce cases (qtd. in Salpeter 613; Kroeger 143). Her feminist work similarly ran the gamut and included suffrage, support for striking female clerical workers, and a membership in the Heterodoxy Club, a group of self-proclaimed "unorthodox women," who, in Mabel Dodge Luhan's memorable words, "did things and did them openly" (Kroeger 145; qtd. in Schwartz 1). But Hurst did not allow her penchant for success to deter her savvy and sometimes savage criticism of not only cultural depictions of women but also the women who followed them. She critiqued the current female fashion of "single sheaf of frock, single sheaf of silk underclothing, flat sheaf of hair and sheer stockings" in 1927 as "an

elaborate and subtle and expensive simplicity . . . that enslaves even while it liberates,” later pinning part of the blame on the movie industry for encouraging a role model who is “slinky, low in vitality, and concave in curve” (qtd. in Kroeger 145; “No Food” 51). She had just as little tolerance for the current view of sexual autonomy as an avenue to marriage and economic opportunity, castigating in 1934 those “hordes of women who still observe the twenty-four a day working hours of the industry of gold digging” (qtd. in Kroeger 232). Imitation of Life, then, is a more subtle insinuation against women like Bea who believe a slavish imitation of the flapper’s standards of sexual desirability would lead to love and a wedding ring.

If the broad range of her activism in conjunction with her vast oeuvre suggests that she may have sometimes lent no more than a name and a checkbook to a cause, Hurst’s participation in racial advancement was extensive enough to develop personal relationships with members of the NAACP, the National Urban League, and the Harlem Renaissance, including Charles S. Johnson, Dorothy West, and Zora Neale Hurston. Yet Imitation of Life is Hurst’s first fictional work with black characters even though by 1933 she had been a noted literary author for almost twenty years and a race activist for close to ten.² Some critics attribute this new topic to her friendship with Hurston but sometimes portray Hurst in an unflattering light as a Jewish socialite whose short-term employment of Hurston first as a secretary in 1925 and then as a traveling companion in 1931 was a calculated attempt to exploit her intimate knowledge of African American life.³ But the novel offers a sensitive and observant interpretation of black women’s dilemma in finding socially appropriate avenues of sexual fulfillment even if it sometimes veers too closely to stereotypes and oversimplification. Overall, her analysis

questions the exclusion of black women from models of sexual autonomy since, in the end, the only woman in the novel who is able to fully satisfy her sexual autonomy chooses to deny her black heritage and live as a white woman.

As a descendent of German Jewish parentage, Hurst's ethnicity also contributed to her social consciousness, particularly during a period when economic decline and rising immigration encouraged the widespread view of the Jew, in one historian's words, "as part-banker controlling the world economy, part-Bolshevist subverting the nation, and a racial pariah destroying Anglo-Saxon America" (Bayer 580).⁴ Generally well educated and liberal even before emigrating, German-American Jews, fueled by decades of middle-class assimilation, often shared their Christian neighbors' disdainful view of the more recent Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, yet this inter-Jewish distinction was often unrecognized by the dominant Christian society, such as the many contemporary critics who grouped Hurst with other Jewish-American women writers like Edna Ferber and Gertrude Stein despite these authors' obvious differences in style and subject matter and despite the fact that Hurst, in one modern critic's view, had "little interest in Jewish themes" (Uffen, *Strands* 9).⁵ Even the most sympathetic criticism could utilize Jewish stereotypes, from references to her "native Jewish love for music" to descriptions like "[Hurst] thinks subconsciously always in terms of the Jewish mother portioning out the soup and the family gathered together in the security of racial solidarity" (Loggins 347; Lawrence 195).⁶ Widespread anti-Semitism most likely contributed to Hurst's decision to downplay her Jewish heritage during portions of her career, although more work needs to be done on this subject to fully understand the personal impact of these public stereotypes.⁷ Given the complicated juxtapositions of her political work, her popular

success, and her personal identity, Hurst's alliances were therefore at odds in a manner which parallels, albeit less severely, the dissension Larsen and Hurston experienced as black female novelists who favored literary experimentation and themes of black female sexuality during the Harlem Renaissance.

The Passive and the Beautiful

The novel's plot, at first glance, seems to be a conservative endorsement of full-time motherhood and wifehood as the proper female role in modern society. At the novel's opening, Bea Chipley is a shy teenager just out of high school struggling with the impact of her mother's death in 1910s Atlantic City. With little ambition of her own, she willingly moves into her mother's place in the household, cooking and cleaning for her father and their long-time boarder, Benjamin Pullman, and she similarly acquiesces to the men's plan to become Pullman's wife soon after her eighteenth birthday. Bea's romantic expectations of marriage, however, clash with the tensions of married life and unsatisfactory sexual relations with her much older husband, and the weight of her domestic duties increases after her father's stroke leaves him in a wheelchair, barely able to care for himself.

Soon after Bea discovers her pregnancy, her husband is killed in a railroad accident, leaving the household in economic straits. Bea struggles to find work once her daughter Jessie is born, first by turning to the company where both her father and husband had been employed, a pickle and relish conglomerate, but she cannot convince the owners to give a woman a sales position. After finding out that the maple syrup company which supplied her husband's second job is unaware of his death, she decides to maintain his

accounts by corresponding with them only by mail and using his business cards embossed with “B. Pullman.” Bea begins working long hours dragging her syrup supplies door to door among the boardwalk’s many hotels and restaurants. In the meantime, her father’s condition worsens, forcing her to look for a live-in maid in the town’s black neighborhood, yet only one is willing to accept the job because she too has had difficulty finding work as a widow with a small daughter.

The arrival of Delilah Johnston revitalizes the small household as she lovingly cares for all its inhabitants, even placing the well-being of Bea’s father and daughter over her own Peola. Two additional mouths tax Bea’s meager resources, so she decides to market Delilah’s maple sugar hearts as a holiday specialty with Delilah’s smiling photo on the box. Their modest product takes off and increases multifold after Delilah convinces Bea to capitalize on her own image as “a walkin’ trade-mark” by selling the hearts and her special waffle recipe at the local church fair, where the booth’s popularity gives Bea the idea of opening a permanent waffle restaurant on the boardwalk (106). Thus, the “B. Pullman” restaurant chain is born, making Bea a famous entrepreneur and Delilah a national icon.

The novel documents their twenty-year ascendancy in detail, noting Bea’s strategy for each expansion which eventually allows the families to leave their crowded Atlantic City row house for a ritzy Central Park West apartment; nevertheless, problems continue to plague their good fortune. As Bea’s youth slips away, her romantic longings increase, helped by Delilah’s encouragement to find some “man-lovin’,” while Peola constantly tests her mother’s racial loyalty by trying to pass as white. But Delilah’s urgings do little to help Bea articulate her romantic feelings for her business manager, Frank Flake, as she

is reluctant to acknowledge her erotic passion for a younger man after decades of denying her sexual needs. The daughters' transition to young womanhood complicates these situations further when Peola, now working in Seattle as a librarian, returns to tell her family that she plans to permanently estrange herself from the black community by marrying a white man unaware of her black heritage and moving to South America. Her only concession to her interracial background is to sterilize herself. Meanwhile, Jessie returns from boarding school to steal Frank's heart before Bea finds the courage to admit her true feelings. Since Delilah dies of cancer soon after Peola's disappearance, Bea is left to survive alone, traveling the world to oversee her now international franchise.

The bare outline of the novel's plot does little to reveal its unconventional examination of female sexuality across racial lines. Not surprisingly, the popular press overlooked it as well, mainly characterizing the story as "an Aladdin tale" of female business success by a "so-called modern woman" trapped by the "weariness and vacuity that reigns in her heart" (M.W. 10; Ross, "From" 4; Rev., New York Times 14). Those white reviewers who mention the black characters usually focus on selfless Delilah, named "one of the most magnificently drawn characters in all the great store of literature depicting Negro life" by the Cincinnati Enquirer, and recall Peola only as the disobedient daughter who "made her mother suffer" (qtd. in Kroeger, 198; M.W. 10). As this study contends, each of these three female characters is a cultural marker in the debate over female sexuality, expounding the virtues of female sexual autonomy while revealing the flapper's limitations.

Bea's transition from virgin to wife to widow is, in a sense, parallel to the story of her sexual awakening but from an unusual perspective. Rather than a more traditional

trajectory from virginal innocence to married sexual fulfillment, the novel depicts Bea as a contemplative teenager, struggling to reconcile the practical facts of heterosexual intercourse with the romance found in books and sensual clues gleaned from half-dressed bodies on the beach. Even though in the novel's timeframe Bea's girlish sexual curiosity predates the flapper phenomenon, Hurst is clearly embracing the modern view of sexuality espoused by psychoanalytic theory which validates female sexual drive even in adolescence. Her mother's death forces Bea to confront the corporeal reality of her existence, observing "in death, there was at last something physical about her mother," but this realization has less to do with the messy pain of illness or the cold stillness of death than with the idea of her mother's "warm, yielding loins" joined with her fastidious father's in "the act of sex" (3). Hurst thus raises her main theme of female sexuality in Imitation's first chapter: the contradictions between how female sexuality is portrayed publicly and how it is enacted privately in the bedroom, under the covers, even in one's mind - in other words, the discrepancy between how something appears versus how it actually exists. Despite Bea's confession that even contemplating "this mystifying riddle of the intimacies" is something that "nice girls" do not discuss, her only concession is to keep such speculations private, not to ignore them (3). This self-conscious revelation is Hurst's as well, an up-front declaration that female sexuality is a legitimate topic that, in defiance of conventional definitions of female propriety, her novel will explore.

Even though Lauren Berlant rightly connects Bea's "initiation into sexual self-consciousness" with death and mourning, she maintains that this association is painful, a dismemberment Bea uses to distance herself from her grief, but Bea's sexual curiosity increases as the months pass, suggesting that as Bea consciously moves into her mother's

role as caregiver she is subconsciously exploring the other components of wifehood (116). Bea's sexual inquisitiveness might seem staid as she dwells only in passing on the male body and then only with the observation that she has never seen her modest father in less than his undershirt (3). Yet as an indulged only child, Bea's almost exclusive focus on the female body as representative of heterosexuality makes sense; like many teenagers, she displays a self-involved obsession that moves in succession from her mother's now still "arms and legs and breasts and her loins," to "the bold beach girls in their knee-length bathing-suits, long, black-stockinged legs," and finally to a self-conscious recognition of her own body, her "pretty tan hair" and "lovely white breasts" (4, 17, 25). Once she realizes Pullman's intimate interest in her, she becomes more aware of how her body must appear in his eyes, willingly accessing her own desirability as an erotic object. The paragraph in full graphically illustrates her changing perception and indicates the influence of psychoanalytic theories of sexual development:

It was the queerest experience, this coming suddenly aware of her teasing bodily self. The nape of her neck felt nice and long as she turned her head slowly on it. Under her shirtwaist, lovely white breasts, which, as they had developed, had filled her with secret shame, causing her to bind them down to flatness under towels and tight corset covers, seem part, now, of that strangely exciting sense of her contour. It was not pleasant, but at the same time it was strangely exciting to behold [Pullman's] eyes seeming to want to undress something that she coveted, with sudden exaltation, for her modest secret self. (25)

Hurst aptly portrays the "secret shame" of adolescent sexual maturation, but this paragraph does more than document a girl's stunning revelation that the corporeal

changes causing her such emotional pain could be appealing to someone else. Here Hurst reveals the chasm between a woman's outside sexual self, the "teasing bodily self" that she can manipulate and enhance, and her inner sexual autonomy, her own erotic desires, which Bea cannot yet name but the "something" she wishes to control, to keep hidden within her "modest secret self." What Bea does not recognize is that gaining control of her outside sexual self -- her desirability and, later, her wifely sexual duties -- is not the same as having power over her sexual autonomy -- her ability to acknowledge her own sexual desire, to act on that desire, and to satisfy it. In short, the outward appearance of her sexuality -- her breasts, her clothes, even her "exciting" new self confidence in her sexual desirability -- is not the same as her inner sexual drive and its fulfillment.

The conflicting dichotomy of Bea's sexual awareness becomes even more apparent once Bea begins her sexual initiation with the unappealing Pullman, a dour man with "brown wig-like hair, long, lean body, and . . . moist-looking lips carved heavily into his lantern-shaped face" (27). After the wedding ceremony, Bea retreats to the bedroom where she finds a pornographic photo of a "horrid cabinet-sized thing of a woman, . . . in stockings and no clothes" on the dresser, but instead of acknowledging her new husband's indiscretion, she displaces her anger and disgust on to the temporary black maid who, in her mind, has "unearthed" the photo and propped it up on the dresser "with what seemed actual malice" (42). Notwithstanding this clearly racist conflation of blackness and sexuality, as Berlant has argued, Bea's anger and disgust arise from her dawning apprehension of her limited control over her sexuality (134). The photo's necessarily static female figure reminds her how her husband soon will similarly reduce

and possess her as an erotic object and how the act will entail her passive acquiescence, thus making her anger an attempt to reassert control by directing it towards someone, like the maid, beneath her in the domestic power hierarchy. Bea's disgust is also apparent in her stubborn refusal to conceptualize the physical sexual act, cryptically alluding to how, "the curtain veiling the unmentionable was about to be withdrawn," and she again disassociates the sexual act on her body from her sexual inner self: "what was going to happen? To her? To happiness?" (42-43). As her anger turns to fear, she runs down from the bedroom in case Pullman interprets her presence in the room as "waiting for him," refusing even this passive and implicit expression of lust (43).

A moment later, however, Bea sits on Pullman's lap in the parlor, fascinated by "the cold male aroma of his flesh as he held and desired her," and plays with his cravat like a coquettish child as if appealing to his earlier confession, "A man likes innocence. A man likes innocence a lot" (43, 27). At the same time, even if Bea enjoys the only power she possesses in her new relationship, the sexual arousal she incites, she still feels sexually unaroused herself for Hurst notes that Bea "didn't want to push his hands away from her face and neck but she wished – she wished he wouldn't," and as she goes upstairs to undress she repeatedly hopes he will not follow her (43). The chapter concludes with a fitting simile for Bea's terrifying disempowerment and disembodied confusion: "The door opened then, and precisely as the panther is supposed to do in the jungle, some one was breathing in the dark" (45).

Bea experiences this sexual bifurcation slightly differently after she is married. Although she enjoys the security and comradery that her new status brings her in the public arena, from the shared intimacies with other wives to enhanced relationships with

local shopkeepers, she still distances these elements from the “almost intolerable ecstasies of the flesh which, through the calm unruffled curtain of her own unawakened flesh, she could regard with almost clinical detachment” (49). Earlier in this chapter Hurst uses more traditional metaphors for marital intercourse, such as “the ecstasies behind the veil,” but here she distinguishes Bea’s dormant erotic center, “her unawakened flesh,” from her dispassionate participation in her husband’s concupiscence (47).

Significantly, Bea still finds pleasure in her desirability, in her ability to arouse sexual desire in Pullman, despite her phlegmatic response. Her description of the sexual act has an almost masochistic combination of, in Berlant’s words, “pleasure, pain, and physical defamiliarization”: “It was a little terrible at first. Quite terrible, in fact, to have to feel so passive, so unstirred in the face of all the strange delights it was within her power to awaken in Mr. Pullman. After a while one’s chief solace lay in just that. It was wonderful, . . . to be able to bestow, even though within yourself no fires were lighted, only the willingness to endure” (116; 47). Like Irene Redfield, Bea has discovered that the traditional erotic power of heterosexual women lies in the peculiar synthesis of active sexual desirability with passive sexual autonomy, in addition to the strange contradiction that a woman can appear more sexually desirable in her passivity, exemplified by her husband’s pornography. In other words, she has accepted the unequal power dynamic of heterosexual etiquette, even embraced it, but only through disciplined clinical insensibility, again apparent by her references first to her own husband as “Mr. Pullman” and then to the endurance she must summon to order to enact her impassive demeanor, as if on an examination table.

Hurst, however, takes pains to make clear that the traditional sublimation of female sexuality is no longer acceptable. What distinguishes Bea from Irene Redfield and other bourgeois matrons – and Hurst from many of her contemporaries - is her guilty belief that this lack of reciprocal sexual desire is abnormal. As part of her indoctrination into wifely duties, Bea learns from a neighbor that if she is “one of the frigid ones,” she should not inform her husband, suggesting to Bea that her lack of sexual interest is something to hide (49). This deception, she decides, is part of a larger pattern she terms “knowing how to handle a man,” parallel to sublimating her material wants to his financial schedule or pacifying his temper (48). At the end of the novel, once Bea’s sexual desire *has* been awakened by another man, she is able to identify the missing component in her relationship with Pullman, albeit only to herself and only after questioned Jessie: “My marriage to your father was the marriage of a sleeping spirit and a sleeping flesh which he never succeeded in awakening” (302). Hurst thus endorses the importance of the female orgasm for personal and marital happiness along with marriage professionals and psychoanalysts.

Given Bea’s fear of appearing unnatural or atypical from the other wives now that she has found the power and comfort of her new public role, she logically views her pregnancy as “a compensation,” something “nice and right. . . . A justification, in some way, for that sense of the passivity of things” (47). Pregnancy represents a visible confirmation that unites the disorienting divide between seeming heterosexually “normal” and being heterosexually “normal,” coupled with an excuse to avoid the very act, heterosexual intercourse, that aroused this disturbing bipartition in the first place.

The Bad Fate of “Gooda Busts”

After the death of her husband, Bea discovers that his absence not only affects her physical and mental well-being but also brings unanticipated effects now that she has lost her standing as a middle-class wife. She immediately suffers economically from the loss of income as well as psychologically, losing the security of both her passive acquiescence to his control and the anticipation of greater economic prosperity in the future, the latter represented in her middle-class mind as the “purchase [of] one of those darling bungalow cottages” (58). But even if she does not miss the sexual relations per se that her husband’s lust required, Bea does miss the sexual respectability that his physical presence provided, a marital compensation she previously only conceptualized as his “caring” when “other men ogled her” and the “very good fate” of being able to avoid “that strange cold world out there into which girls were actually voluntarily venturing nowadays for such positions as stenographer, teacher, [and] saleslady” (35, 59). These two dangers now come crashing together as Bea contemplates her financial options and so confronts the reality of class distinctions in female sexual propriety, summed up by her neighbor who cautions, “In the nasty eyes of a lot of men a woman who is out to earn her own living a man’s way is either a freak or don’t mean any good” (63). In short, as a white working woman, Bea's economic need to venture out of the private domestic space into the public arena remakes her public sexual persona, the consequences of which she only partly comprehends. Through Bea’s dilemma, Hurst explores the class distinctions that predetermine the flapper’s upper-class status as well as the bias against working-class women unable to break down class barriers to access female-appropriate jobs like nursing, filing, and teaching.

Her neighbor's warning does little to prepare Bea for the licentious environment of the working world, for soon after on a "canvassing tour" to find employment, she is shocked when, during a visit to "a deacon, mind you, right in her own Atlantic City," she is pushed "up against the door and a pair of insinuating knees pressed against hers" (63). And yet, despite the likelihood of this scenario for many working women, Hurst then comments that this terrifying incident is an isolated one, perhaps to concede the reality of sexual harassment without derailing Bea's determination or traumatizing her sexual consciousness. In fact, once Bea begins soliciting and delivering maple syrup orders door to door, Hurst shifts from an internal narrative of Bea's consciousness to an omniscient narrator who insists Bea remained "unmolested" on the dangerous "side streets" of Atlantic City due to her terse and dowdy appearance and the "frantic haste" of her manner (73). Hurst depicts Bea's innocuousness in a characteristically visual description: "Loitering men in lighted doorways or on street corners looked after [Bea], but did not follow up with more than the occasional half-hearted accosting which they subconsciously expected of themselves at the passing of an unaccompanied woman. It is doubtful if Bea, her face twisted with purpose, ever even heard" (74). If Bea was previously protected from harassment by her middle-class ability to avoid the wrong (working-class) men on the wrong (side) street at the wrong (unaccompanied) time, at this point she cannot or will not admit the appearance of sexual impropriety inherent in her new status as a working woman because it not accompanied by the existence of sexual impropriety, although Hurst does. This distinction is relevant because it questions the traditional presumption, voiced by her neighbor, which marks all working-class women's sexuality as deviant or promiscuous, but from another perspective, it also shows

Hurst's careful characterization of Bea as consistently unable to comprehend the gap between how something may appear and its true essence, even when that "something" is as important as her personal welfare or sexual reputation.

If Bea appears to have lost the ability to enjoy the power of her sexual desirability, Hurst provides examples to indicate she has merely adapted it, albeit unconsciously, to the business world. Overall, the men she encounters present a range of emotions when faced with the true identity of "B. Pullman," some "register[ing] surprise at the sight of a woman as follow-up to that card, some a passing annoyance, . . . others a rather disgruntled refusal to permit her to even recite the virtues of her product," but few reveal a libertine predilection besides the occasional "rather mild and easily rebuffed advance" (82). Bea instead discovers that "where her sex entered at all, it was to the extent of influencing some male to give her an order, where, except for her being a woman, none would have gone" (82). Since Bea's girlish features have now been replaced by "a leaner face, an obsessed face, . . . [and] a quality of straight-lipped concentration," she decides her new self-determination is what forces men to take her seriously, yet Hurst provides a clue to suggest it is neither the hardening of her features nor a patronizing paternal instinct that keeps orders coming in (81, 82). She compares Bea's repeated success with male merchants to her lack of success with female ones, maintaining that Bea's "defeats, her snubs, her humiliations, her failures, were to descend upon her from the women executives of hospitals, diet kitchens, [and] hotels . . . who would have thrown their patronage to the male had the alternative presented itself;" hence Bea, despite her "grim harassed" demeanor, still arouses female jealousy and male desire with her natural beauty

now further enhanced by “the light and quite lovely pollen of slight maturity” (82, 74, 82).

Eventually Bea must confront these antithetical aspects of public female sexuality – the notion that working-class women lack sexual propriety and the advantages a sexually desirable woman has in the business world – when she attempts to raise capital for her first restaurant venture. Initially, her requests for a loan are refused due to the impracticability of a waffle counter in the seasonal Atlantic City economy, but then male business leaders begin to attack the premise that a woman can run her own establishment, one recounting the general assumption that “the place for a woman who has got to earn her living is behind the typewriter or the counter or the school-ma’am’s desk,” another arguing, “You’re too nice a woman . . . to be out after fish of this fry. Go get yourself a husband or a lover. Or at least a job behind somebody else’s desk” (114, 115). The Italian husband of a former schoolmate adds his own religious spin to her problem: “Only customer for crazy idea lak that is some fella who lak to sleep with you. Fine woman lak you – fine – strong– gooda busts – high. Beezness no place. Jeez Christ He makka woman for love” (114-115).⁸ In other words, if her middle-class respectability, coded as being “too nice,” narrows the acceptable options for employment to more subservient, female-dominated fields, her sexual desirability in combination with her “crazy” wish to break into the male realm of business ownership increase the public assumption of her sexual promiscuity. Yet in place of her previous innocuousness, Bea now displays anger at the disjunction between the apparent prudence of her motives and the prudish and, indeed, traditional core of her values, what she terms “her own innate niceness”:

Try and make the rather curiously focusing eyes of the men believe that her major idea was to achieve the security of life at home with her child. To the male mind, snooting about as if among the garbage of her motives, there was something neither savory nor welcome in the idea of a woman getting creative about this matter of business. . . . There were enough of them already talking about their women's rights, and God knows the spectacled kind of females that wanted them were welcome to them. But a woman with a pair of busts and a curve to her – get a man, is our solution. Or if you won't do that, be a man, then, and stand on your own. (115-16)

Social restrictions on female sexual desirability are here made explicit: attractive women are expected to use their sexual desirability as a pathway out of the public working world and into the private sanctum of marriage (or concubinage), whereas those who remain do so because they lack or repudiate the feminine allure needed to find a male breadwinner. Bea's public sexual persona is now even more suspicious since she is not just a white working woman but a pretty, single young woman who is challenging the lower-paying, traditionally nurturing jobs open to her. With her entrance into the business world as an owner financed, not coincidentally, by the maple syrup business of "H. Prynne, Esq.," Bea thus refutes the conventional view that an ambitious, attractive female entrepreneur cannot remain underneath a traditionally chaste and modest mother, while Hurst challenges the continued presumption, reiterated by many flapper films and novels, that women should work only to find a husband (116).

Fortunately, the rise of the B. Pullman restaurant franchise coincides with the development of the flapper persona in the novel's timeframe which helps to validate

Bea's entrance into the business sector and adds to the phenomenon of her accomplishment in the public eye. Ten years after her fledging business attempts, Bea has moved to New York City and, at the urging of her business manager, reluctantly allows the press to publicize her "flamboyant success story," although she still clings to the conviction that genteel women do not appear in the newspaper but "left that sort of thing to the actresses and women who achieved the front pages through actions which invited notoriety" (154, 155). Just as Bea previously rejected the public debasement of her sexual morality, she now resists public anointment as a successful flapper role model despite the growing acceptance of women in business: "She, who had scarcely been aware of the woman-suffrage movement as it came to fruition, [was] importuned now on all sides to address business and professional groups of her sex, eager to take cue from her; she to whom everything outside the home was interference with the ordered rightness of the dear private things that mattered" (185-86).

Bea's nostalgia for "the ordered rightness" of the "private" sphere may certainly be construed as Hurst's avowal, in the words of one critic, of "the return of white women to their domestic spaces and relations" (V Smith 46).⁹ Yet such elucidations ignore a crucial plot sideline, Bea's close friendship with Virginia Eden, a woman who similarly has built up an empire from the ground floor and remade herself in the process from Sadie Kress of Jersey City into a high profile sensation (207). Modeled on Hurst's friend Elizabeth Arden,¹⁰ Virginia seems to be Bea's opposite and not merely due to her beauty industry which, as she remarks to Bea, provides them with the perfect foundation for friendship since, "You make women fat and comfortable. My job is to undo all that and make them beautiful" (163). What Bea finds most intriguing about Virginia is her ability

to unite her public persona – an ostentatious, demanding, beautiful female executive - with her private self, refusing to sacrifice personal pleasure for professional success. Given Virginia's unconventional sexual history, her personal philosophy, how she "talked of life, happiness, and love as if they were the rightful facets to the diamond she called life," may be an endorsement of the indispensability of female sexual autonomy in a woman's life (164). Hurst reveals that in her search for a satisfying heterosexual relationship, Virginia has borne two children with two different fathers and even "twice divorced and twice remarried" her second husband, a man "whom she adored with a kind of intermittent and adolescent infatuation" (207, 211). Thus, Virginia, a flapper whose life is dedicated to the "cult of beauty" and whose riches depend on other women's attentiveness to their own sexual attractiveness, represents the successful union of sexual autonomy on the inside with sexual desirability on the outside, a unity Bea lacks (210).

Virginia's entrance into the novel is only one element that highlights Bea's ambiguous relationship with female sexual desirability. As Bea adjusts to her role as a "modern woman, up and doing, celebrated after a fashion," she becomes increasingly sensitive to how physical appearance functions in this public persona, noting it "was impossible to live and move in an ever-enlarging world of business women and not both consciously and unconsciously ape their accouterments of dress and good grooming" (158, 157). Although such "aping" certainly represents Bea's class aspirations, Bea's increased willingness to exploit, rather than deny, her sexual attractiveness in the public arena is an important development, one that is all the more visible in Stahl's film. Initially, Bea (Claudette Colbert) is modestly dressed in conservative suits or dresses, often with an apron, but after her successful rise, she flaunts around her New York

mansion in more sexually explicit outfits, like form-fitting suits and low-cut evening gowns. Nevertheless, the film cannot duplicate how Bea's renewed self-conscious manipulation of her sexual desirability coincides with her mounting sexual desire for her business manager, Frank Flake, but instead reconfigures Bea's romantic climax into a more conventional sequence.¹¹

Bea's dimidiation of her sexual self reaches an ironic conclusion once her previously empty presentation of sexual desirability begins to signify real internal lust that she ultimately cannot fulfill. While Hurst documents Bea's growing affection for the younger man through their work relationship, she also indicates that Virginia Eden is as much an instigation as Flake for Bea's erotic transformation. On one hand, Virginia is a model for Bea both by presenting her own sexual autonomy as an attainable goal and by reminding her that older women can still be sexually active.¹² On the other, Berlant provocatively queers Virginia and Bea's relationship, arguing that Virginia "dates [Bea], makes her a business 'proposition,' and seduces her into a contractual collaboration," which then makes Bea so fearful of her own lesbian desire that she "begins immediately to hyper-heterosexualize herself and falls in love with an unattainable man" (121). Like Passing's complex configuration of desire, however, Imitation critics must take care to avoid conflating all expressions of erotic desire into a desire for a specific sexual object, for Bea most likely does not desire Virginia sexually as much as she envies her sexual desirability and the crucial fact that Virginia's sexual allure is a means to sexual expression and fulfillment, not a stagnant end. Moreover, Bea begins to "hyper-heterosexualize herself" with Virginia's help, for she allows Virginia to "do [her] over" in the latest styles in order to show off her still youthful and sensual body (238). Even

though Bea initially fears that Frank will think her new look merely illustrates that she is “a fool and a slave just like all the rest of the women,” she later relishes the changes, “the grooming and creaming and waving and slimming,” because they allow her to express her passion for Frank, albeit passively and silently (218, 239):

I love Flake and I am glad of it, and not even my child shall deny me! And nothing smote her, not even shame, except the quite incomparable sensation of sitting there in her beige velvet, her hair soft, brown, and with electricity in it, curving out from beneath the gold turban, and more beige, fluffed in tulle over the bare white bosom revealed by her décolletage, blocked squarely into his vision. (236)

Emphatic verbs like “smoot” convey the violent psychic reaction that occurs as the two parts of Bea’s sexuality -- her outer desirability and inner erotic desire -- finally come together, a physical sensation that repeats after Frank compliments her on her outfit: “The sense of being admired lifted itself from the dusty places within her” (239).

The intensity of Bea’s erotic arousal, and Hurst’s sexually fervent phrases, escalate as Bea tries to verbalize her emotions. She aborts her first attempt when, during a business meeting, she leans towards him, “her bare shoulders” exposed, and touches him on the knee only to have the humiliating sense that he knows what he has “awakened deep down inside the hitherto motionless jungle of her emotions” but will not respond in kind (271). Her inner monologue then grows even more salacious: “The house of me has never been opened. You have ripped up the blinds and let in the light. I want to lay with you, Flake. To love with you” (271). In the end, of course, Frank learns of her love too

late and tells her that he and Jessie plan to marry in an embarrassing and shocking dénouement.

Should, then, this pessimistic ending be interpreted as a contradiction to this valuation of female sexual autonomy? It is certainly tempting to see the choice of Jessie over Bea as a prioritizing of youth over maturity, a reiteration of the view, found in the flapper icon, that sexual desirability necessarily equates youth. Significantly, unlike Stahl's film, which repeatedly emphasize Jessie's youth as immaturity and her feelings as a "crush," Hurst ends the novel with the words, "They were so young, standing there . . . so right. . . ." (310, ellipses in original). Yet given the wider spectrum of my interpretation, Hurst may have instead wanted to show how Bea is punished for her inability to act upon her emotions. Indeed, rather than seeing this finale in other ways, as either a "cruel punishment for the working mother" or Bea's "lack of insight into matters of the heart," I propose that Hurst may be arguing that female erotic desirability is not a substitute for erotic desire – having it, acting on it, and satisfying it (Caughie 35; DaGue 54). The novel thus warns modern women to not allow the overwhelming media emphasis on female sexual attractiveness to cloud their sexual priorities.

Every Woman's Share

The most unique factor that Hurst uses to highlight the irreconcilable division of Bea's inner and outer sexual selves is by introducing the foil of Delilah, whose many roles in the household include an incessant verbal advocacy of the importance of female sexual autonomy. Delilah is a mouthpiece for the necessity not only of "man-lovin'" but also of "flirtatious ways" in the business arena, insisting that Bea needs to learn that "you

kin fool a man and he'll like it" (186, 82, 83). Delilah's affiliation with sexuality in general, much less to affirm female sexual autonomy, initially seems ridiculous since as an overweight, religious, dark-skinned maid, she has no sexuality according to cultural tradition because she satisfies every cliché in the myth of the plantation mammy, down to her dialect and fervent servility. As Chapter 2 discusses, by the 1930s, this persona was familiar to Hurst's readers, and a number of critics have charted Delilah's likeness to the mammy stereotype.¹³ Hurst's visual description of Delilah's "red, black, and white personality" mimics such iconic images: "The red of her easily-hinged large mouth, packed with the white laughter of her stunning allotment of hound-clean teeth; the jug color of her skin with the gold highlights on cheekbones; the terrific unassailable quality of her high spirits, Baptist fervor, and amplitude" (80). Hurst exploits this metaphorical association even further when Bea turns Delilah's image into a marketing tool, first as a photograph on packages of "Delilah's Hearts" and then, at Delilah's suggestion, as "a walkin' trade-mark" who stands behind a counter flipping and serving waffles (87, 106).

If Delilah's connection to the pancake persona is not completely obvious, Hurst practically plagiarizes the story of Aunt Jemima when Delilah, "fluted and starched to perfection" in a white hat and apron, brings incredible success to their first restaurant enterprise at a church fair, preparing a family specialty while hungry customers proclaim, "Say, Mammy, don't care if I do have another order of those waffles!" (110, 111). As historian Marilyn Kern-Foxworth has documented, an ex-slave named Nancy Green was hired by the R.T. Davis Mill and Manufacturing Company to play the part of the plantation mammy at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago and then "traveled around the country demonstrating Aunt Jemima pancake mix at fairs, food shows, and

festivals” (67). The print campaign became extremely popular from the 1910s onward due to innovative promotional strategies and merchandise, and given its proliferation, Hurst most likely was counting on her white readers’ positive familiarity with the campaign and may have entertained the possibility that the women’s fashion and advice magazine Pictorial Review, which ran the novel’s initial serialization in six issues in 1932-33, might have carried an Aunt Jemima advertisement as well (Kern-Foxworth 66).¹⁴ Stahl heightens the Aunt Jemima similarities by making the business a pancake shop and pancake flour company and integrating “Aunt” into the company’s trademark.

On one hand, a necessary component of Delilah’s sexual authority is her asexuality, conveyed in particular through her heft, a physical indicator of her matronly manner and sexual repulsiveness regardless of her actual age,¹⁵ because without such markers of sexual unattractiveness, Delilah may be perceived as a sexual rival or spokesperson for lascivious erotic desire given her race and gender. Indeed, Delilah’s size is the first attribute Bea notices when she approaches a woman during her inquiry around the “shanty district” for a live-in maid, striking up a conversation with an “enormously buxom figure of a woman with a round black moon face that shone above an Alps of bosom” (75, 76). The repeated emphasis on her “gargantuan” bulk successfully diffuses any threat from Delilah’s proclamations on female sexual autonomy (224). In short, Delilah is allowed to talk about sex, even advocate it, because she never has sex herself (in the novel’s timeframe) and lacks any kind of sexual desirability.

On the other hand, Delilah reverses the dichotomy found in Bea: her apparent outward lack of sexual desirability versus an inner sexual knowledge of what it means to have, express, and fulfill sexual desire. Hurst seems aware of the ironic discontinuity

between Delilah's outer asexuality and inner sexual drive when, in her longest speech on the topic midway through the novel, Delilah does more than advocate for the necessity of heterosexual relations for a woman; she also talks longingly about her own erotic desire while admitting the contradictions apparent in a pro-sex speech given by an overweight, matronly African American maid:

I's jes' an ole nigger woman, honey, but I's had [man-lovin'] and I's done wid it, but I's had it while it lasted. I's laid wid a no-'count nigger, knowin' I was no moh to him dan a washin'-machine and a ironin'-board dat he married to save ever havin' to shuffle a bone again. But in lovin' dat no-'count, I's had de t'ing dat ain't come up in your eyes yet. And knowin' dat, I wants mah Miss Honey-Bea to have it. No matter what you got to pay, its [sic] worth it. Doan' wait too long, honey. Cotch it! (188).

In spite of the uncomfortable stereotype of her "no-'count" husband, Delilah presents the modern notion that female sexual autonomy has an intrinsic value for women rather than more conventional assumptions about the importance of sex for a husband's comfort or the well-being of a marriage. In fact, she places female sexual autonomy above all else ("No matter what you got to pay, its worth it"), but in case Delilah sounds like an mouthpiece for traditional patriarchal values -- even a "no-'count" man is better than no man -- she repeatedly remarks on the unfortunate truth that Bea has always lacked sexual autonomy despite the fact that she once had a husband, thus appropriating the psychoanalytic notion that female sexual satisfaction is a necessary component for marital happiness. Even when Bea insists that she has "had my share of that sort of thing," Delilah replies, with characteristic subservience, "Man-lovin'? No, you ain't, honey. You jes' know you ain't. I doan' know nothin' about Mr. Pullman, honey. You

ain't never mentioned him much. I ain't nevah asked, knowin' mah place. But I've seen his picture, honey. You ain't nevah had your share. Nothin' lak your share. You doan' know nothin'" (186).

In order to assert the veracity of Delilah's proclamations on sexuality, Hurst indicates that Delilah's domestic authority is never questioned for Bea often comments on her ability to satiate her family's needs even on a limited income, such as her ability to make "dishes that were not only tasty, but toothsome, out of anything from barley to tapioca" (91). Granted, Hurst certainly emphasizes Delilah's "folksy" quality, both in her advice and in her reaction to their good fortune, such as her insistence that she wants neither luxury nor rest but a "de finest funeral a nagger woman ever rode home in" (146). But in comparison with Stahl's film, Hurst clearly allows Delilah to remain an authority figure while Stahl instead repeatedly degrades her.

Stahl gives Bea, not Delilah, the credit for knowing what her marriage lacked, as she recounts to Delilah, "I think I was too young to know very much about love. Mother was dead, and he was my father's choice. Father wanted someone to take care of me," and when Delilah responds, "You need some lovin', honey-chile," Bea dismisses her with a laugh, saying "I need some supper." Overall, the film undermines Delilah's authority by celebrating her domestic abilities but highlighting an intellectual inferiority and economic gullibility missing in the novel – in other words, placing her squarely in the center of the mammy iconography. One notable example from the film occurs when Delilah refuses Bea's offer of twenty percent of the company's profits even though its product is based on her family's recipe; she first mistakenly thinks that she is being fired and then denies any need for money: "Let me and Peola stay same's as we been doing.

It's your cook and I wants to stay your cook. . . . I gives [the money] to you, honey. I makes you a present of it." When Bea insists that she will bank Delilah's percentage separately for her to use later as she wishes, Delilah only requests an extravagant funeral.¹⁶ In contrast, Delilah is never ridiculed in the novel but given a fairer portion of the profits in stock shares and a salary of one hundred dollars a month, a notable sum considering, as Brooke Kroeger explains, that Hurst was paying "her own college-educated secretary forty dollars a month, and a maid's monthly wage was eight to ten dollars" (225; 201).

The repeated references to Delilah's hefty and thus sexually repulsive body are also necessary to diffuse any intimations of homoeroticism (80, 83). Hurst may have realized that presenting Bea as sexually unaroused by her husband or heterosexual intercourse could suggest another meaning for her "frigidity": Bea is a lesbian. As the Chapter 2 explains, the origin of homosexuality was now attributed to improper psychological development because, in one clinician's terms, "a large proportion of cases drift into a homosexual adjustment because the obstacles to heterosexual adjustment have been overwhelming," using as his case example a woman "Disillusioned in Marriage. Finds a Substitute in Homosexual Liaison" (Henry 905, 896). Since masculine attributes were no longer necessary to diagnose homosexuality, Bea's own marital disillusionment makes her suspect, and placing another woman in the house certainly increases the possibility of a homosexual attraction, particularly given the real affection between the two, from their pet names -- "darling," "Miss Honey-Bea," "honey-chile" -- to their physical exchanges, including hand stroking, back rubs, and foot massages (85, 83). Granted, Delilah's characterization as a mammy persona predefines her affection as maternal, not sexual, but

critics who maintain that Bea and Delilah's relationship, in both the film and novel, exists more in an “utopian dual realm of maternal reciprocity” than in a homoerotic setting do so to deny that sexual tension may exist between two unattached women sharing a household (Flitterman-Lewis 44).¹⁷ Furthermore, such conclusions ignore how each woman’s relationship with her daughter is noticeably strained, both by distance, as each girl is sent away to school at a young age, and by temperament, given Peola’s angry discontentment and Jessie’s flighty disposition which makes her seem to her mother to be “a bright foreign bird captive in the hand” (175). Other critics more logically define their relationship as a “marriage” or “a quasi-companionate couple” since such terms clarify how Delilah’s caretaking frees Bea to build a successful business (Basinger 204; Berlant 114). Delilah’s comments on Bea’s need for heterosexual fulfillment are thus not only fitting but also required for Hurst’s contemporary audience, for Delilah can satisfy all the components of wife to Bea’s husband except the sexual without crossing the boundary into sexual deviance. In other words, Delilah’s speeches on “man-lovin’” reiterate the normativity of heterosexual relations in order to counteract a situation which seems to discount it.

White Skin, White Horses, White Lies

Peola, Delilah’s daughter, represents sexuality in more than one way: her very presence denotes miscegenation and as a stereotype of the tragic mulatta, she also recalls traditional assumptions about the sexually voracious black female and the “curse” of white blood. But, like Cather, Hurst raises the tragic mulatta stereotype in order to subvert its tenets, giving a seemingly disempowered African American woman control

over her own sexual autonomy at the expense of familial relationships. Unlike Stahl, who is unable to move beyond these stereotypes, content to imply, as Donald Bogle summarizes, that the “explanation for Peola’s rebellion is simply that she wants to be white, not that she wants white opportunities,” Hurst provides background to explain Peola’s stubborn refusal to “be” black, allows Peola to speak more often about her rationale, and even implies that Peola permanently assumes a white identity (60). In this sense, Peola utilizes a modern sense of female sexual autonomy, although her contention that she deserves to live as a white woman raises the question of whether this sexual freedom is available to black women. At the same time, this assertion challenges the common understanding of racial identity as biologically derived. Like Larsen, Hurst questions the spectacle of race as a determination of identity with Peola’s insistence, “I’m as white under my skin as I am on top” (258).

As a woman of mixed race, Peola recalls the presumed dangers of interracial sexual relationships by the nature of her existence, part of a larger historical fear of miscegenation that itself is a commentary on the instability of racial definitions and the legal practices, like the “one-drop rule,” which were passed to secure them.¹⁸ Hurst dispels this threat with Delilah’s repeated explanations of how her daughter came to possess her “pale-tan” skin, “slim Caucasian features,” “soot-colored eyes and straight-banded, soot-colored hair” (79, 100, 119). Indeed, Delilah seems to find it necessary to dismiss any suspicion of deviant interracial sexual relations even before she has been hired, immediately mentioning to Bea that her deceased husband was a “white nigger” who left his daughter “nothin’ but some blue-white blood a-flowin’ in her little veins” (76, 77). She consistently and conveniently distances her daughter’s white inheritance

out of living memory, making it, in Susan Courtney's estimation, "at least three generations prior to Peola, and even then [Delilah] cannot be sure when, or if, it was actually 'mixed'" (n21).¹⁹ Even if she later tells Bea there was "mostly nigger in mah nigger," she obviously cannot deny her husband's white ancestry, so she instead diffuses the responsibility, insisting that she "ain't sayin' dar mayn't been plenty of white blood in him, down dar [Virginia] whar white blood in nigger veins comes cheaper than moonshine whisky" (120).²⁰

This refutation of any interracial relationship precipitating Peola's conception, however, is specifically Delilah's and fits into Delilah's belief system regarding interracial couplings, as I later explain. The fact that Hurst was not against interracial relations per se is evidenced by her decision to allow Peola to marry a white man at the end of the novel. Hurst's willingness to confront this traditional taboo is all the more noteworthy given Stahl's excision of any mention of Peola's romantic life, only one of the many ways in which the film's appropriation of Peola's story deviates the most sharply of all the characters from the novel, also discussed below. Overall, as critics have noted, Stahl's version of Peola perpetuates stereotypes of the tragic mulatta that Hurst deliberately shuns, for he simplifies her reasons for passing to self-hatred and material greed articulated through forthright proclamations of how she "won't be black" but merely wants "the same things in life other people enjoy."²¹ Hurst instead provides evidence to suggest that Peola's misery is an outgrowth of her environment, not merely an innate character flaw, and, indeed, the happy domestic circumstances that work to her mother and Bea's advantage are what sow the seeds of Peola's discontent, for Peola is raised in the same middle-class setting as Jessie and appears to choose Bea, not Delilah,

as her role model even as a young child; for example, Hurst explains how, “from her very infancy, Peola, quick as any child to ape, was nevertheless careful to avoid any replica of her parent’s diction” (99). Such an identification might be expected because, as Adrienne Johnson Gosselin explains, Bea is “the mother figure . . . who, like Peola, refuses to stay in her ‘place,’” and Peola confirms this mentoring during her last scene when she tells Bea, “You’ve succeeded in a world that matters to you! Give me that same chance” (59; 258-59).²² Delilah unwittingly encourages this white middle-class affiliation by imitating, “as far as her sense of propriety dared, Jessie’s clothes, hair-dress and color schemes” in her own daughter (180).²³ Moreover, even at a young age Peola is aware of the advantages Jessie’s white skin affords her, Bea commenting, “They play nicely together. It’s only that Peola seems almost resentful of Jessie” (120). Given Peola’s association between whiteness and self-advancement, success, and personal autonomy, Hurst portrays Peola’s wish to deny her black heredity sympathetically even if her own conception of African American identity is somewhat limited.

Bea and Delilah may be willing to acknowledge Peola’s bitterness, but they are unable to admit how their favoritism of Jessie, the “yaller-haired angel-chile,” may also arouse Peola’s resentment (120). Bea constantly woos her daughter’s affection with attention and gifts out of her own jealousy that Jessie appears more comfortable with her nanny than with her busy mother. Still, it is Peola’s own mother who repeatedly makes the lesson of the racial difference a negative one, insisting, “Every day of mah life I’s gonna rear mah young un to know de glory of bein’ one of de Lawd’s low-down ones” (119). For instance, Delilah punishes Peola more harshly than Jessie for the same crime – sticking pins into the immobile Mr. Chipley in imitation of the doctor’s reflex tests –

with the justification that “mine might as well begin learnin’ herself now, that what’s jes’ naughty for a white chile, can be downright ag’in’ de law if a black one does it. ‘Tain’t no use mah chile tryin’ to get herself raised on de idea all men is equal” (101). If this reaction seems somewhat strong for a preschooler’s prank, even before Peola and Jessie venture into the wider world of elementary school their mothers accept the inevitable demise of their relationship, which Delilah characteristically describes as the day when Jessie “is gonna wake up an’ find my Peola black” (119). Later it is Delilah who insists on separating the children by sending Jessie to boarding school at age seven, arguing, “Dem two chillun is turnin’ black an’ white on us now, in earnest. Your chile cain’t go startin’ in the same public school, tagged on to by mah nigger child – ‘tain’t no good for both” (173). Her rationale is that their closeness will do more harm than good if it delays their indoctrination into a racially segregated and unequal society: “When de time comes for mah Peola to stay on her black side of de world and youm on her white side, we won’t have to decide it, Miss Bea. Some day, jes’ a little word lak nigger’ll creep in, an’ everything will be all right except nevah de same as befoh” (119). Thus, it is Bea, not Delilah, who is upset when that day arrives, and Delilah’s explanation to her own daughter reiterates what she sees as the inevitable transformation of the girls’ relationship into a racial hierarchy: “Jessie didn’ call you a nigger wid her meanness. She called you dat wid her blood. . . . Stop dat tremblin’, Peola, and walk over dar, and tell Jessie you’re proud of bein’ a nigger, ‘cause it was de Lawd’s work makin’ you a nigger. . . . The further ‘long you go apin’ whites and pleasurin’ wid dem, de more you’re letting yourself in for de misery” (152). Delilah will not even allow Jessie to apologize to Peola, stoically asserting, “Jessie ain’t to blame. God ain’t, cause He had some good reason for

makin' us black and white . . . and de sooner mah chile learns to agree wid Him the better" (151, ellipse in original).

Delilah's attitude towards Peola's "misery" and shame in being "what de Lawd made her" is perhaps the most problematic feature of the novel (121). There is never an acknowledgment by Delilah (or Bea) that Peola's desire to pass might be a legitimate wish to escape the disadvantages imposed on blacks by a racist society or to access greater opportunity and prosperity. Delilah's interpretation follows the tragic mulatta stereotype that the miscegenous mix of bloodlines naturally precipitates psychic confusion and unhappiness, making her daughter's discontent a terrible inheritance from her little-skinned father, a "curse . . . like it was on him. Mah baby hates to be black. . . . Her little heart's scarred wid it, lak her paw's before her;" she later prays, "Lawd, git de white horses drove out of her blood. Kill de curse-shame de curse her light-colored pap lef' for his baby" (121, 192). In fact, Delilah is the spokesperson for the novel's worst racial stereotypes in her final confrontation with Peola:

 Lovin' de Lawd dat made me black, I bring mah baby-chile into a race dat I'm proud to be one of. A low-down, good-for-nothin' race of loafers, lots of 'em, but no worsen dan loafers of any other color. Lovers of de Lawd and willin' servers is mah race, filled wid de blessin's of humility – a singin', happy, God-lovin', servin' race dat I loves an' is proud of, an' wants mah chile to love. (259)

Critics have tried to validate Delilah's abject acceptance of racial inequality, even defending her treatment of Peola as a loving vigilance "about preparing her daughter for what she knows she can expect from the world outside," but if Hurst truly wanted to undermine Delilah's explanation of Peola's "curse," she could have included some scenes

of racial discrimination (Kroeger 203).²⁴ Granted, Hurst never offers any narrative support to validate Delilah's evaluation of Peola's metaphysical malaise, yet Janet Handler Burstein's assessment that the cancer that ends Delilah's life is representative of "the silent, self-destructive rage that flourishes within women who accept and pass on their subordination by class, race, and gender" seems to be a convenient excuse for Delilah's behavior where Hurst supplies none (58).

At the same time, Hurst has obvious sympathy for Peola, although unfortunately she never provides any narrative interpretations of Peola's inner torment.²⁵ As a result, her empowering characterization of Peola's journey to racial and sexual autonomy must be construed through more indirect routes, mainly by examining Peola's statements to Bea and her mother. Before analyzing these speeches, though, I would first like to point out what may be a surprising omission in a narrative of passing: unlike Stahl, Hurst refuses to provide a direct staging of the insistences when Peola successfully passes for white. Passing episodes in literature may indeed affirm the reality that many light-skinned blacks routinely pass as white without detection in order to gain access to segregated facilities, even those who otherwise live in the African American community, such as by Irene Redfield in Passing and in other novels, like Jessie Fauset's Plum Bun (1929). However, in the dominant discourse, passing scenes require exposure in order to satiate the white fear of what Gosselin terms "the threat of 'invisible blackness'" and to provide reassurance that passing blacks will always be caught and punished for their hubris in challenging the racial hierarchy (48). Hurst refers to Peola's success at passing and, in one case, her exposure without dramatic confirmation, perhaps to avoid the sensationalist emotions which often accompany such scenes for the mainly white

audience – the suspense of whether the passer will be exposed, her shame and humiliation when she is, and then the shocked betrayal of the white participants which legitimize the wrongfulness of her act. Stahl’s film provides two such passing examples and only the first, when Delilah accidentally exposes her relation to Peola by bringing her raiogear to her third grade classroom, is mentioned in Hurst’s novel and then only in retrospect by Delilah, who focuses not on her own pain but on Peola’s mortification (“Mah baby turned seventy years old in dat schoolroom”) and counters Bea’s sympathy with the remark, “Poor Delilah ain’t no matter, Miss Honey-Bea. It’s poor Peola” (191, 192). In contrast, Stahl plays out the emotional turmoil of this scene for Delilah’s benefit rather than Peola’s, for the camera zooms in on Delilah’s anguished expression as she notices the teacher’s puzzlement and Peola’s embarrassment and inquires, “Teacher, has she been passing?” a question that Hurst’s Delilah never apparently needs to ask. Hurst adds an interesting footnote to the school episode by having the white doctor who attends to Peola’s “nervous collapse” mistake her for Bea’s daughter, a detail which indicates that Peola’s passing may not always be a conscious and deliberate act (193). The classroom scene is only one reinforcement of Stahl’s overall presentation of Delilah as the suffering, selfless mother and Peola as a bratty, selfish child.

The second passing example in Stahl’s film is worth elucidating since it implicitly connects Peola’s decision to pass with sexual deviancy, an implication that Hurst is unwilling to make. After learning from school administrators that Peola has abruptly left the southern black college Bea suggested she attend, Delilah and Bea travel together to find her working as a restaurant cashier. Yet instead of allowing Bea to confront Peola without embarrassment, Delilah enters the restaurant alone and verbally exposes the truth

of her relationship with Peola in front of her employer and a customer, both white men. In the sequence, Delilah leaves Bea in the car and proceeds to gaze through the window at Peola, who has a pleasant conversation with the male customer as she rings up his bill and fetches some cigars for him from behind the counter. This apparently harmless exchange between Peola and the customer increases in significance once a few details of Stahl's staging are revealed. First, the well-dressed man asks Peola if she is enjoying her new job, an indication that he has noticed her presence. Then Peola smiles at him, replying, "Very much, thank you," a seemingly appropriate response but also a facial expression and camera angle that Stahl has not allowed until this moment in the film: a frontal shot of Peola's smiling face. Thus, Peola's unhappiness living amongst those who know her as a black woman is contrasted with her happiness at passing for white and, specifically, at passing as a white woman in the eyes of white men, severely reducing any sympathy her predicament may have aroused in a conservative white audience.²⁶ The comparison between the psychic states of "black" and "white" Peola is again enhanced by a rhyming frontal shot of Peola's horrified face when she sees her mother enter the restaurant. Given the high visibility of her position, Peola's job as a cashier may even be a calculated opportunity to revel in her sexual desirability as a white woman.

The relevance of the white men's gaze on Peola the "white" woman may seem somewhat tenuous, but it assumes more meaning when Stahl returns to a wide-angle shot in order to include the reactions of both men as Delilah confronts Peola, tearfully rejoining Peola's denials with "Why, Peola? Peola, chile. I'm your mammy." Furthermore, Peola turns to the men in her defense, crying out, "Do I look like her daughter? Do I look like I could be her daughter? Why, she must be crazy!" The two

white men respond with silence, a necessary reaction since, as Gosselin points out, a “yes” would mean they were knowingly colluded with her deception while a negative reply “would admit the power of invisible blackness” (60). Instead, they assume appropriately aghast expressions, perhaps appalled by the revelation that this attractive, well-dressed woman is not the “white” woman they assumed her to be. Only when the fashionably dressed, fur-clad Bea comes to the door crying, “Peola! How can you talk to your mother that way?” does Peola give up the facade and run out. The cinematic “Imitation” therefore confirms the conventional view of the lascivious black female libido by presenting this passing episode as transgressive sexual desire which could lead to interracial sexual relations.²⁷

Against Stahl’s incendiary and racist characterization of Peola, Hurst’s decision to depict Peola as an articulate, intelligent, and ambitious woman is all the more innovative and liberal, particularly given Peola’s refusal to allow the racist world to deny her any of her human rights, notably her right to define her own sexual autonomy against the negative stereotypes traditionally associated with a mulatta who passes. In the novel, as in the film, Peola’s last scene with her mother is a poignant confrontation in which she asks Delilah to forsake their relationship permanently so Peola can move into the white community without fear of exposure. The different motivations for Peola’s visit, though, greatly alter the level of empathy her request arouses, for in the filmic version Peola is returning in defiance of her mother’s dramatic exposure at the restaurant, begging to be left alone, while in the novel Peola has already been living and working as a “white” woman in Seattle for four years but wishes to clarify her resolution to marry and move abroad.²⁸ Indeed, Hurst might have opened up the novel to similar accusations of racism

if she had presented Peola's plan to marry a white man unaware of her racial background with less sensitivity or attention to detail since Peola's act alone is a challenge to legal and social sanctions against interracial sexual relations and marriage.²⁹ In the same way, Peola's denial of her African American heritage could have also been interpreted as an affirmation of the racist stereotype that all blacks would rather be white. Yet Peola's explanation recounts how her reasons for abnegating her black heredity, as well as all those who knew her as a black woman, are dependent not on self-hatred nor sexual transgression but on her desire to unify her inner psychological reality with her outer physical identity, a union that neither her mother nor Bea is ever able to fulfill for themselves.

Hurst first raises the traditional stereotype of the libidinous passing mulatta in anticipation of Peola's last request, again placing troubling racist assumptions in the mouth of Peola's mother. Peola has not visited her family in New York since she stopped by on her way to Seattle to work as a librarian nor has anyone visited her from back east, even though she later acknowledges to Bea that they "must have known that all along" about her white lifestyle (257). As a matter of fact, Peola's suspicion is correct, yet Delilah earlier refused Bea's offer to go to Seattle to visit Peola, saying, "I doan' know *how* she's livin' out dar. I'm 'fraid to know. I doan' know *what she's passin' herself off as*" (225, emphasis added). Delilah's enigmatic comments add a sexual innuendo to her apprehensions, for what she seems to fear most is not Peola passing as a white woman but what *kind* of white woman she might be passing as -- a sexually desirable white woman, perhaps even a sexually active one.³⁰ In other words, the different kinds of "passing" available to Peola are inextricably combined with her sexual

activities. Like Clare Kendry's girlhood friends, Delilah presumes Peola's desire to pass is sexually motivated, eventually leading to her downfall as a white man's mistress or even a prostitute, an implication that precipitates Delilah's later remark, "Black wimmin who pass, pass into damnation" (260). The gendered specification of Delilah's religious prediction also confirms her equation of female passing with sexual promiscuity since in all her lamentations about her husband and his "curse-shame," she never worries about his eternal damnation, despite the fact that she learned after his death that he was a bigamist (192, 76). Delilah, in short, sees Peola through the racist eyes, conflating racial defiance with sexual impropriety and reiterating the tragic mulatta's connection to rapacious black female eroticism.

Peola's description of her own experience in the white community explicitly rejects this interpretation of her motivations and implicitly demonstrates a modern willingness to assume control of her own sexual autonomy, including how she exhibits and fulfills her erotic desire. Her version presents the courtship as the accidental meeting "of a lonesome kid coming to the library evenings and the loneliest girl in the world," a scenario that unequivocally contradicts the sexual transgression implied by her mother's conjecture for why and how she might pass (264). Unlike the film's Peola, who appears to revel in her sexual desirability as a "white" woman, Hurst's Peola makes it clear that she has deliberately avoided this path, calling it a "wonder" that she would meet such "[a] darlingest *clean* fellow . . . leading the lonely careful life I had to" (264, emphasis added). Her emphatic description of her fiancé's "clean" intentions, his personality as "not a boy to go gadding around," and the circumstances of their courtship indicate her awareness of the sexual impropriety surrounding the black woman who passes for white (265).

Moreover, Peola admits she not only tried to avoid any sexual contact in Seattle but also never planned on the conventional route to romance and marriage: “All of sudden – all of a sudden the whole world bursting open, like a flower. I never dreamed – I never tried for him” (264). Hurst thus revises the image of a rampant, aggressive black female libido by having Peola assert control over her sexual autonomy, even if that means avoiding sexual satisfaction while she lived as a single white woman. Peola appropriates a modern conception of female sexual autonomy even as she rejects the flapper’s deliberate flaunting of her sexual desirability.

At the same time, Peola’s decision to sterilize herself is necessarily problematic for it fits the myth of the tragic mulatta. As literary critic Mary V. Dearborn has documented, the threat of the mulatta’s physical ability to pass as white is traditionally contained by the belief that black heredity will always show itself in some form, commonly either in the reemergence of “the savage, primitivistic behavior of the jungle” or the birth of a “coal-black baby” (151-2). Peola’s willingness to forsake maternity seems to heed Delilah’s warning that her white husband would otherwise “live to curse de day when your lie comes out in your chillun” (260).³¹ But this drastic action could also be understood as another method by which Peola gains control of her own sexual autonomy, for restricting her reproductive abilities is the key, at least in her mind, to freeing her sexual ones. As such, Peola affirms her ability to satiate her physical desires at the expense of the traditional outlet for female satisfaction, motherhood, a conscious act which, in Pamela L. Caughie’s words, demonstrates “that the cultural production of femininity can proceed apart from the reproduction of mothering and of mummies and thereby undermine the ‘natural’ basis of female identity” (35). Unlike Clare Kendry,

whose racial and class privilege has given her a sexual respectability that was missing from her life as a sexually desirable and sexually active black woman, Peola interprets the sexual respectability of being a white woman as first the ability to ignore her own sexual drive as a single woman and then the need to reject her reproductive drive as a wife, and as such she moves beyond the flapper's resolution of sexual freedom through middle-class marriage and motherhood. Although Hurst's conception of black female autonomy is somewhat limited, she still affirms Peola's sexual autonomy as Peola genuinely believes that her choice will bring her joy and presumably allow her to lead a sexually fulfilling life: "He'll never know anything but how happy I can make him. And will. . . . It's all or nothing for me. For us" (264).

Just as Peola denies the white society's right to define her sexual autonomy, she also denies her mother's religious argument which presumes that one's race is due to God's design: "De glory in bein' black, honey, is dat de Lawd willed it so. . . . Glory be to Gawd, I's glad I's one of his black chillun, 'cause, sho as heaven, his heart will bleed fust wid pity an' wid mercy for his low-down ones" (119). What Delilah fears is not an destabilization of the racial hierarchy but of a religious one, arguing, "Nobody cain't pass. God's watchin'" and "Gawd don't want His rivers to mix!" (191, 259). Yet when she insists to Peola, "Black wimmin who pass, pass into damnation," Peola first calls her talk "swamp and voodoo nonsense" and then says, with defiance, "Let me take care of God!" (260, 261). In contrast, Stahl's ending implies that God *has* punished Peola, an view that Peola corroborates in her dramatic declaration after Bea drags her, weeping, from her mother's coffin: "Miss Bea, I killed my own mother!" The film thus confirms Delilah's passive religious fatalism by showing how God Himself defeats Peola's attempt

to dispute the essentialist system of racial difference, a judgment Peola accepts when she repudiates her desire to pass by returning to her southern black college.

Delilah's dramatic death could have been presented as punishment for Peola's defiance of racial prescriptions and confirmation of this racial hierarchy, as it is in the film, but Hurst refuses such traditional resolutions. After Bea finds Delilah prostrate on the floor, Delilah argues that she does not need a doctor for the pain, which she calls "dat ole debbil bitin' me": "ain't no doctor gonna gitten his hands on mah misery. I's lived alone wid it for three years, day and night. An' de wusser it gits, de closer it gits me to my Lawdagawd" (280). The timeframe makes clear that Delilah was suffering from a cancerous tumor before her final confrontation with Peola, and she even tells Bea that God is "a-havin' mercy on mah baby wherever she is" by sparing her the sight of her mother's demise (281). By suggesting that Delilah's religious faith kills her, not Peola's denial of her black heredity, Hurst further rejects this version of God's racial hierarchy and gives mother and daughter each a justified reward for their sorrows – Delilah a lavish funeral and heavenly home and Peola a life of unequivocal racial identity and true love, an ending befitting any sexually autonomous flapper.

Overall, though, Peola's most controversial contention is not her wish to marry and live as a "white" woman nor her denial of God's racial essentialism but her argument that racial designation should not be based upon visible racial characteristics or, indeed, upon biology at all. She argues, "I'm light. No way of knowing how much white flows somewhere in my veins. I'm as white under my skin as I am on top. . . . If your skin is white like mine and your soul is white – like mine, there is no point to the needless suffering" (258-59). Stahl's Peola, in contrast, wants to pass because she hates her

“inner” blackness and wishes to deny this part of her physiology, exclaiming into the mirror in front of her mother, “I want to be white, like I look. Look at me. Am I not white? Isn't that a white girl there?” Rather than emphasize her sameness to whites like Bea or Jessie, as she looks in the mirror she focuses on, in Miriam Thaggert’s view, the difference “between what she has been designated and her physical appearance, between the self categorized as black by others and the ideal, visibly white self she imagines she could be” (487). In the film, Peola’s argument merely rests on the perceptibility of her white skin, admitting that her curse is to “look white and be black,” and thus she accepts the essentialist notion that “inside” she is black, a logic which foreshadows the inevitable exposure of her black heritage because she can never really “be” white. In contrast, Hurst’s Peola insists that she will continue to pass because she “is” white through and through. Moreover, her continued success and explicit satisfaction in living as a white woman provide the only confirmation she needs to feel she has made the right choice, a choice Hurst’s narrative affirms as well by implying that Peola has become another “ex-colored” person.

Hurst’s novel ends with two modern marriages for the two daughters, a maneuver that explicitly parallels Peola’s right to a happy life with Jessie’s. She therefore seems to implicitly endorse the period’s emphasis on monogamous marriage as the only choice for women. However, like Larsen, Hurst never provides details of a modern marriage in which wives can practice such autonomy. The next novel in this study, Their Eyes Were Watching God, attempts just that, deliberately comparing the heroine’s two previous failed relationships with her third marriage with an untraditional man with whom she finds love and happiness. At the same time, problems arise that question the ability of

modern women to find full autonomy, sexual and personal, in relationships still predicated on traditional hierarchies of power.

Notes

¹ Not only is the majority of criticism on Hurst's novel placed within a comparison of Sirk's and Stahl's versions, but the most recent edition by the Perennial Library is published as a "literary cinema classic" with Lana Turner's photo on the cover and additional photos from Sirk's film inside, regardless of the fact that the context of more than one photo deviates sharply from the novel's scene. The publishers also blatantly ignore the great differences between Sirk's film and the novel, including the majority of the plot and even the characters' names. Fannie Hurst, Imitation of Life (New York: Perennial, 1990). All citations are to this edition.

² Hurst biographer Brooke Kroeger documents only one short story, "The Smudge" (1922), that utilizes any racial subject material, but instead of black characters this story focuses on an unmarried white mother who earns her living acting on stage in blackface wearing her own line of makeup (81).

³ For a general discussion of Hurst and Hurston's friendship, see Robert E. Hemenway (Hurston, 20-24); Kroeger (122-27, 166-69, 199-200); Abe C. Ravitz (165-67); Carla Kaplan (Hurston: Life 41-42); and Gay Wilentz ("White"). Hurston comments on Hurst in her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road (1942) and in a 1937 article for The Saturday Review entitled "Fannie Hurst by her Ex-Amanuensis Zora Neale Hurston" (173-76). For one example criticizing Hurst in this relationship, see Jane Caputi's essay. Hemenway disputes this negative view in a later essay, arguing, "To think of Mrs. Meyer or Fannie Hurst as 'patrons' in the classic sense distorts their friendship with Hurston" ("Personal" 34).

⁴ Kroeger provides a more complete discussion of Hurst's German Jewish identity (190-92, 239-40). For more information on the factors which produced this rise in anti-Semitism, see Robert Singerman and John Hingham in addition to Leonard Dinnerstein and Ronald H. Bayor. For a discussion on these factors in relation to Hurst's writing, see Susan Koppelman.

⁵ Ellen Serlen Uffen is not alone in excluding Hurst from Jewish-American criticism as Hurst is also absent from other collections like Sanford Pinsker's Jewish American Fiction 1917-1987, Lewis Fried's Handbook of American-Jewish Literature, 1880-present, and Allen Guttman's survey The Jewish American Writer in America: Assimilation and the Crisis of Identity. However, I disagree with Uffen's contention that in contemporary criticism Hurst was often "discussed as [a] Jewish [woman] who did not write much about Jews" (Strands 2), given contemporary examples like Joseph E. Mersand (85-86); Joseph Collins (122-25); Myrtle Lecky Grimshaw; Halford E. Luccock (116-17); and Grant Overton (180-86). For a more general explanation of the dynamics between German and Eastern European Jewish immigrants, see Dinnerstein (30-35).

⁶ For other examples, see Luccock (117). As these examples were drawn from my relatively limited collection of contemporary criticism, I find it a blinding oversight that Hurst criticism in general and biographies of Hurst specifically, such as Kroeger's lengthy work, do not discuss the effect that anti-Semitism must have had Hurst's career, subject matter, and decision to downplay her Jewish heritage.

⁷ Hurst become more active in Jewish causes during and after World War II, particularly after the establishment of Israel.

⁸ If Hurst's decision to place the most sexually explicit description in the mouth and stereotypical dialogue of an Italian immigrant seems racist, Bea's reaction makes it more

so, particularly her insistence, “Italians were than way, about love and sex and nature. Her mother had always said, ‘Never have anything to do with Eytalian boys. . . . They aren’t nice in their ideas about little girls’” (115). For more discussion on Hurst’s pejorative depiction of other ethnic groups, see Wilentz (“White” 40).

⁹ See also Elizabeth DaGue (54); Ravitz, (163); and Uffen (“Novels,” 576-77).

¹⁰ Both of Hurst biographers make this connection, although apparently Hurst never commented on her characterizations in this manner (Ravitz 163; Kroeger 197).

Regardless, Hurst’s choice of a beauty company for Virginia’s business is fitting as the rise in cosmetic production during this period was unprecedented, revising attitudes toward beauty and consumption and offering women a range of opportunities to enter the business sector. For more on this topic, see Martin Pumphrey and Kathy Peiss ([Hope](#)). For a reading of Virginia Eden that differs greatly from my own, see Uffen (“Novels” 578-79).

¹¹ In Stahl’s film, Bea falls almost immediately for an outsider, ichthyologist Stephen Archer (Warren William), after meeting him at a party. Soon she completely neglects her business duties in order to pursue the romance, thus presenting work and love as incompatible, a false dilemma Hurst avoids in the novel. The novel’s finale is also rewritten to present Jessie’s infatuation as a childish fling that Stephen repudiates by announcing his love for Bea. The film also eliminates characters, like Bea’s father and Virginia Eden, and begins after the death of Bea’s husband.

¹² The belief that Bea, age forty in the last third of the novel, is “old” is not my own but one the novel seems to advocate, such as Bea’s reference to herself as “old and leathery” (271). Virginia is in her forties. The apparent contradiction between Bea’s

obsession with the eight year age difference between her and Frank (“I am in love with this boy”) and the fact that Jessie is a mere teenager at least twelve years younger than her future husband is never commented upon (236). The film, in contrast, never questions Bea’s ability to be sexually attractive at her age but instead critiques Jessie as a sexual role model by highlighting her immaturity through both girlish mannerisms, like pouting and giggling, and dress, until, that is, she dons her mother’s apparel when she confesses her love for Stephen. His attraction to her is never in question for he has already told Bea, “She’s a most appealing little person. Half child and half woman” and in this scene calls Jessie first “a child” and then “a babe in arms” and “a baby.”

¹³ For a more detailed analysis of the novel’s depiction of Delilah as a mammy or Aunt Jemima figure, see Berlant (119-26); Caputi (702); Kroeger (199); and Miriam Thaggert (482-85). General information on the evolution of the mammy stereotype into Aunt Jemima can be found in Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, Patricia Morton, Cheryl Thurber, and Patricia A. Turner. Chapter 2 provides more discussion of the mammy persona.

¹⁴ The novel was serialized under the title “Sugar House” in Pictorial Review, 34 (Nov 1932-Apr 1933).

¹⁵ In fact, Delilah is, in Bea’s estimation, “in no more than her late thirties” when she arrives in the Pullman household, making her probably in her early fifties at the time of her death (87).

¹⁶ Stahl’s film is replete with examples in which Delilah is similarly ridiculed or undermined. One notoriously offensive scene, when Bea asks Delilah to pose for her trademark photo, is explored in detail by Berlant (124-25) and Courtney (par. 23-25), while Donald Bogle (57-59), Jeremy Butler (25-26), Caputi (699-700), Adrienne Johnson Gosselin (50-57), and Thaggert (483-89) offer an general assessment of Stahl’s overall

treatment of Delilah. Not surprisingly, this weakening in Delilah's overall authority in the film accompanies a dramatic increase in her mammy connotations, particularly given Stahl's choice for Delilah, an overweight, dark-skinned actress named Louise Beavers famous for her mammy roles, having appeared at least seven previous times as a similar character (Bogle 62).

¹⁷ For a similar interpretation of their relationship as a maternal utopia, see Ravitz (165-66).

¹⁸ For an overview of American attitudes towards miscegenation, see George Fredrickson, Winthrop D. Jordan, and Joel Williamson. For more on the tragic mulatta stereotype, see Judith A. Berzon, Werner Sollors and Morton.

¹⁹ By doing so, Hurst herself is able to conveniently sidestep both the myths about interracial relations, such as primitive and rapacious black desire, and the realities, like the exploitation and violence against black women by white men. Given her work in racial advancement, particularly the anti-lynching campaign, it seems likely that she would be aware of both issues.

²⁰ It is the sexual threat of Peola's mere existence that almost prevented Stahl's film from being produced. For a complete overview of the debate between Universal Studios and the Association of Motion Pictures Producers during the film's production, see Courtney and the American Film Institute Catalog.

²¹ See Bogle (59-60); Sandy Flitterman-Lewis (45-53); Daniel L. Leab (107-09); and Thaggert (486-88); for specific details on how Stahl's camera technique and blocking deliberately obfuscate Peola's appearance as a white woman, see Courtney (par. 35-39) and Valerie Smith (49).

²² Peola's last scene with her mother provides other indications that Bea and Peola's relationship is based on affection and respect. For example, Hurst increases Bea's intimate role in this scene by placing the action in Bea's bedroom in their apartment (rather than Delilah's downstairs quarters in the movie's mansion) and by making Bea repeatedly interject whenever Delilah begins her emotional lamentations about Peola's "curse" with statements like "Delilah, you must give Peola the right to state her case" (259). Valerie Smith rightly problematicizes Peola's identification with Bea as model of non-conformity since "race and class privilege provide a safety net below which Bea cannot fall. Peola's class advantages ultimately cannot protect her from the power of race and gender inequalities" (52). In contrast, Stahl de-emphasizes their relations until their main interactions occur when Bea observes each of Delilah's and Peola's confrontations, often as eavesdropper, not participant, a deliberate strategy to present Bea's reaction as a model for the white audience – sympathy for Delilah and shock at Peola's cruel betrayal of her mother.

²³ Hurst does provide Peola with opportunities to interact with the black middle class, as Peola is sent to live with an educated black woman, a "Miss Abbie Deacon, daughter of a colored professor of mathematics at Howard University and herself a teacher in the public schools" (196).

²⁴ See also Berlant (127).

²⁵ Hurst utilizes a limited third person narrator which mainly explains only Bea's internal emotions and thoughts, with one exception previously noted in the third section.

²⁶ For a different reading of this scene, see Flitterman-Lewis (50-53).

²⁷ These same connections are made much more explicitly, and more violently, in a scene that the producers eventually removed from the script due to PCA objections, a

sequence based on material never found in the novel. In it, a black man is nearly lynched by a crowd for flirting with the “white” Peola, until at the last minute she hysterically cries out, “don’t do it, I’m a nigger too!” (qtd. in Sampson 495). For more information on this excised scene, see the American Film Institute Catalog (1013) and Courtney (par. 7).

²⁸ Another significant difference is that in the film Peola makes the request only of her mother while Hurst’s Peola asks both women, “To let me pass, in silence. Give me your solemn oaths that so far as you are concerned, so far as ever entering my life with my husband is concerned, you do not know me, have never seen me, have never heard of me” (261). Moreover, both women agree to her request in the novel while in the cinematic version Delilah refuses, making Peola’s departure all the more cruel, walking away as her mother sobs and cries out, “You can’t ask me to unborn my own child!”

²⁹ Over half of the states had anti-miscegenation laws until the civil rights era, some until it was outlawed by the Supreme Court in Loving v. Virginia (1967).

³⁰ The Perennial edition certainly advocates this interpretation by placing a photo from Sirk’s film of the adult Peola (Susan Kohner), clad in what appears to be only a low-cut negligée and fishnet stockings, stretched on a nightclub table gazing provocatively at a white male customer whose line of vision is directly into her ample breasts, with the caption “I doan’ know how she’s livin’ out dar. I’m ‘fraid to know.”

³¹ It is relevant to note here than in Passing, Gertrude Martin, whose white husband is aware of her interracial background, and Clare Kendry, whose white husband is not, discuss how their fears of having a dark-skinned child have prevented further pregnancies, demonstrating that this assumption was not limited to white authors.

Chapter 5: “A Pain Remorseless Sweet”:

The Reaffirmation of Black Female Desire in Their Eyes Were Watching God

To call Zora Neale Hurston a modern woman is almost an understatement.

Although the year of her birth is unclear, Hurston arrived in New York City as a young woman at the height of the flapper era, 1925, and New Woman attitudes towards career, marriage, and sexual freedom fit ideologically within her already independent personal philosophy.¹ Married and divorced at least twice, Hurston refused to compromise her artistic and research work for intimate relationships, biographer Robert E. Hemenway concluding, “Hurston went through two marriages and a number of love affairs without finding a man secure enough to grant her both his love and her career” (Hurston, 314).² Alice Walker puts a more positive spin on Hurston’s love life, presenting a sexually autonomous woman who “tended to marry or not marry men, but enjoyed them anyway – while never missing a beat in her work” (88).

This driven and proud Hurston is the one most often celebrated by critics, a woman who negotiated lifelong personal conflicts due to her work as an ethnographer of African American folklore and culture and due to her constant struggle to maintain a precarious economic independence, both of which often required her to straddle the division between black and white, the upper- and lower-class, the college-educated and the working-class, and the North and the South.³ Some critics, such as Hazel V. Carby, even speculate that Hurston recognized such racial and class categories as socially constructed and posit that she directly and indirectly challenged these categories, particularly their often dichotomous relationship, in her life and her work (“Politics”). In Carby’s words, “she lived the contradictions of the various constructions of her social identity and

rewrote them in Their Eyes Were Watching God” (“Politics” 80-81). Like Nella Larsen, Hurston had a sometimes contentious relationship with other Harlem Renaissance writers and critics, as I discuss in Chapter 1, particularly since such conceptions conflict with the DuBoisian rhetoric of racial solidarity, as does her viewpoint that artistic priorities are often distinct from racial ones.⁴

Following this view of Hurston as a sensitive and astute social critic, this study reads Their Eyes as an assertion of every woman’s claim to sexual autonomy, especially those women excluded from the decade’s flapper stereotype, black women and lower-class women, while presenting modern sexual autonomy as a black woman’s right rather than a component of white female sexuality for black women to imitate. Yet instead of reproducing the common interpretation of Their Eyes as an Afrocentric or Afracentric text which affirms black culture and womanhood, I wish to offer a viewpoint that problematizes Hurston’s depiction of black female sexuality and the black community without deconstructing its obvious strengths in these areas. For one, critics have fully established the numerous African American cultural traditions Hurston successfully integrates and celebrates in her text, including call and response, signifying, and the blues, in addition to her inclusion of folk culture, but this affirmation of black culture should not prevent us from appreciating her very valid critique of other aspects of African American life, particularly, as I argue, the community’s investment in maintaining traditional gender relations and codes of sexual behavior.⁵

And feminist critics, particularly early black women studies advocates like Barbara Christian, Cheryl A. Wall, Alice Walker, and Mary Helen Washington, have rightly heralded the novel’s standing as, in Christian’s words, “a breakthrough in the literature of

Afro-American women” (Black Feminist 123). But a feminist novel is not the same as a feminist main character, so we can uphold the novel’s feminist label without agreeing with a claim like Bernard Bell’s that Hurston presents “the most compelling modern feminist vision of an autonomous woman and inspirational love story in the tradition of the Afro-American novel,” just as we can acknowledge, with Jennifer Jordan, “Hurston’s ambiguity about race, sex, and class” without taking it away, as Jordan does (128; 107).⁶ In fact, Hurston offers a scathing critique of socially constructed notions of female sexual autonomy within both the black community and the larger culture, raising some very relevant questions left unanswered by contemporary models of black and white modern womanhood. At the same time, I wish to examine some very significant moments of ambiguity in the text and posit an explanation for why Hurston could not or would not fully resolve these perplexing incongruities, particularly an ending which offers an optimistic, metaphysical vision of fulfillment, often celebrated in Hurston criticism, against the overlooked reality of Janie’s situation: her impending confinement and painful death due to rabies.⁷

This ambiguity is both plot-driven, arising from the novel’s exploration of this very controversial topic, black female sexual autonomy, and a symptom of the text’s narrative creativity. Subject and method are thus united for modernist aesthetics enable Hurston to advocate for black female sexual autonomy without engaging negative stereotypes of black sexuality still present in 1930s America precisely because discontinuity, irresolution, ambivalence, and multiplicity of voice are definitive characteristics of a modernist text, not what make it flawed or underdeveloped, as some critics have termed Their Eyes.⁸ The novel’s definition as a modernist narrative is hardly an uncontested

one, but Philip Goldstein's recent essay follows the history of the dispute and, by dismantling the opposition between realism and modernism, concludes the novel is "both a realist critique of slavery and its aftermath and a modernist evocation of Black dialect and myth" (55).⁹ Recognizing Their Eyes as a modernist project allows us to reveal the finely constructed cultural critique that is sometimes obscured by the novel's narrative structure, being an intensely personal story told by a sympathetic main character, most likely the primary reason why Their Eyes criticism continues to focus optimistically on Janie as a paragon of black female independence.¹⁰ Hurston's novel, like other modernist novels, documents the nature of perception through Janie's desire to enact her own conception of life against the conflicting ideologies that are forced upon her. Therefore, because the need for resolution and unity is a distinctly un-modernist compulsion, the ambiguity within the novel's plot does not have to be resolved, particularly regarding Janie's struggle for personal and sexual autonomy. In fact, Hurston often judges Janie's choices implicitly, challenging us to look beyond Janie's retrospective narration to recall what Janie is glossing over or leaving out entirely. Although Janie's vision at the end of the novel is beautifully optimistic, ultimately the novel is not, particularly in its estimation of contemporary gender relations, demonstrating that Hurston wants us to recognize what Janie cannot, wants us to see what Janie has had to suppress, wants us to recognize the limits of shared experience, since we too have "tuh go there tuh know there."¹¹

Seeing isn't Believing

The novel's tangled themes of black female sexual autonomy, sexual propriety, and sexual desirability are all evident in its first scene which highlights the community's criticism of the unnamed woman, Janie, as she passes their porches on her return to town. The focus of their talk is specifically upon her defiance of conventional sexual codes of age-appropriate behavior ("Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?") and dress ("What dat ole forty year ole 'oman doin' wid her hair swingin' down her back lak some young gal?") (10). The narrator also draws attention to the woman's sexual desirability with the description of "her firm buttocks like she had grapefruits in her hip pockets; . . . her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt" (11). Moreover, her attire, overalls instead of the "blue satin dress she left" town in, draws attention to her class status, as do the repeated comments about "all dat money her husband . . . died and left her" (10). Together these reports present Janie as sexually suspect, a previously respectable older woman who has "been doin' wrong" (12).

This focus on Janie's class, age, and physical appearance is telling as it immediately juxtaposes the threat of Janie's sexuality against her otherwise disempowered state, apparently penniless and alone. And yet the community's desire to control and objectify her sexuality reveals the locus of their fear, her sexual agency, within their struggle to contain it. P. Gabrielle Foreman points out that Janie is depicted as an assertive sexual being within these active verb phrases about her body, like breasts "trying to bore holes" (659). This ritualistic dismemberment also makes the neighbors' anxiety visible since, in John Lowe's words, they "meld and reverse traditional associations" to read her breasts, for instance, as weapons (159). Perhaps their most obvious strategy is to move beyond

criticism in order to supply their own consequences for her sexual rebelliousness, which has presumably led to financial ruin (“What he done wid all her money?”) and abandonment, utilizing social beliefs about the waning sexuality of older women to concur Tea Cake must have left her for, “some gal so young she ain’t even got no hairs” (10).

Thus, from the first scene, the duality of Hurston’s thematic focus on female sexuality is evident. Rumors of Janie’s past sexual behavior and sexually provocative dress raise stereotypes of aggressive, promiscuous, and illicit sexual desire, stereotypes of black sexuality still common in 1930s America. Yet Hurston clearly wishes to validate this woman’s sexual autonomy despite its apparent cost, repeatedly demonstrating that her sympathies lie with Janie, a woman who has “come back from burying the dead,” not with the “mass cruelty” of the porch-sitters (9, 10). To balance, then, this endorsement of a rural black woman’s right to sexual autonomy, Hurston offers this testimony to the conservative morality of an all-black community. Furthermore, by the end of the chapter she reveals that Janie’s sexual behavior, despite its modern attitude towards female sexual needs, is rooted in traditional conventions such as marriage and true love. The only other sympathetic character here, Janie’s friend Pheoby, reinforces these conventions when she encourages Janie to right these rumors even while condemning the townspeople’s gossipy habits, telling her to “make haste and tell ‘em ‘bout you and Tea Cake gittin’ married, and if he taken all yo’ money and went off wid some young gal” (17).

My intent, though, is not to argue that Hurston’s approach to black female sexuality is necessarily narrow or simplistic, for I see the plot as more than a battle between the

conservative black community and one modern, liberal black woman. Nor should we reduce Janie's life to a lifelong quest to reconcile her erotic "pear tree vision" with her sexual reality, an evolution, in one critic's words, "from a sex serf to a soaring spirit" thanks to her "bee-man" Tea Cake Woods (Hudson-Weems 194).¹² Hurston wishes us to recognize that Janie battles not just with external social restrictions on black female sexuality but also with her own conflicting perceptions, and these perceptions in turn limit her definition of sexual autonomy. Throughout her life, Janie struggles with traditional conceptions of heterosexual relationships in order to find a way to satisfy her modern understanding of sexual autonomy – the acknowledgement of her sexual desire and her ability to express and fulfill that desire. Hurston seems to suggest that even when a black woman achieves control of her sexual autonomy, she still cannot control how her community perceives that autonomy -- the social definition of female sexual propriety -- or how her male sexual partner utilizes the other component of her sexuality, her sexual desirability, to publicly express his power over her. Significantly, Hurston also exposes the connection between violence and public control of female sexuality, suggesting that men have an additional tool, and additional social affirmation, not only denied to women but exercised at great cost to them.

Spit Cups or Shivering Blossoms

Janie's modern vision of female sexual autonomy is represented by her pear tree vision, a scene critics agree is a "orgasmic communion with nature" symbolizing Janie's sexual awakening (23; Reich 164). By validating female sexual autonomy as a natural force carried by an "inaudible voice," Janie's revelation, on one hand, is incredibly

empowering and intensely personal (24). This scene is also revolutionary, as Hurston's dramatic affirmation of the female libido here presents the most explicit and joyous confirmation of black female sexuality found in this study and perhaps in literary history up to this point. The force of this "voice and vision" on Janie is immediately evident as she begins to fulfill the three-step process - having, acknowledging, and satisfying her sexual desire - to completion in an act of masturbation, her orgasm somewhat veiled as "a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid" (24). Janie's vision thus works on two levels, presenting an appropriately modern conception of female sexuality while announcing the more radical notion that such rights should be extended to black women.

On the other hand, the imagery here is particularly *heterosexual*, focusing upon the "dust-bearing bee" as it pollinates "the sanctum of a bloom," so Janie immediately interprets the vision as "marriage," as if she can imagine only one model of heterosexuality, assigning a legal and social marker to what is otherwise presented as a natural occurrence - the procreative union of a male and female (24). Furthermore, Janie's vision is spontaneous and rapturous, affirming not just heterosexuality as natural and universal but also a specific code of sexual conduct - monogamous, legal marriage. Finally, this version of female heterosexual fulfillment is limited further because, as Washington contends, the female is notably passive, an immobile, if fecund and willing, partner (240).¹³ As a result, Janie learns to connect her sexual desire to an unequal heterosexual dichotomy that sublimates female sexual autonomy to an active male partner, thus presenting sexual gratification for women as more of a promise and less of a quest.

Significantly, then, Janie herself distinguishes the significant moment when “her conscious life had commenced” as not under the pear tree when she fulfilled her own desire through masturbation but “at Nanny’s gate” when she begins this wait for a satisfying sexual relationship with a male partner, “for the world to be made” (23, 25). In fact, Janie’s most active contribution to her first sexual encounter, a kiss with a local boy, is through her imagination, for she does not leave the gate to search for the “kissing bees” but instead romantically transforms “shiftless Johnny Taylor” into “a glorious being” (25). The force of her imagination here is reiterated by these details of Johnny’s character, first with the descriptor “shiftless” and then with the additional note of how she has “beglamored” the boy’s “rags” (25). Hurston also emphasizes that Janie, in her “former blindness,” knew of Johnny’s disreputable reputation, signaling her conscious willingness to see him now, as Michael Awkward explains, “in a manner that is inconsistent with her knowledge of his character” (25; Inspiring 19).¹⁴ Overall, this transformation of an otherwise “wrong” boy into a romantic hero attests to the power of Janie’s sexual autonomy as she assumes by sheer force of will that she can make the experience sexually fulfilling. In a sense, she has presumed that the joyful quality of her desire will somehow translate into a joyous experience, thus conflating the critical difference between having desire and satisfying it.

Unfortunately, Hurston does not detail Janie’s experience at the moment of sexual contact, albeit merely a few whispered endearments and a kiss, only Nanny’s reaction, introducing another aspect of female sexuality into Janie’s life – the influence of social definitions of female propriety on a woman’s sexual autonomy. Before analyzing Nanny’s conception of female sexuality, though, we must acknowledge her effect on

Janie's sexual self-esteem. As Hurston details, "Nanny's words made Janie's kiss across the gatepost seem like a manure pile after a rain," and Janie later admits to her grandmother, "Ah don't love him at all. Whut made me do it is – oh, Ah don't know" (27, 30). Thanks to Nanny's censure, Janie now understands how external attitudes can alter an internal experience, and through her confusion and dismay, Hurston emphasizes the difficulty of separating innate sexual desire from social and historical structures.¹⁵ Sexuality, Hurston suggests, feels to the individual like a transhistorical human experience unconfined by social constrictions, but its meaning is always susceptible to outside interpretations. As a result, a woman is always vulnerable to the influence of social convention to define her own sexual autonomy: how she feels about having sexual desire, the appropriateness of expressing sexual desire, and how and with whom she satisfies sexual desire.

Such a thematic concern is a crucial factor in Hurston's focus on black female sexuality. By juxtaposing this distinction between an allegedly natural phenomenon and its social interpretation, Hurston can question the stereotypical assumptions that identify black female sexuality as excessive and licentious. This view, Hurston implies, may be a socially constructed postulation of black female desire, not its innate characteristics. By identifying this stereotype as a social construct, Hurston can then offer an alternative interpretation of black female sexuality that associates it with modern conceptions of white female sexuality rather than constructs them at an opposition. Furthermore, aligning Janie's pear tree vision first with natural procreative images and then with social institutions like marriage further reorients black female sexuality away from its stereotype as primitive and aggressive and towards a more common, and commonly

acceptable, vision of heterosexuality.¹⁶ Hurston's inclination to connect black female desire with normative, procreative sexuality may have also been a direct refutation of scientific and sociological theories which, in Siobhan B. Somerville's words, "constructed both the nonwhite body and the nonheterosexual body as pathological," often joining them through analogous and anthropological analysis in order to characterize white heterosexual females as the norm (17).¹⁷

Nanny's perspective on female sexuality despoils Janie's joyous celebration of sexual desire because, like the neighbors in the first chapter, Nanny equates female sexuality with danger and seeks to control it, although her focus is more benevolent, fearing less the disruption of societal norms than the disruption of Janie's sexual well-being – or virginity. In Glynis Carr's words, Nanny interprets Janie's "budding sexuality . . . [as] a destructive force that must be contained, and quickly, in the name of self-preservation" (194). In Nanny's view, the expression of black female sexuality (desire and desirability) leads to unwanted male attention, which leads in turn to violence and exploitation. Therefore, as Nanny explains, "it's protection" that black women need since their sexuality makes them vulnerable to male exploitation, but protection is only available through other men, notably, through the social institution of marriage that defines female sexuality as the property of the husband (30).

Ironically, Nanny's attitude arises from a life of violence and exploitation which began when her sexuality – and her body – were literally another man's property. During slavery, sexual autonomy was absent as a female slave was merely, as Nanny explains, "a work-ox and a brood-sow" for her master (31). Although her master's sexual coercion is only conveyed by the phrase, "[he] made me let down mah hair," Nanny's powerlessness

is harshly reiterated when her jealous mistress beats her and then promises to whip her and sell her newborn (33). Despite its brevity, this scene is critical to Hurston's presentation of black female sexuality. It not only refutes assumptions of rapacious black female sexual desire, the rationale that historically justified such mistreatment, but also represents the complete cycle of black female exploitation under slavery in just a few pages: female slaves were able to resist neither sexual violence by their masters nor retribution by their mistresses, while the product of this abuse, the child, became profit further benefiting the master's wealth. Furthermore, this scene clarifies, although does not justify, Nanny's world view of gender relations: black women are so vulnerable to sexual abuse that, in essence, sexual relations become synonymous with sexual exploitation. Given Nanny's harrowing journey of escape to save herself and her child, her willingness to force her granddaughter into marriage makes sense under the logic that in the post-emancipation era, black women at least have the opportunity to gain from their own exploitation, exchanging sexual relations with one man in marriage for protection from sexual mistreatment by other men. Female sexual autonomy, in other words, still does not exist for Nanny even decades after emancipation.

The legacy of slavery is not the only factor which has warped the meaning of female sexuality for Nanny. Hurston takes care to add Nanny's explicit wish to prevent "de menfolks *white or black* . . . [from] makin' a spit cup outa" her granddaughter, a graphically sexual image that recalls male control and female passivity (37, emphasis added). Nanny's earlier metaphor of gender and racial hierarchy began with the white man who, as "de ruler of everything," gives his load to the black man, who then hands it to the black woman, always as the bottom as "de mule uh de world," but so far no

explanation has been given to justify this denigration of black men into sexual aggressors along with white men (29). Logic then suggests that the school teacher who rapes Janie's mother, Leafy, is black since nowhere else in her speech does Nanny provide evidence of black male sexual violence or oppression.¹⁸ Even Nanny's decision to avoid marriage after emancipation is explained not as a safety precaution to avoid sexual abuse but as a preventive measure to keep anybody from "mistreating mah baby," presumably because Leafy's pale skin mark her as the daughter of her former master (36).

Further evidence about the race of Janie's father may be gleaned from the fact that he later tries to find Leafy in order to marry her (22). As this event occurred during the nadir of African American history (identified by historian Dickson D. Bruce, Jr. as 1877-1915) when laws against interracial marriage were most prevalent, presumably his race, if white, would have again warranted some narrative attention if marrying Leafy would have been legally impossible (1). Instead, Janie explains that her grandmother's white employer and the sheriff put "de bloodhounds on de trail tuh ketch mah papa for what he done tuh mah mama," an explicit reference to a lynch mob, a common occurrence during these decades of racial violence (22).¹⁹ The fact that Leafy's rapist is a teacher is another critical element since, as Carla Kaplan has explained, "few historical figures are more glorified in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century black American literature than the Reconstruction schoolteacher" (*Erotics* n38 193).²⁰

Such details again reveal the difficulty of Hurston's task; on one hand, the need to provide a realistic view of black female sexual oppression would have to indict black men as well as white men, but, on the other, any mention of a brutal rape by a black man

would raise the stereotype of black male lasciviousness, an image used to justify lynching violence. Given her conflicting racial and gender loyalties, Hurston was both required to provide a redemptive view of Janie's father to avoid stereotyping black men as sexual predators and to condemn the violence through a clear demonstration of the vast psychological and economic repercussions of the act on Leafy and on her family, as Nanny recalls that Leafy's recovery from the rape took "a long time" and she was never again stable or responsible (37). For my purposes, the racial identity of Leafy's rapist is even more relevant for it establishes the prevalence of violence in black women's relationships with black men even before Hurston reveals the physical abuse in Janie's marriages to Joe Starks and Tea Cake Woods. Thus, through Nanny and Leafy, Hurston demonstrates the difficulty of uniting a modern attitude of female sexual autonomy within the black history of oppression and patriarchal violence, and her ambivalence towards Nanny, discussed in more detail in the next section, may be construed as her desire to validate the presence of such a philosophy while seeking to affirm the positive value of female sexual desire for black women.

Farmers and Dressed-Up Dudes

Given the conflicting lessons between her pear tree vision and Nanny's horrifying story, Janie logically enters her first marriage with a confused understanding of her sexual autonomy, leading to unhappiness and the marriage's dissolution. Granted, her grandmother's poignant tale of sexual exploitation leaves Janie no choice but to concede to her wishes, and Logan certainly lacks many desirable qualities. Besides his greatly advanced age, Logan is emotionally inarticulate, often relying on orders, scorn, or even

insults about Janie's family history, like his reply when she threatens to leave him: "Tain't too many mens would trust yuh, knowin' yo' folks lak dey do" (51). Yet a closer look demonstrates that blaming the failure of Janie's first marriage on either Nanny or Logan does not take into account the extent to which Janie is a candidate for her own misery. Thanks to her pear tree vision, Janie falls victim to her own romantic illusions of sexual autonomy, while her familiarity with middle-class whites has given her expectations of marriage that are impractical for the wife of a black farmer.

First, Janie's upbringing within a white household has given her a conventional middle-class understanding of marriage. As she relates to Pheoby at the start of her narrative, she was raised "livin' in de white folks back-yard," the Washburn family, whom she calls "quality white folks," a hint regarding their class status as well as their ability to keep a live-in housekeeper (22, 20). Even though some critics, like Klaus Benesch, insist that Janie rejects Logan's "questionable, white middle-class aspirations," Logan argues the reverse, demonstrating that it is actually Janie's white middle-class aspirations which cause conflict, specifically the idea of separate spheres or a division of labor based on gender (630).²¹ For example, he calls her "spoilt rotten" because she insists on such distinctions, like her contention that if she chops wood as he wishes, a chore she defines as his, then he can do her job of making dinner (45). Similarly, when he later requests her help in the fields, she replies, "Youse in yo' place and Ah'm in mine," while he rejoins, "You think youse white folks by de way you act" (52, 51). While few modern readers of any race would find Janie's refusal to plow or chop wood unreasonable, Logan's race-based retort is not illogical since, as William A. Gleason points out, "most rural southern black women at the turn of the century (when Janie lives

with Killicks) worked in both kitchen and field, and so not only cooked, cleaned, sewed, and laundered but also (as Killicks seems to hope) collected firewood and hoed” (331). Moreover, the very thing that Logan’s fears about Janie, that she will leave him for being “too honest and hard-workin,” a euphemism for working-class, is correct, for she departs with Joe not because she loves him or even finds him sexually desirable, noting “he did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees,” but because he promises the “far horizon, . . . [of] change and chance” where she will be “treated lak a lady” and spend her days on the front porch instead of in the fields (53, 50, 51).²² In the next section, I will elaborate on how Hurston reveals Janie’s mistaken rationalization to follow her second husband through a much more explicit criticism of the separate sphere ideology.

Janie’s options for satisfying her sexual needs are also necessarily curtailed by her adherence to middle-class standards, as she will not have a sexual affair with another man while living with Logan. Yet Janie’s ability to express and satisfy her sexual needs with her husband are also influenced by her grandmother’s history of black oppression in which the relevance of female desire has been firmly renounced. Nanny’s denigration of female sexual expression is extreme, initially presenting the options to Janie as either “marry off decent like” or “hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another,” men like the “trashy nigger” Johnny who will use her “body to wipe his foots on” (28, 27). Critically, Nanny never characterizes either married or unmarried sexual relations as a way for a black woman to satisfy her sexual needs but merely views all such relations as a woman’s acquiescence to male exploitation, either by her husband or by multiple men. In the former situation, a wife trades control over her sexuality in exchange for “protection,” or economic and social security and protection from, in

Jordan's words, "indiscriminate sexual exploitation;" in the latter, only the man enjoys pleasure (as Nanny suggests with this view of Johnny) while the woman loses her social respectability (109). Understanding Nanny's logic makes it less shocking, albeit slightly, when she criticizes her own daughter for choosing to "hug and kiss and feel around first one man and then another" after her rape, for she is, as Carr explains, holding Leafy "morally accountable for the consequences of [her] victimization" (194).

Consequently, Nanny's philosophy completely dismisses black female sexual desire in any form. When Janie asserts her right to "want [Logan] sometimes," Nanny incorporates a disturbing phallic metaphor that graphically recalls her sense of who benefits in heterosexual relations, "Dat's de very prong all us black women gits hung on. Dis love!," and then she scoffs, "If you don't want him, you sho oughta. Heah you is wid de onliest organ in town, amongst colored folks, in yo' parlor" (41). Nanny's sexual pun emphasizes that a musical "organ" is far more beneficial in her view than a male one since it brings social respectability and recognition, while the sexual satisfaction Janie craves is what "jus' makes you sweat" (41).²³ Nanny further negates female desire by upholding "big protection, and [how] everybody got tuh tip dey hat tuh you and call you Mis' Killicks," over male sexual desirability, noting that if Janie would rather have "some dressed up dude" instead of a farmer husband in overalls, she should remember that Logan's wealth means, "You can buy and sell such as dem wid what you got. In fact you can buy 'em and give 'em away" (41, 42). Nanny's connection here between sexual propriety and class is thus starkly apparent. Some critics, like Vashti Crutcher Lewis, presume that to Nanny, "nothing is more important than money, land, and property," a value Janie explicitly rejects when she tells her, "Ah ain't takin' dat ole land tuh heart.

Ah could throw ten acres of it over de fence every day and never look back” (140; 42).²⁴ Yet Nanny recognizes that money, land and property are not signifiers of proper sexual morality without a husband since she herself owns land with the help of the Washburns (22-23). In other words, it is the man’s class, not the woman’s, that designates a woman’s sexual propriety. Since the only expression of black female sexuality, for Nanny, is public expression, it retains value only through marriage, symbolized by neighbors who now tip their hat to Janie and call her “Mrs.” Nanny has no positive conception of private sexual expression because for her it has been nonexistent, first under slavery when her sexuality, reduced to her breeding capabilities, was a topic in public discourse like all slave women’s and then during the public outcry over her daughter’s rape.²⁵

Nanny’s dismal view of sexual pleasure is so strong that she denigrates male sexual pleasure as well even when it motivates positive treatment of Janie. Recognizing that Logan’s willingness to do chores is connected to his sexual fulfillment, she predicts the situation won’t last because, “he ain’t kissing’ yo’ mouf when he carry on over yuh lak dat. He’s kissin’ yo’ foot. . . . Mouf kissin’ is on uh equal and dat’s natural but when dey got to bow down tuh love, dey soon straightens up” (40-41). “Mouf kissin’” or “natural” sexual relations, in Nanny’s view, is “natural” and “equal” because both partners must participate in order to reach the expected goal of sexual relations: procreation, not pleasure, another example of public sexual expression as children give (married) women respectability. Her understanding of sexual needs is reiterated by her assumption (and implicit happiness) that Janie has been “knocked up already” (40). As a result, Hurston’s decision to maintain Janie’s childlessness through her three marriages is

another validation of modern female sexual autonomy as she can then affirm popular culture's new emphasis upon mutual pleasure, not procreation, as central to marital happiness.

Hurston does show her loyalty to Nanny and the black history of oppression when Janie's decision to run off with "some dressed up dude" like Joe Starks ends in even greater misery than her marriage to Logan, but she questions its validity with Janie's very passionate sexual relationship with Tea Cake. In fact, as at least one other critic has pointed out, Hurston's rejection of Nanny's defeatist attitude towards black womanhood in general, symbolized by her metaphor that "de nigger woman is de mule uh de world," stems from her belief that blacks cannot allow the history of oppression to dictate their actions any longer (29; Awkward, *Inspiriting* 24). As she states in her 1928 essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," "I am not tragically colored. There is no great sorrow dammed up in my soul, nor lurking behind my eyes. . . . I do not belong to the sobbing school of Negrohood who hold that nature somehow has given them a low-down dirty deal and whose feelings are all hurt about it" (Hurston, "How" 153). Hurston's decision to keep Janie looking towards the horizon for change is therefore another implicit criticism of those African Americans who define themselves by the past, not the future.

Hurston's dismissive attitude towards Nanny is most obvious in how Nanny's contemptuous attitude cannot alter Janie's determination to include sexual autonomy within her definition of "love." Indeed, Janie's qualifications for sexual desire and satisfaction are quite high as she dreams of a "love like the sun the day," one that will "end the cosmic loneliness of the unmated" (38). As she explains to Nanny, Janie cannot reconcile the disjuncture between her inner sexual fantasies, what she names, "things

sweet . . . lak when you sit under a pear tree and think” and her external sexual autonomy, her ability to have and satiate her sexual desire, insisting, “Ah wants to want [Logan] sometimes. Ah don’t want him to do all de wantin’” (43, 41). She paints a graphic picture of Logan that is guaranteed to arouse revulsion: “his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck. . . . His belly is too big too, now, and his toe-nails look lak mule foots” (42). Logan’s sexual repulsiveness is not only the cause of Janie’s disillusionment but also exacerbates the powerlessness of her situation, for she cannot, as his wife, legally refuse sexual relations with him.²⁶ In short, Janie refuses to allow the public perception of her sexual autonomy, here verbalized by Nanny, to devalue her internal conception of her own sexual needs even if external social restraints have curtailed how her needs are expressed. Janie might be practicing the correct sexual propriety as demanded by the community and she has even lowered her expectations for marriage since, as Hurston explains, “she knew now that marriage did not make love,” but she will not sacrifice her belief that black women have a right to sexual autonomy (44).

But why would Hurston offer a somewhat sympathetic view of Logan? Perhaps she was aware that too much emphasis on Janie’s disregard for this farmer and his hard work in maintaining self-sufficiency could belittle the reality that many poor blacks were still trapped by institutional systems of peonage and share-cropping in the South or demean the vast scores of unemployed people of all races in 1930s America who would find such her situation envious, even idyllic.²⁷ Despite his sexual repugnance, Logan appears to truly love Janie, and narrative clues about his inner feelings indicate that Hurston finds this fact relevant, perhaps to lend some credibility to the adage Janie has been told by

“Nanny and the old folks,” how “husband and wives always loved each other, and that was what marriage meant” (38). Even his anger at Janie stems from his desire to “hurt her as she had hurt him” with similar insults, such as when she tells him, “You don’t take nothin’ to count but sow-belly and corn-bread” (52). At the same time, love does not change Killick’s dismissive view of female sexuality because Hurston demonstrates that he takes into account only his own sexual desire, not his wife’s, as Susan Willis claims: “since sex is intended to satisfy his need, rather than Janie’s desire, it doesn’t matter that he refuses to wash his dirty, stinking body before getting into bed with his wife” (49). Hence, Janie’s situation reveals the paradox behind the image of modern black female sexuality offered by the black press and middle-class reformers; if by the 1930s black women could finally gain control of their sexual desire, they were still required to fulfill it mainly through the legitimacy of marriage or risk the taint of traditional negative stereotypes. Those with undesirable husbands, in other words, were out of luck unless they were willing to risk social sanction to find a new lover who could fulfill their needs.

In the end, then, Hurston suggests that Janie’s decision to leave Logan in order to seek “flower dust and springtime sprinkled over everything. A bee for her bloom” is correct (54). This ambiguous metaphor for sexual happiness, though, is necessary since depicting Janie’s romantic or sexual needs too explicitly could recall stereotypes of the lascivious black female libido. Thus, Joe’s “citified, stylish” demeanor, his emphasis on marriage (notwithstanding a divorce), and his promise of a life in an all-black community help elevate Janie’s decision to a more socially acceptable level of morals, one that celebrates the American dream, monogamy, and racial advancement, without undermining her quest to find a relationship compatible with full sexual autonomy (47).

As Carol Batker contends, Hurston wishes “to ‘legitimize’ or represent sexual subjectivity as acceptable for women without reinforcing negative stereotypes. At the same time, Janie’s rejection of Logan . . . as sexually inadequate suggests her sexual subjectivity without positioning her as a seductress” (208). Unfortunately, life as Mrs. Joe Starks does little to fulfill Janie’s search for sexual autonomy but instead reveals that economic and social respectability are not worth the price of denying female sexual needs.

Still-Bait on a High Stool

From more than one aspect, Janie’s second marriage can be interpreted as Hurston’s critique of the black women’s club movement, a group of turn-of-the-century activists whose work often encouraged a restrictive female sexual propriety in addition to other middle-class ideals as a method of “lifting as we climb,” or raising the general well-being – and perception – of the race. Given the timetable of the novel, the movement’s influence was at its height during Janie’s marriage to Joe Starks.²⁸ As their name indicates, a variety of social and religious associations promoted these lessons through charity, education, and other public activities as well as through the growing sector of black periodicals like The Crisis and the women’s magazine The Half-Century Magazine. The black women’s club movement, as Chapter 2 explains, was entrenched in bourgeois values that presumed that property, family, and employment were the avenues of social and moral advancement and mimicked white Victorian values that advocated female dependence and moral motherhood. An understandable and even commendable reaction

to decades of institutionalized racism and disenfranchisement, these organizations reinforced class and gender barriers even as they sought to dismantle racial ones.

As the previous section discussed, Janie's decision to run away with Joe appears partly connected to such values, particularly the idealization of the bourgeois division of labor or separate spheres, but when she becomes Mrs. Joe Starks, she learns the social and economic respectability she gains is extracted at a cost to her personal and sexual autonomy. She later criticizes such thinking in explicit terms, first blaming her inability to be satisfied with a wifhood spent "jes sit[ting] wid folded hands" on her class, arguing, "dese educated women got uh heap of things to sit down and consider. Somebody done tole 'em what to set down for. Nobody ain't told poor me," and then holding her grandmother responsible for emulating white standards: "sittin' on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. . . . So Ah got up on de high stool lak she told me, but . . . nearly languished tuh death up dere" (169, 172). However, as I discuss below, Nanny disagrees with the black women's club movement on female autonomy. Janie's hindsight seems to hint that the gender division of labor disseminated by the club movement, mainly college-educated women, holds little value for working-class women, especially its message that the sacrifice of female autonomy is a fair price for economic and social respectability. This critique also fits within Hurston's goal of highlighting how a woman's perception of her own sexual autonomy is influenced and controlled by social convention.

The division of labor by gender or separate sphere ideology advocates female dependence using the rationale that women maintain control over the household affairs, including child-raising, and the men maintain control over its other components. At the

same time, since economic and social respectability is connected to the husband's financial success, his earnings determine their class standing, a significant factor as class status was also a primary indicator of moral and sexual propriety. Joe recognizes that the prerequisite for social success is money, as he explains in his first speech to Janie: "He was glad he had his money all saved up. . . . He meant to buy in big" (48). But he similarly understands the need to demonstrate one's success *with* money, using as his model, Hurston explains, "rich white folks," emulating not only their material possessions but also the power structure inherent in the capitalist philosophy, so he sets them up in a white mansion which makes the rest of the all-black town look "like servant's quarters surrounding the 'big house'" (56, 75). Indeed, the slavery hierarchy is recalled numerous times; Janie's attire in "wine-colored silk" is compared to the other women's "percale and calico" dresses; the townspeople grumble about "slavery being over" when told to dig a ditch in front of the new store; and one of them even observes, "You kin feel a switch in [Joe's] hand when he's talkin' to yuh," (66, 75, 78). In a 1934 essay, "Characteristics of Negro Expression," Hurston lambastes the middle-class African American who, full of "self-despisement, . . . scorns to do or be anything Negro. . . [and] apes all the mediocrities of the white brother," and here provides a clear example of a black man obsessed with white privilege and status, as Karen Jacobs has observed (59; 346).

Critically, a main part of Joe's strategy to be "a big voice" in the town arises from the envy he presumes his possessions inspire in others, and Hurston soon makes it apparent that Janie is slave as well as mistress in this scenario (48). As many critics, like Lee R. Edwards, have acknowledged, Janie is not merely a display piece to flaunt Joe's

finery but also a “possession whose value will enhance his status” (216; 3).²⁹ Given Janie’s beauty, set off in such exquisite display, the townspeople respond enthusiastically with their jealousy; at the very first sight of her, the townsmen discuss her like she is an item of Joe’s they too can acquire, one responding, “dat wife uh hisn! Ah’m uh son of uh Combuncheon if Ah don’t go tuh Georgy and git me one just like her” (58). Later that same evening, another man pays Joe the proper respect by thanking him for “sharing” Janie with the community, effectively removing her agency in the matter, as Awkward has pointed out: “we welcomes you and all dat yo have seen fit tuh bring amongst us – yo’ belov-ed wife, yo’ store, yo’ land—“ (26; *Inspiriting* 67).

As Janie eventually learns, Joe must exercise his authority as head of the household which, in her words, means he “wanted her submission and he’d keep on fighting until he felt he had it” (111). Yet she doesn’t fully grasp the other component of this equation: Joe’s constant need to demonstrate her submissiveness in front of other black men as part of his exhibition of economic and social power. One key element is his refusal to allow her to speak in public, which begins early in their marriage on the night of the store’s opening when he rejects their new neighbors’ request for a few words from her, proclaiming, “mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’ . . . She’s uh woman and her place is in de home” (69). Joe later prohibits her from participating in storytelling sessions around the store, saying, “he didn’t want her talking after such trashy people” (85). He also constantly criticizes her in front of others, as one neighbor notes, “De way he rears and pitches in de store sometimes when she make uh mistake is sort of ungodly,” and much of his criticism denigrates her intelligence, such as his comment, “When Ah see one thing Ah understand ten. You see ten things and don’t understand

one” (79, 111). Physical violence, the ultimate demonstration of dominance, is not far behind; at one point he slaps her for ruining dinner “until she had a ringing sound in her ears,” but again, this behavior is necessitated less by his propensity for violence than by his need for public affirmation of his control (112). The importance of such abuse is reiterated by the other townsmen, who validate it as a logical and even practical necessity of marriage just a few pages after this first episode. They criticize Tony Robbins because he refuses to beat his wife for publicly humiliating him, one vowing, “If dat wuz *mah* wife, . . . Ah’d kill her cemetery dead” (115-16). Thus, in exchange for being “treated lak a lady,” Janie has to sacrifice her personal autonomy – her control over her actions, her voice, even her body – in exchange for economic and social respectability as the Mayor’s wife (50).

Control over Janie’s sexual autonomy is similarly part of this package. Given his obsession with domination and public validation, Joe’s main interest in Janie’s sexuality is inextricably tied to his right to control her sexual desirability in the face of other men’s desire, symbolized by their continuous fights over a head-rag to cover her long hair, a request that “didn’t seem sensible [to her] at all” (86). During their courtship, he delighted in Janie’s hair, asking, “Kiss me and shake yo’ head. When you do dat, yo’ plentiful hair breaks lak day,” but now he covets this display only for himself (50). Furthermore, his exhibition of control is all the more powerful given the high worth of Janie’s beauty since, as Jacobs points out, Janie’s value as “property herself . . . is legible only through an imposed hierarchy of racial characteristics” (345).³⁰ In other words, what makes Janie so sexually desirable to Joe – and the black townsmen – is her affinity to white standards of beauty, especially her hair, one male neighbor arguing, “Tain’t

nothin' to her 'ceptin' dat long hair," while another is caught by Joe "standing behind Janie and brushing the back of his hand back and forth across the loose end of her braid" (62, 87). In this way, Hurston criticizes the obsession in African American culture, particularly the popular press, with emulating and imitating white images of beauty. This critique appears to have been central to Hurston's early conception of the novel, for in a 1936 letter she summarizes the plot as the story of "a woman who was from childhood hungry for life and the earth, but because she had beautiful hair, was always being skotched upon a flag-pole by the men who loved her and forced to sit there" (Kaplan, Hurston: A Life 366-67).

Joe's fixation on Janie's hair gives new meaning to the numerous slavery metaphors in this section as they suggest a parallel between the sexual exploitation Nanny suffered under her white master and Joe's control of Janie, as Maria J. Racine contends: "Nanny's oppression is exemplified by her master's forcing her to display her hair, which represents her sexuality, just as Janie's oppression is exemplified by Joe's forcing her to cover her hair, and thus her sexuality, with her head rag" (286-87). This parallel is another way for Hurston to both confirm Nanny's outlook – sexual exploitation is still a very real danger for black women – and criticize it, as sexual exploitation within marriage is not an acceptable trade for "protection." This critique is reiterated by the fact that once Joe assumes control of the display of Janie's hair, he assumes control over the display of her sexuality until, ultimately, it becomes the only sexual relationship between them. In fact, Joe's overwhelming interest in his sexual possessability *of* Janie seems to overpower his interest in sexual relations *with* her. His initial sexual courting ends on their wedding trip, for by the time the train reaches Eatonville, he has practically stopped

making “speeches with rhymes to her” (56). Then, after a few years, their sexual relations have almost declined completely, as Janie indicates: “The spirit of the marriage left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor. . . . The bed was no longer a daisy-field for her and Joe to play in. It was a place where she went and laid down when she was sleepy and tired” (111). With striking clarity, then, Hurston has revealed how middle-class expectations of marriage and sexuality do not end black women’s sexual exploitation nor succeed in removing female sexuality from the social consciousness. Such beliefs merely allow black men to exploit the value of female sexual desirability to enhance their public status while black women are to suppress their sexual desire like their white True Women counterparts.

The crucial distinction between ideologies like the black women’s club movement and attitudes like Nanny’s is that Nanny does not advocate female submission, reacting strongly when she misinterprets Janie’s post-marital misery with Logan as the effects of physical abuse, proclaiming, “Ah know dat grass-gut, liver-lipted nigger ain’t done took and beat mah baby already! Ah’ll take a stick and salivate ‘im!,” even if the qualifier “already” indicates Nanny’s assumption that violence may be inevitable (40). Furthermore, as previously discussed, Nanny does not deny that female sexual desire exists as much as she dismisses it as a motivation for anything besides further sexual exploitation. This distinction is critical as it allows Hurston to demonstrate much more sympathy for Nanny’s philosophy, arising as it does directly out of a personal experience with slavery as well as from loving affection for her granddaughter, than for ideologies like the black women’s club movement, which offered, for this topic at least, a recast version of middle-class white values of True Womanhood regardless of a woman’s

background, education, or class. Another indication that Hurston disproves of importing white cultural standards into the black community is through her critique of one of the flapper's most seductive claims, that sexual desirability is an avenue to sexual autonomy as well as economic and social respectability.

A closer look at a scene often characterized as light-hearted sexual banter, the "acting-out courtship" on the porch of Joe's store, reveals Hurston's analysis of the value of publicly expressed female sexual desirability for black men *and* women (105).³¹ One afternoon, a long "contest in hyperbole" between male story-tellers shifts its focus to love when some local women pass by, first three girls with a "fresh, new taste about them," then Daisy Blunt, whose sexual allure is offered in detail (99, 105). As Maria V. Johnson rightly asserts, "Hurston celebrates Daisy's sensuality and sex appeal using blues imagery" with her descriptions of Daisy's "black" skin offset by white clothes, her "big black eyes," and "thick and heavy" hair, features Daisy consciously employs to gain male attention (406; 105-06). Such a celebration of African American beauty is certainly a critical component of Hurston's positive promotion of black female sexuality. Yet Hurston clarifies the difference between how the men treat the girls, who are apparently too young to warrant anything but "acting-out courtship and everybody is in the play," and how they treat Daisy (105). Their banter with and about Daisy moves beyond mere signifying to a more contentious rivalry, for Hurston notes that "this time, everybody knew they meant some of it," even Daisy, whose "discomfiture" becomes evident to all the participants but merely encourages another "burst of laughter" (107). Hurston's decision here to utilize African American courtship practices is telling as the situation with the storytellers contrasts sharply with the good-humored exchanges Janie has first

with Joe and then with Tea Cake. These other conversations exemplify, in Pearlie M. Peters' words, "the old time Negro courtship ritual" where "the man and woman are amicable and equal verbal partners engaging in the friendly dialogue of courtship talk," yet they also occur without the element of either competition or performance in front of an audience (14). As Susan Lurie explains, here the emphasis shifts from "celebrating indigenous black culture in the context of playful relations between genders to linking that cultural form to the denigration of black women" (56). Hurston is again reiterating how the public expression of female sexuality holds more power for black men than for black women. In other words, although Daisy's sexual desirability wins her male attention that everyone, including herself, enjoys at first, once the conversation becomes less about wit and more about sexual rivalry, her sexual objectification – and lack of control over her sexual desirability – become obvious and her active participation declines. Daisy's acquiescence is not important to these men at all; they only need her sexually desirable presence – her body, her breasts, her long hair – to stimulate their public show of masculine power, verbal and sexual.

The scene's complex presentation of female sexual power is further complicated by the appearance of another woman, again described as sexually desirable. As the men continue their sexual one-upmanship over Daisy, they pause to notice Mrs. Bogle as she passes into the store without speaking, a woman "many times a grandmother, but . . . [with] a blushing air of coquetry about her that cloaked her sunken cheeks" (108). Her two husbands have been successful, the narrator reveals, in order "to win her" and prove their "love and pride," yet her control is limited: "She moved men, but the helm determined the port" (108, 109). Mrs. Bogle's arrival also completes the chapter's

spectrum of female sexual desirability by age, moving from the “fresh, new” young girls, to a sexually mature Daisy in full bloom, and ending with a grandmother who, despite her advanced age, still arouses male desire.

These women’s role in the porch activity is therefore critical. Although Cathy Brigham has claimed that “in the ritualized courtship exchanges . . . everybody has equal access to the ritual and the power it confers,” all the women are audience members or objects, not participants, and are mainly silent (410). Indeed, Daisy’s “discomfiture” arises when she *tries* to respond verbally to the jests, not when she stays quiet, while Mrs. Bogle’s significant power over men is attributed specifically to her sexual desirability, not to her voice, wit, or intelligence, an emphasis affirmed by her muteness in this scene, a parallel to Daisy’s, whose words are never again directly relayed. One final moment in this chapter is relevant, for immediately after this episode, Joe’s criticism of Janie’s intelligence leads her to reflect on “the inside state of her marriage,” acknowledging that their sexual relations have so declined that “the spirit of the marriage [had] left the bedroom and took to living in the parlor” (111). This lack of sexual activity is also accompanied by her realization that she in turn no longer desires her husband: “She wasn’t petal-open anymore with him. . . . She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be” (111-12).

These strangely juxtaposed episodes together reveal the flaw behind the modern consumerism ethic, exemplified by the flapper, which emphasizes female sexual desirability as an avenue to economic and social status and sexual autonomy, such in the many films, non-fiction romance narratives, and popular literature of this period. The

epitome of success, Mrs. Bogle, remains a beautiful mute even in widowhood, while Daisy, a modern woman unafraid to flaunt her sexual needs, cannot even get a “pickled pig foot” from her suitors, and the three girls can barely hold their attention (109). In other words, each woman reveals the emptiness of this promise just as Janie reaches a crucial insight about her own autonomy. Earlier she seemed to share the modern tenet regarding female sexuality, for when she first spots Joe walking down the road, she uses her sexual allure to get his attention, jerking the pump handle so hard, in Lowe’s words, it “(accidentally?) causes her hair, always mentioned as her sexuality, to fall down” (47; 66). After years of social success and sexual dissatisfaction, Janie now recognizes her marriage’s hollow center, the decline in her sexual desire, and the significant fact that her sexual desirability is not even hers, symbolizing not her sexual autonomy but her husband’s power over other black men. Despite the contention of some critics who argue, like Bertram D. Ashe, that Joe’s wish “to close Janie off from the world of the porch . . . is exhibited by his insistence that she tie up her hair,” Hurston provides no evidence that, even without Joe’s proscriptions, Janie’s presence would alter how, as Cynthia Bond asserts, this “signifying game takes women as its object and excludes them as speakers” (582; 209).³² Without discounting the idea that black women of all shades can be sexually desirable, Hurston suggests that female sexual desirability does not gain a black woman access to any type of power: sexual, economic, or social. Mrs. Bogle may have accumulated wealth and social influence, but she was still submissive to her husbands’ will, while Daisy’s exploitation of her own sexual allure provides naught in the end. From a cultural perspective, then, Hurston is critiquing both the traditional bourgeois exchange of female sexuality for economic gain and the modern emphasis on

female sexual desirability, ideologies first constructed with white female sexuality, as if to suggest that black women should reject such models, but she affirms the importance of black female autonomy, sexual and personal.

Given the relevance of these previous episodes, Janie's revenge against Joe's control in Chapter 7 can now be understood as a larger rebellion against this unequal sexual power dynamic. Janie not only exhibits a verbal finesse previously demonstrated only by black men but also seizes control of the public expression of her sexuality as well as Joe's. She therefore directly reverses the male social practice of using female sexual desirability to reveal male social power while also exposing men's reliance on female sexuality to maintain that power.

The chapter opens with Janie's observation of how Joe's verbal abuse has changed over the years. In addition to his constant referrals to her inferior intelligence, Joe begins to insult Janie's aging body: "The more people in there [the store] the more ridicule he poured over her body to point attention away from his own" (120). In other words, Joe's control over Janie's sexuality now shifts from coveting her sexual desirability to denigrating it, yet this reversal is only possible because he can draw upon a larger cultural deprecation of menopausal women, as Sharon Davie has argued (451).

The chapter's most critical scene starts when Joe decries Janie's perceived incompetence, yelling, "A woman stay round uh store till she get as old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dere rollin' yo' pop eyes at me wid yo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees!" (121). But this insult disturbs the crowd of men in the store, despite their shared penchant for objectifying the female body or denigrating female intelligence: "A big laugh started off in the store but people got to

thinking and stopped. It was funny if you looked at it right quick, but it got pitiful if you thought about it awhile. It was like somebody snatched off part of a woman's clothes when she wasn't looking and the streets were crowded" (121).³³ In Janie's words, trash "talkin' under people's clothes" crosses a line in sexual morality that the townspeople recognize as inappropriate, a violation Patricia Felisa Barbeito calls "a metaphorical rape," and offers another example of the black townspeople's sexual conservatism (122; 386).³⁴ But Joe refuses to quit and shifts the focus again from the sagging appearance of Janie's body to her menopausal state, highlighting the decline of what had previously been the source of his power, her value in the heterosexual economy: "You ain't no young girl to be getting' all insulted 'bout yo' looks. You ain't no young courtin' gal. You'se uh ole woman, nearly forty. . . . T'ain't no use in gettin' all mad, Janie, 'cause Ah mention you ain't no young gal no mo'. Nobody in heah ain't lookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is" (122). Ironically, then, Joe's determination to humiliate his wife in public undermines his own status in the community because he insists that *other men* no longer crave her sexually. At the same time, Joe's declining physical health makes this strategy necessary, for his power in the community would also be diminished if it appeared that he could no longer have sexual relations with his wife – and this fact is precisely what Janie uses to her advantage. Thus, although Janie's actions represent a victory of personal autonomy in her newfound willingness to publicly subvert Joe's control, her victory is bittersweet for it relies on the same cultural standards that constructed her prison in the first place. In short, Janie's ability to defy gender hierarchies and gain the upper hand here is specifically tied to those same gender hierarchies, an ironic strategy few critics recognize.³⁵

Janie defeats Joe by deliberately exposing his lack of sexual power while reiterating her own sexual desirability, in effect reclaiming part of her own sexual autonomy while stripping Joe of his: “Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’s uh whole lot more’n *you* kin say. . . . Humph! Talkin’ ‘bout *me* lookin’ old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (122-23). As Washington asserts, Janie’s power rises from her manipulation of social perspective and reversal of the conventional gender dichotomy because forcing the sexual gaze to objectify Joe’s body “is considered so demeaning that when it happens to a man, it figuratively transforms him into a woman.” (241). At the same time, this scene does more than merely recreate the sexism inherent in the concept that if a man is humiliated by being labeled a woman, then it is even more insulting to be labeled a menopausal woman because such a woman is “no longer fully a woman,” an assumption that at least some critics, like John F. Callahan, reiterate in their analysis (134).³⁶ Janie’s words also expose the esteemed place black female sexuality holds in gender relations, specifically, in a black man’s relation vis à vis other black men, a correlation the townsmen immediately grasp, one remarking, “Ah ruther be shot with tacks than tuh hear dat ‘bout mahself” (123). Hurston’s description of Joe’s reaction is worth reproducing in detail:

. . . his vanity bled like a flood. Janie had robbed him of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible. The thing that Saul’s daughter had done to David.³⁷ But Janie had done worse, she had cast down his empty armor before men and they had laughed, would keep on laughing. When he paraded his

possessions hereafter, they would not consider the two together. They'd look with envy at the things and pity the man that owned them. (123)

The power of Joe's possessions, including Janie, to maintain the town's envy and respect has thus been undone through the implication that Joe can no longer control his woman *sexually*. In other words, a wife is a man's most important possession, so if she declares, in Sally Ann Ferguson's words, that he "is all talk and no sexual action," she not only reveals his sexual impotence but also the necessity of "her feeble female consent [for Joe] to be viewed in society as a man" (190). Joe knows the true locus of his power over his black neighbors lies not in his store, his fancy clothes, or his beautiful house since now not even "good-for-nothing's like Dave and Lum and Jim wouldn't change places with him. . . . Raggedy-behind squirts of sixteen and seventeen would giving him their merciless pity out of their eyes" (123-24).

While not a pronouncement of modern female sexuality – Janie does not imply that Joe does not *satisfy* her desire, only that he cannot perform sexually – Janie's ridicule is all the more devastating because it stays within traditional middle-class boundaries of sexual propriety, the system which Joe has used to curb Janie's sexuality throughout their marriage. The true damage from Janie's ridicule, then, results from her ability to both reiterate her own sexual desirability despite Joe's insults to the contrary and deny Joe's ability to perform sexually, turning his impotence metaphorically into a castration, not just of his penis but of his reputation as the "biggest" man in town. The mode, not just message, of her triumph is also relevant. As Henry Louis Gates, Jr. explains, Janie "gains her voice within her husband's store not only by daring to speak aloud where others might hear, but by engaging in that ritual of Signifyin(g) (which her husband had

expressly disallowed)” (193). Moreover, signifying, as the courtship scene reveals, is the avenue by which black men exhibit social *and* sexual power at the expense of black women, so Janie’s act demonstrates, on one hand, a woman’s ability to reverse this hierarchy, and, on the other, the limits of this reversal as Janie cannot exercise this power the same way men can, by pronouncing her sexual needs and commenting on the sexual desirability of others.

The importance of male sexual control in the public eye is highlighted by another detail to this scene. Joe is unable to regain his authority even though his first reaction is to demonstrate his physical prowess by publicly striking “Janie with all his might and dr[iving] her from the store” (124). While this act seems repulsive to modern readers, in the novel’s setting it represents not merely a just reassertion of black male control over black women but a respected one. Hurston, in fact, sets up this interpretation in the previously described conversation about Tony Robbins and his wife. The men criticize not just Tony’s refusal to beat his wife but his refusal to beat his wife for publicly claiming that he will not provide food for his family; in other words, it is not the *content* of Mrs. Robbins’ upbraiding that insults the men – Tony cannot support his family – but the *context* – a public declaration. One asserts, “Ah could break her if she wuz mine. Ah’d break her or kill her. Makin’ uh fool outa me in front of everybody,” and another agrees with an even more vindictive hyperbole, “[Tony] claims ‘tain’t no place on uh woman tuh hit, . . . but Ah’d kill uh baby just born dis mawnin’ fuh uh thing lak dat” (116). Therefore, even though physical abuse is traditionally the avenue to reclaim social authority after a public embarrassment, the damage from Janie’s remark is too severe to be amended by even this surefire remedy. Pheoby neatly connects the sexual and social

humiliation when she tells Janie the town cannot stop gossiping about how “Joe was ‘fixed’ and yuz wuz de one dat did it” (127).

This episode has a lasting effect on how Janie perceives the choices she has made in her life even if it does not change her marriage. A radical reversal of power is simply not possible. For one thing, Janie genuinely cares about “poor Jody” and wishes him no further public disgrace, despite his attempts to exacerbate public opinion against her by claiming that his illness is the result of voodoo, not kidney failure (129). As she sobs to Pheoby, “Ah’d ruther be dead than for Jody tuh think Ah’d hurt him” (127).³⁸ For another, the community reaffirms its investment in traditional gender relations by taking Joe’s side, “parad[ing] in and out [of the sick room] as his confidants” and spying on Janie for him, in spite of their previous dissatisfaction with Joe and sympathy for Janie (128). But more importantly, Janie and Joe’s relationship cannot change and not merely because Joe is dying. Neither will concede the damage they have done to the other’s self-esteem. Janie dismisses the larger consequences of her act, wondering, “Why must Joe be so mad with her for making him look small when he did it to her all the time? Had been doing it for years?,” and Joe to his dying breath refuses to listen to her, his last words to her being, “All dis tearin’ down talk! . . . Git outa heah!” (125, 133-34). The fact that neither can communicate nor understand the other’s emotions may be Hurston’s acknowledgment that both black men *and* women must change in order to transform traditionally unequal marriages into mutually satisfying relationships.

The benefit of Janie’s public trouncing is mainly to confirm her awareness that marriage has reduced her control and diminished her self-worth. Hurston communicates Janie’s recognition by repeating an interesting metaphor for Janie’s understanding of her

own autonomy, the first in a conversation with Pheoby when she says, “for de longest time, Ah been feelin’ dat somethin’ set for still-bait” (127). This folk expression recurs again in the next chapter as Janie ponders her life and confronts her bitterness at Nanny for smashing her dreams, realizing, “she hated the old woman who had twisted her so in the name of love. . . . She had found a jewel down inside herself and she had wanted to walk where people could see her and gleam it around. But she had been set in the market-place to sell. Been set for still-bait” (138). This metaphor conveys how Nanny’s emphasis on female sexual desirability as an avenue to economic status and social respectability turned Janie into an passive object to be coveted by others without any control over its destiny. Yet the fishing analogy adds a sensual dimension absent from the marketplace one since bait, unlike many other objects sold for profit, is completely consumed by a predator; the power dynamic is so uneven that nothing remains of one of the parties. The physical need here – the fish wants to eat the bait – evokes sexual desire as well as one aspect of the flapper’s modern emphasis of female desirability, the expression that the woman “catches” the man with her sexual allure, implicitly revealing the irony that sexual desirability is, in fact, an empty promise. In other words, Janie is now aware that the price – her personal and sexual autonomy – has not been worth the catch – economic and social respectability under the thumb of a domineering man. Unlike the flapper heroines of Ankles Preferred (1926), Mantrap (1926) or Get Your Man (1927), then, Janie now recognizes that the sexual allure is not the way to happily ever after.

Given her resentment, Janie’s first act after Joe’s death is logical, unpinning her hair and gazing at her image in the mirror, as she notes that “the young girl was gone, but a

handsome woman had taken her place. She tore off the kerchief from her head and let down her plentiful hair. . . . She took careful stock of herself” (134-35). As some critics have acknowledged, Janie is assessing her own sexual desirability here, noting how “the weight, the length, the glory” of her long, thick hair have not faded, and, as Ashe emphasizes, this “examination of her hair/self-esteem is more important than immediately announcing her husband’s death” (135; 581).³⁹ Joe’s death allows Janie to reclaim her sexual desirability for her own purposes rather than his, and although she repins her hair for the wake and funeral, soon after, Hurston notes, she burns “up every one of her head rages and went about the house next morning with her hair in one thick braid swinging well below the waist” (137).

Hurston does not suggest, however, that Janie’s newfound freedom to express her sexual desirability is the same as the freedom to express her sexual desire, much less the freedom to satisfy it. Despite this active act of defiance against Joe’s control, a closer look at the mirror scene indicates that Janie is more comfortable with an outside affirmation of her sexual desirability than an internal avowal of sexual desire. With the mirror she recreates a visual relationship with others, not with herself, since at this moment she seems to be “recording, not her own sensations, but the way others see her,” as Washington points out (242). Hurston’s description reiterates this self-(e)valuation of her beauty, noting Janie “took careful stock of herself,” an economic assessment that uses the same standards to judge her personal worth, her beauty, as others do (135). In short, Janie “has also internalized herself as an object,” as Jacobs has observed, an object whose worth is determined by her perceptible sexual desirability (345). In fact, this emphasis on her long, flowing hair reveals Janie’s internalization of the black community’s

prioritization of white standards of beauty. Her sexual autonomy is therefore still incomplete; Janie can have and acknowledge her sexual desire, but she expresses it only to herself and only as sexual desirability within the confines defined by her community.

Moreover, Janie is still unwilling or unable to seek a new route to sexual satisfaction, content to play the waiting game once again. Before Joe's death, Janie admits to herself she is waiting for "the future, . . . [for a] life different from what it was," than looking to change her marriage, content on "saving up feelings for some man she had never seen" than articulating her problems to her husband (118, 112). Granted, it may be futile to struggle against Joe's oppression, but, as Lloyd W. Brown contends, regardless of "whether she is motivated by an ambitious pragmatism or by a romantic ideal of love and manhood, Janie is the woman as dreamer in waiting" (44). The widow Janie continues this inactive contemplation, "basking in freedom for the most part without the need for thought," as Awkward has asserted (143; Inspiriting 35-36). Yet, at the very least, her previous marriages have taught her that it is not enough to enter a relationship because she completes a man's sexual autonomy or fulfills his idea of sexual desire. Her rejection of potential suitors may then be an expression of her sexual desire in that she refuses them because she does not find them sexually desirable or otherwise attractive, feeling that "these men didn't represent a thing she wanted to know about. She had already experienced them through Logan and Joe" (139-40). In a sense, she has again allowed her imagination to fulfill her sexual desire for the time being, as if the promise of sexual gratification is enough after years of sexual dissatisfaction.

Everything He Wants

Janie's wait, of course, is apparently over with the arrival of Tea Cake Woods. At face value, Tea Cake seems to fulfill Janie's lifelong yearning for a "bee-man" as he allows her to fulfill not only her sexual autonomy but also her personal autonomy, providing a new life on the muck where she can freely participate as a storyteller in this idyllic society of equal and non-materialistic, fun-loving workers.⁴⁰ As she decides during her self-revelation after Joe's death, as a girl she "had been getting ready for her great journey to the horizons in search of *people*; . . . But she had been whipped like a cur dog, and run off down a back road after *things*" (138). However, Tea Cake – and Janie's ensuing relationship with him – represents perhaps the most contentious debate in Hurston criticism, primarily centered upon Tea Cake's violent behavior and subsequent murder at his own true love's hand. My analysis suggests that Janie's relationship with Tea Cake actually exposes the shortcomings of her "kissing bees" vision that were apparent all along, while the rabid Tea Cake's jealousy and violence are always a part of his overall personality, not aberrations. As a result, Hurston demonstrates that Janie may be able to fully satisfy her sexual needs like a thoroughly modern black woman, but ultimately she cannot free herself from the influence of social definitions of female sexuality on both herself and on her lover.

Such insights may have been the result of Hurston's own relationship with Percival Punter, a West Indian college student.⁴¹ Hurston herself makes this claim in her 1942 autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, stating, "I tried to embalm all the tenderness of my passion for him in 'Their Eyes Were Watching God'" (188-89). Like Tea Cake, Hurston finds Punter's physical assets erotic, noting he was, "tall, dark brown,

magnificently built,” and later, “a fine mind in a fine body,” so much so that she admits, “he was so extraordinary that I lived in terrible fear lest women camp on his doorstep in droves and take him away from me” (Dust 183, 185). The passion of their strong physical attraction, though implicit, is still clear in her physical metaphors, calling herself “hog-tied and branded” and “his slave” and their time together “soaked . . . in ecstasy” (Dust 186, 187, 188). But Punter had specific notions of gender roles which Hurston admits were visible from the beginning of their relationship. On their first date, when she tries to lend him carfare home, she unintentionally insults his masculine sensibilities: “He was a *man!* No woman on earth could either lend him or give him a cent. If a man could not do for a woman, what good was he on earth? His great desire was to do for me. *Please* let him be a *man!* . . . Nor did he ever change. He meant to be the head, *so help him over the fence!* That very manliness, sweet as it was, made us both suffer” (Dust 184). Ultimately, his middle-class view of the division of labor caused friction as he demanded that she end her career as a prerequisite to marriage, while Hurston felt, “I could not see that my work should make any difference in marriage” (Dust 186). Aware of the price she paid for her ecstasy with Punter, Hurston chose a heroine whose need for sexual autonomy is a lifetime quest that, even when fulfilled, endangers her autonomy and control over the rest of her life.

Hurston offers an extensive analysis of Janie’s courtship with Tea Cake, mainly through Janie’s own doubts about his suitability as a boyfriend versus her almost instantaneous rapport with this stranger who “seemed as if she had known him all her life” (151). Despite their easy banter, the crux of Janie’s misgivings seem to dwell on how Tea Cake disrupts social conventions for romance but satisfies physical ones,

suggesting the extent to which she has internalized her African American community's expectations of female sexuality. Her behavior immediately after Joe's death suggests that she is unwilling to confront her neighbors' standards of appropriate gender behavior and, in fact, abides by them, acting like a respectable widow from the moment of Joe's death when she "starched and ironed her face, forming it into just what people wanted to see" before she spreads the news of his passing (135). Some critics term her disposal of the head rags "an overt act of rebellion," but she is defying Joe's requirements, not the community's, and they may even expect such an act since, as the Mayor's wife, it was inappropriate for her to wear a head rag in the first place, being "a customary sign of poverty," in Gleason's words (Bobb 3; 334).⁴² She continues to follow convention, wearing black for the required time and meeting with potential suitors even if she refuses to take their intentions seriously. Similarly, her employment of Hezekiah as clerk and rent collector fits her neighbors' opinion that she "needs aid and assistance," preferably from "uh man dat yuh done lived uhround and know all about tuh sort of manage yo' things fuh yuh and generally do round" (139, 140-41). Janie concedes that "she wouldn't know what to do without him," for Hezekiah is efficient as well as honest despite his young age, again concurring with the consensus that "womenfolks is easy taken advantage of" (142, 140). If Janie is so unwilling to assert her autonomy in these other situations – choosing her wardrobe, refusing to see potential suitors, running the store – then her timid approach to sexual autonomy is not surprising. After decades of denying her sexual needs and playing the part of the African American bourgeois wife, Janie is initially uncomfortable acting upon her attraction to Tea Cake since it would require her to ignore the traditional middle-class tenet which places a higher priority on a man's

economic and social standing than on his physical prowess. Given Hurston's awareness of stereotypes of black sexuality, she most likely would have also avoided presenting Janie's sexual attraction as too aggressive or uninhibited.

Janie's eventual capitulation to her sexual needs thus reveals how this otherwise inappropriate suitor's sexual desirability triumphs over her investment in traditional hierarchies of class and gender. During their first meeting, Hurston notes Tea Cake's sexual allure for Janie, who gets "little thrills from every one of his good points. Those full, lazy eyes with the lashes curling sharply away like drawn scimitars. The lean, over-padded shoulders and narrow waist," but afterwards she critiques his age and lack of money as any bourgeois matron would, concluding it was "just as well if she never saw him again. He was probably the kind of man who lived with various women but never got married" (146, 152). Janie's doubts are so strong that even when Tea Cake announces his romantic intentions, her first reaction is to think, "he's just saying anything for the time being, feeling he's got me so I'll b'lieve him. . . . He's trading on being younger than me. Getting ready to laugh at me for an old fool," but try as she might, Janie's sexual urges will not be ignored (159). Tea Cake's sexual desirability is another celebration of black beauty, a male counterpart to Daisy Blunt with similarly dark skin and features, like his "full, purple lips" (145). In the end, then, Janie chooses as any modern black woman would, fully aware of her sexual desire as well as the means to satisfy it. Her willingness to overlook social ostracism indicates her growing acceptance of the value of sexual relations to one's happiness.

However, instead portraying this internal struggle as an active assertion of Janie's sexual autonomy, Hurston depicts the entire battle as if Janie is again a passive recipient

of external agents, possessing little control over a predetermined outcome endorsed not only by her own body against her rational judgment but also by nature and God: “she couldn’t make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be the bee to a blossom – a pear blossom in the spring. He seemed to be crushing scent out of the world with his footsteps. . . . He was a glance from God” (161). Descriptions of Janie’s emotions during their relationship reflect a similar powerlessness against the active onslaught of Tea Cake’s love. After their first night together she awakens to the “feeling [of] Tea Cake almost kissing her breath away,” and during the four days when he disappears with her money, she feels an “excruciating” doubt and fear, which “plunged [her] into the abyss and descended to the ninth darkness where light has never been” (162, 163). Janie even feels out of control of her own emotions during the wedding trip, “so glad she was scared of herself” (175).

Given the overwhelming stereotypes of aggressive black female sexuality found in 1930s American culture, Hurston most likely realized that setting Janie up as a passive victim of love would not only dispel such negative connotations but also accentuate Janie’s characteristics as a romantic heroine. In fact, the scene where she finally gives in to Tea Cake’s wooing recalls many nineteenth-century romantic conventions, as he literally pulls her into his arms as she tries to wake him: “She went to the hammock to shake him and he seized her and pulled her in with him. After a little, she let him adjust her in his arms and laid there for a while” (162). As a result, Hurston appears to reconcile within Janie two seemingly contradictory attitudes: a modern decisiveness which refuses conventional norms of propriety in order to achieve sexual autonomy and a traditional romantic inclination to remain passive as an sexually-desirable object waiting

for male action to fulfill her own desire, in contrast to modern romances where love excuses the woman's decision to act. But a closer look reveals how Hurston instead depicts these two attitudes as irreconcilable as long as black women continue to satisfy their modern sexual needs within conventional heterosexual relationships. Tea Cake *is* the perfect partner to fulfill Janie's sexual autonomy, the "bee-man" of her pear tree vision, but only because he fulfills its uneven power dichotomy. Therefore, when his need to assert control spills over into other levels of their relationship, Janie's autonomy, and eventually her entire well-being, are threatened. Hurston encapsulates this threat early in their marriage when Janie, gazing at Tea Cake's sleeping face, feels "a self-crushing love. So her soul crawled out of its hiding place" (192). Most critics prefer to focus only on the latter phrase to exemplify Tea Cake's liberating influence over Janie, yet, by listing both of these dynamics together, Hurston hints that Janie's love for Tea Cake is dangerous to her personal autonomy even as it enables her to feel autonomous in a way she has never previously experienced.⁴³ As Todd McGowan explains, "though Tea Cake calls Janie's soul from its hiding place, though he allows her to realize herself completely for the first time, he also, in this very gesture, destroys Janie's subjectivity" (122).⁴⁴ But while McGowan attributes this loss of self to a sense of wholeness that invalidates Janie's self-identity of "alienation, the sense of being out of place, the failure which *was* her subjectivity," I would argue that she feels more complete with Tea Cake because she has gained sexual autonomy even though it has come at the price of her own individuality (122). Hurston thus validates female sexual autonomy even while disagreeing with the sacrifices Janie makes to fulfill her own. As a result, Tea Cake and Janie do not characterize new or egalitarian definitions of black male/female relations, as

some critics contend, but their relationship can be interpreted as Hurston's exposure of the contradictions which result when modern definitions of female sexual autonomy are maintained within relationships between black men and women still dependent upon traditional notions of a passive femininity and an active masculinity.⁴⁵

Tea Cake, despite his unconventional occupation as a guitar-strolling gambler, assumes control over Janie's economic well-being and hence social status just as any traditional husband would. His refusal to let Janie pay for anything, not even in her own store, may initially seem intended to deflect criticism that his courtship has material motivations, but after they leave Eatonville, his rationale becomes clear: "Ah no need no assistance tuh help me feed mah woman. From now on, you gointuh eat whutever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain't go nothin' you don't git nothin'" (191). Tea Cake's first step is to remove the source of Janie's economic independence, so, as Janie explains to Pheoby, they must sell the store in order to go "off somewhere and start all over in Tea Cake's way" (171). Like Joe Starks, he then takes Janie to a new community, first Jacksonville and then the Florida Everglades, where their household roles initially follow the same division of labor as her first two marriages with Tea Cake in the fields and Janie "making a home," cleaning the house, washing clothes, and preparing the food he wishes, the beans "Tea Cake loved," followed by dessert since "Tea Cake said it give a man something to taper off on" (194, 197, 198). When she abandons this middle class division to work in the bean fields, it is because Tea Cake complains of loneliness, but he still needs reassurance that he has not lost the economic power in their relationship, asking her if she believes he is "tryin' tuh git outa taking keer uh" her by asking her to earn a wage, an interpretation she denies by rejecting her

previous revulsion of outdoor work, calling it “nicer than settin’ round dese quarters all day” (199). So what initially seems to be a crucial distinction between Logan’s request and Tea Cake’s, Janie’s ability to earn a wage for “male” work, is almost instantly negated. In fact, Tea Cake even dictates her physical fitness for work, as later when the Bahaman workers hold nightly “fire dances” late into the night, sometimes “Tea Cake would not let her go with him to the field. He wanted her to get her rest” (228).

This economic control reveals how Tea Cake, like Joe, believes that his community sees Janie as his possession, one that should appropriately reflect his economic standing even if that standing is lower-class, a rationale that removes notions of largesse from his decision to not spend her considerable savings. He even brags later to other men about her willingness to give up a middle-class life to follow him: “Ah didn’t git her outa de middle uh de road. Ah got her outa uh big fine house. Right now she got money enough in de bank tuh buy up dese ziggaboos and give ‘em away. . . . Janie is wherever *Ah* wants tuh be. Dat’s de kind of wife she is” (219). In short, like Joe, Tea Cake not only makes the decisions about where they live and what they do with their money but also maintains his social status among his black peers by demonstrating his power over his wife. Janie, in turn, is unable or unwilling to interpret Tea Cake’s actions as unfair or domineering, but this pattern is too strikingly similar to Janie’s other husbands to presume Hurston’s characterization of Tea Cake is coincidental. As Alice Reich argues, “Janie herself never sees the limitations in the way he defines her, though they are there for the reader to see,” and Awkward agrees: “The text is clear in its insistence that Tea Cake has internalized much of his culture’s belief about masculine and feminine roles” (167; Introduction 17).

If Tea Cake's similarity to Janie's more traditional husbands ended here, then the chasm between Hurston's and Janie's vision of a perfect heterosexual relationship may have been less obvious. Then Hurston might be suggesting that black women could exchange some personal autonomy for sexual autonomy and that this cessation of control over finances or work was worth sexual satisfaction. However, she adds details to show that Janie's modern attitude towards her sexual autonomy is not shared by her third husband and, in fact, what Tea Cake shares is Joe's need to demonstrate his sexual power over her publicly within their African American community. First, he assumes control of Janie's sexual desirability. Soon after their courtship begins, he influences her dress, as she tells Pheoby, "Tea Cake love me in blue, so Ah wears it," and she starts her new marriage flaunting her desirability in an outfit of his choosing: "Wait till you see de new blue satin Tea Cake done picked out for me tuh stand up wid him in. High heel slippers, necklace, earrings, *everything* he wants tuh see me in" (170, 173). Then Tea Cake begins to exhibit an irrational jealousy, a sign that he sees Janie's control over her sexuality as vulnerable to other men's influence. Hurston shows that Tea Cake's demand for Janie's company in the fields is propelled by jealousy, as he uses loneliness as an excuse only after she asks him why he has started "popping in" unannounced at home during the day and only after he first pretends it is due to his fear that "de boogerman liable to tote yuh off whilst Ah'm gone" (198). Given his circuitous explanation, such behavior more likely reflects his "distrust and insecurity," in Ferguson's view, rather than love and companionship (193). Granted, Janie is certainly willing to accommodate his needs, perhaps because she can continue to fill her own, noting that the new arrangement means, "we ain't got nothin' tuh do but do our work and come home and *love*," but this episode's

jealousy is soon overshadowed by the next, when Tea Cake's envy leads to violence (199, emphasis added).

Fearful of losing Janie to Mrs. Turner's light-skinned brother, Tea Cake beats Janie, according to Hurston, to relieve "that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession," even though Janie previously proclaimed her distaste for Mrs. Turner's plan to unite Janie and her brother (218, 213). Despite his willingness to encourage Janie to explore her sexual needs and to "have de nurve tuh say whut you mean," Tea Cake is threatened here by another man's perceived sexual overtures, revealing that he does not fully comprehend what it means for a woman to have control over her sexuality, and he responds by violently demonstrating his physical control (165). In short, Tea Cake's anxiety is relieved only when he exercises *his* control over *her* body. Contrary to the common critical assertion that this episode is an aberration of Tea Cake's "bee-man" persona, then, I would argue that his violence here is instead the most extreme expression of his overall possessive and controlling attitude.⁴⁶ As McGowan suggests, "Tea Cake's physical abuse is not something exceptional, but symptomatic," and, I would add, is specifically an extension of, not separate from, his attitude towards female sexual autonomy (125 n14).

But full blame for Tea Cake's misguided notions of heterosexual relationships cannot rest upon him alone, for throughout the novel Hurston demonstrates that such assailants are revered not just as powerful men within the black community but also as powerful sexual role models. The outward expression of Tea Cake's insecurity, violence, is not merely expected but condoned by their society: "Everybody talked about it next day in the fields. It aroused a sort of envy in both men and women. The way he petted

and pampered her as if those two or three face slaps had nearly killed her made the women see visions and the helpless way she hung on him made men dream dreams” (218). This disturbing connection between sexual power and physical abuse, however, is the community’s, not Janie’s, because Hurston indicates that Janie hangs on Tea Cake in a “helpless way” only after he “petted and pampered her” as an apology (289; 218). Like Eatonville’s townspeople, the muck residents value such public demonstrations of violence, finding them, in Racine’s words, “a socially acceptable expression of possessive love and authority” (289). That Tea Cake is aware of this association is demonstrated by his rationalization to his friends that he didn’t fear losing Janie but “beat her tuh show dem Turners who is boss” (220). He even insists, “Ah didn’t whup Janie ‘cause *she* done nothin,’” a further indictment of Janie’s lack of power over her own body since placing blame would at least hold Janie responsible for the consequences of her actions (220). Tea Cake instead implies that he uses her body at his convenience for his own ends. As a result, Janie is again a victim of communal expectations of sexuality, here Tea Cake’s insecure need to publicly claim possession of his woman and her sexuality in front of the neighbors.

Hurston draws an extensive comparison between social expectations of female and male sexual roles by examining another case of sexual rivalry, the other between Janie and “a little chunky girl” named Nunkie (203). Unlike Janie, Tea Cake has a publicly acceptable motivation for his jealousy of Mrs. Turner’s brother, the need to demonstrate his possessiveness to other men, as well as a publicly sanctioned expression of it, violence against Janie, while Janie must express her jealousy of another woman almost exclusively within their own home as she does not gain esteem nor respect by

demonstrating it in public. The distinctions between these two episodes are critical as some critics use the conflict over Nunkie to excuse Tea Cake's violence as another mutual attitude in their relationship.⁴⁷ First, unlike Mrs. Turner's brother, Nunkie is a more realistic rival, flirting with Tea Cake so much that "other people began to notice too" (203). Mrs. Turner's brother, in contrast, is never given a name, and there is only a passing mention of one interaction between he and Janie, when they are introduced (218). Then Janie finds Nunkie and Tea Cake in a compromising position, wrestling alone in the fields, and Tea Cake's "shame-faced" denial supports Janie's earlier suspicion that he "didn't seem to be able to fend her [Nunkie] off as promptly as Janie thought he ought to" (204, 203). Tea Cake, conversely, does not even have evidence of Janie's attraction to Mrs. Turner's brother, much less an incident of physical contact between them, only the public knowledge of Mrs. Turner's intentions. Hence, his jealous response intentionally sends a *public* message to reiterate his possession of Janie, while Janie's jealousy prompts her to send Tea Cake a *private* message that infidelity is not acceptable to her, as *Awkward* contends (*Inspiriting* 38-39). Finally, when the physical altercation over Nunkie begins, Hurston specifically points out that although Janie starts the fight by "cut[ing] him short with a blow" rather than hear Tea Cake's explanation, her fists do little damage as she keeps "trying to beat him, and Tea Cake kept holding her wrists and wherever he could to keep her *from going too far*" (205, emphasis added). "Too far" is apparently when Janie's physical violence matches his own, leaving undeniable marks of her anger upon his body as his does upon hers, a friend noting to him later that her light skin means "uh person can see every place you hit her" (218). Indeed, there is little indication that anyone even knows of the first incident as Sop-de-Bottom also declares

after Tea Cake's beating, "Ah bet she never raised her hand tuh hit yuh back, neither. . . . Ah bet she don't even holler. She jus' cries, eh Tea Cake?" (219). Yet Janie's willingness to confront Tea Cake with her fists is unsettling, and the argument's conclusion makes it more so, as Tea Cake "hurl[s] her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, [and] kissed her until she arched her body to meet him" (205). Perhaps, however, there is still an alternative to Jordan's interpretation of this physical confrontation as "a ritualized struggle that is simply sexual foreplay" (109-10). Hurston instead could be replaying the sacrifice Janie makes to her own sexual desire, how again her sexual desire overwhelms her ability to control other aspects of her autonomy, here not just her physical actions, as Tea Cake clearly overpowers her until she stops resisting, but also her emotional message, as there is no indication that Tea Cake ever apologizes or excuses his behavior with Nunkie; he merely denies his attraction to her and compliments Janie instead (206).

Sop-de-Bottom's comment on Janie's bruises is another reminder that, like Joe, Tea Cake's esteemed status as a powerful sexual role model is dependent on his possessiveness not only of an attractive black woman but also of a pale black woman. Janie's white features are, not coincidentally, the reason Mrs. Turner hopes to fix her up with her brother, a rationale Hurston critiques with a description of Mrs. Turner's worship of "the unattainable – Caucasian characteristics for all" (216). Tea Cake, like Joe, has a need to demonstrate Janie's submissiveness in front of other black men, and, similarly, his power is all the more impressive given her light skin, long flowing hair, and her upper-class status; as he asserts, "Mah Janie is uh high time woman and useter things" (219). As such, it is difficult to excuse Tea Cake's violence as a regrettable but

understandable reaction to his powerlessness against racism, as some critics have done.⁴⁸ Who, in fact, is more powerless? Both Janie's and Tea Cake's skin tone recall the racism inherent in the black community, whether the emulation of white-featured black women by black men or the denigration of "black niggers" by "color-struck" blacks like Mrs. Turner, but unlike Janie, Tea Cake can reassert his power using the racial hierarchy by demonstrating how he, "uh rusty black man," can force a "yaller" woman into submission (210, 220, 210). Janie may have found the perfect partner to fulfill her modern sexual autonomy, but she cannot escape the traditional taint of her near-white features.

This hierarchy of gender roles makes it tempting to read Tea Cake's murder as a power shift in which Janie reclaims her right over her own autonomy. Furthermore, seeing the act, in Lurie's words, as a result of Janie's "repressed feminist rage" quashes the ambiguity surrounding Tea Cake's beating, particularly the peculiar omission, first noted by Washington, of Janie's reaction (52; 243).⁴⁹ Janie never expresses any dissatisfaction or resentment about Tea Cake's beating as she did about Joe's, but this silence, even without the murder, is not enough to presume that Hurston endorses abuse given the novel's other condemnations of violence against women and the black society's investment in the practice. Nor do I believe that the beating and murder indicate Hurston's inability to conceptualize romance without violence, as other critics have asserted.⁵⁰ Again, Hurston's interpretation of the relationship is separate from Janie's, and she provides enough details in her account of Tea Cake's last days to implicitly juxtapose his rabid behavior with his previous rage and jealousy. For instance, he confronts Janie when he learns that Mrs. Turner's brother has reappeared after the

hurricane and is also ill with the observation, “People didn’t just take sick like this for nothing” (266). Then he insists that she “stay where Ah kin see yuh” and eventually reads every gesture as evidence of her betrayal, whether it is suggesting a visit to the hospital or no longer sleeping in his bed (268). Such examples indicate that Tea Cake’s growing paranoia is not a new development but one he has expressed before, from his jealousy over Mrs. Turner’s brother, to a controlling need to stay with Janie day and night, to an insistence that even her willingness to agree is evidence of her love and commitment. Yet no other detail recalls this continuum more than Janie’s explicit denial of any connection between Tea Cake’s previous and current behavior, insisting that his irrational conduct is itself an indication of how ill he is: “Ah don’t lack you astin’ me no sich question [about Mrs. Turner’s brother]. Dat shows how sick you is sho nuff. You’s jealous ‘thout me givin’ you cause” (267). Hurston seems to intentionally recall Tea Cake’s earlier jealousy here by accentuating Janie’s intentional obtuseness. This deliberate ignorance continues when Janie, confronted by the loaded gun under his pillow, still ignores the doctor’s warning that he will turn mad, “liable to bite somebody else, specially you,” and instead rationalizes to herself, “Tea Cake wouldn’t hurt *her*. He was jealous and wanted to scare her” (263, 270). Granted, Hurston must justify why Janie continues to keep Tea Cake at home instead of hospitalizing him in order to set up the final confrontation, but her choice of what constitutes mad behavior is tellingly sane, thus suggesting that Tea Cake’s potential for extreme violence is less a product of his illness than a manifestation of his character. In Thomas Cassidy’s words, Tea Cake’s post-infection conduct “does not seem to be the result of a totally foreign element invading his psyche as much as an acceleration of forces already evident in his

personality before the storm” (264). Janie’s violent response may then be interpreted as her shifting of the active/passive dichotomy in her favor, finally asserting her own autonomy in order to place her own needs above Tea Cake’s own.

At the same time, this reading is difficult to maintain when other aspects of Tea Cake’s death fit the overall pattern of their relationship. Even the description of his last moments underscores Janie’s passivity: “the pistol and the rifle rang out almost together. The pistol just enough after the rifle to seem its echo. Tea Cake crumpled as his bullet buried itself in the joist over Janie’s head. Janie saw the look on his face and leaped forward as he crashed forward in her arms” (273). As Dianne F. Sadoff insists, here the “language removes Janie as subject from the narrative description of the shooting” (22). A sentence construction placing Janie as the actor would contradict the general attitude of inevitability that she has maintained throughout their relationship. Moreover, while cradling the dead Tea Cake in her arms, Janie “thanked him wordlessly for giving her the chance for *loving service*,” an ambiguous statement which could suggest that she is thankful for having been allowed to *serve* him or that she is thankful for finally having gotten the chance to serve a husband *lovingly* (273, emphasis added).⁵¹ Regardless, during Janie’s initial devastating grief, Hurston’s choice to emphasize not only the marriage’s unequal power distribution but also Janie’s belief in its structure seems to indicate, at the very least, that Janie is uncomfortable with the power reversal which has taken place.

Janie’s revisionist version of Tea Cake at the trial similarly concurs with her typology of love, depicting the murder as another instance when her autonomy was overwhelmed by events. As Cassidy points out, at the trial she presents “herself as a

victim of circumstances . . . controlled by forces of nature beyond her control,” all the while emphasizing her love for Tea Cake (260). Significantly, she also frames the final conflict as the result of Tea Cake’s lack of control in conjunction with her powerlessness, insisting, “Tea Cake couldn’t come back to himself until he had got rid of that mad dog that was in him and he couldn’t get rid of the dog and live. He had to die to get rid of the dog” (278). Therefore, Janie maintains the traditional hierarchy of gender power even when describing her own violent act by implying that the murder occurred not because *she* was in control but because *he* was not any longer. Her fear that the jury would make “a verdict that she didn’t want Tea Cake and wanted him dead” similarly constructs their potential error in judgment as presuming that *she* made the decision to pull the trigger (279). Her description might even imply the contradictory situation that Tea Cake, although insane at the time, instigated his own murder in order to return his sanity.

Given this ambiguous presentation, I find it incongruous to validate Janie’s murderous act on any level, much less as an explicit criticism of Tea Cake’s sexist behavior. Similar interpretations which see the hurricane as an expression of Janie’s or Hurston’s anger are also defeated by the chain of events, since Janie concedes to her husband’s decision to stay rather than flee with the other workers.⁵² Once again, Janie is complicit in her own repression, as much a victim of her own misperceptions as she is of Tea Cake’s fists. She so clings to traditional gender roles that even after her husband’s death at her own hand, she cannot relinquish the constructed order of their relationship. Even if Sigrid King and other critics disagree with the judge’s description of Janie as “a poor broken creature, a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances” this face is what she offers during the trial (695; 279).⁵³

Once again, however, Hurston's objective here seems quite distinct from Janie's. By documenting the muck community's condemnation of Janie, Hurston provides a telling contrast to their endorsement of Tea Cake's violence, again highlighting the distinctions in acceptable gender conduct. Even though she shot Tea Cake in self-defense, even though her passivity to Tea Cake's previously violent and controlling behavior was well-known, even though it was his, not her, decision to wait out the hurricane, the muck residents refuse to grant Janie any justification for murdering Tea Cake, arguing after the verdict, "Aw you know dem white mens wuzn't gointuh do nothin' tuh no woman dat look lak her. . . . long as she don't shoot no white man she kin kill jus' as many niggers as she please" (280). Thus, Hurston can critique black gender role standards even while maintaining a traditionally focused heroine, again perhaps due to the realization that the majority of her readers would interpret any sign of physical strength or violence from a African American woman as a resurgence of primitive, licentious behavior.

Living in Peace or Dying in Denial?

Consequently, in the end, even though Hurston does not offer a feminist heroine *per se*, her novel does suggest that a black woman's quest for a heterosexual relationship based upon conventional power roles is itself flawed without offering any alternatives. As James Krasner contends, it is Janie, not Hurston, who ignores Tea Cake's faults, and Hurston consistently shows these faults and Janie's decision to ignore them (123). Janie's constant bending to Tea Cake's will leads to the murder and trial that almost cost Janie her life and freedom, while the ending reveals Hurston's awareness of the

compromises Janie must make to maintain her romantic illusions at the cost of her sexual autonomy. Without necessarily endorsing these compromises, Hurston acknowledges the effect of such a sacrifice through two means: Janie's affirming vision of Tea Cake and her refusal to admit what Hurston has already made clear, her impending death from rabies.

The novel's final scene with Janie offers a ironic juxtaposition to the scene which began her narrative, her pear tree vision. These final moments emphasize the same components: Janie's wish for a perfect union (through "his memory" she now finds "peace"), her immobile posture as she visualizes this union (she sits alone in her bedroom), and her passive course of action after the vision (all the action is interior and metaphoric, such as "pull[ing] in her horizon like a great fish-net") (286). Both visions occur in Janie's consciousness, yet the pear tree vision, by uniting life, nature, and procreation, is rooted in the bodily experience of living, represented by sexuality and confirmed by its joyous masturbatory climax. But unlike some critics, like Barbeito, who assert that "Janie's peace results from joining the physical and spiritual," this final vision is only able to resolve Janie's conflict between sexual and personal autonomy because it transcends the physical and ignores the body (388).⁵⁴ Moreover, any satisfaction she finds in this new sense of peace and contentment is still attributed to Tea Cake, repeating the pattern of passivity and domination that characterized their relationship and prompting Ann duCille to conclude that the novel "is a text as much about submission as about self-fulfillment" (123). While this moment of euphoria takes place within *her* consciousness, using *her* memories (and selective ones at that), Janie still gives credit to Tea Cake for achieving this peace. Once again, Tea Cake may provide her with the

opportunity for intense self-realization but by attributing it to him, she is still under his control, even if the “Tea Cake” who now exists is merely a product of her mind and heart.

The positive future effects of this vision on Janie or her community are also questionable. As Christine Levecq points out, “Just as she stayed inside her room several times in Eatonville, Jacksonville, Palm Beach, and the Everglades, with an image of Tea Cake to dote on, she is now perpetuating a form of dependence that comes dangerously close to stasis” (108). Washington similarly asserts that Janie “is left in a position of interiority so total it seems to represent another structure of confinement” (248). In other words, there is no indication of how Janie plans to convert this vision of Tea Cake into action. The only previous avowal of any future plans, besides returning to Eatonville, is to carry a package of garden seeds from the muck in order “to plant them for remembrance” (283). Even her decision to tell Pheoby the story of her life, the action which propels the narrative forward at the novel’s start, is less a conscious decision to influence someone else’s perception of life or love than an encouragement to formulate one’s own perception through action or personal experience: “talkin’ don’t amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can’t do nothin’ else. . . . you got tuh *go* there tuh *know* there. Yo’ papa and yo’ mama and nobody else can’t tell yuh and show yuh” (285). Furthermore, the effect of her story on Pheoby is at best unclear and at worst limited to a seemingly small request of her husband Sam, for she states, “Ah done growed ten feet higher from ju’s listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied wid mahself no mo’. Ah means tuh make Sam take me fishin’ wid him after this” (284).

In addition, Janie can only achieve unity by disengaging from the community, whose investment in hierarchical heterosexual relations has also proven dangerous to her. Her rejection of the real world is so complete that, in Donald R. Marks' words, "meaning in Janie's life [now] exists solely in her consciousness, distinct from any outside community" (157). Thus, Hurston implies that a complete revolution of female autonomy, where a woman's relationship with a man contributes to her well-being and individuality, can only occur in the abstract, in one's interior consciousness, a world without class, without race, perhaps even without gender, not in the real world, controlled and defined by social conventions. Hurston here may even be acknowledging how one's relationship to one's body, to sexual desire, to sexual partners, is so influenced by historical factors that Janie can only escape by moving into a dream world of her own making.

At the same time, Janie's vision must ignore the body because to acknowledge it would mean she must acknowledge a fact that most critics still overlook, how she is dying, infected by rabies from Tea Cake's bite.⁵⁵ Hurston has left enough clues to point to this inevitability even without Janie's explicit confirmation, starting with the doctor's warning that if Tea Cake bites her, "you'll be in the same fix he's in," where "he's got almost no chance to pull through," and ending with a bite so severe that Janie is forced to pry "the dead Tea Cake's teeth from her arm" (263, 273). With 12,000 animal cases of rabies in 1937 and 38 human deaths, the transmission, symptoms, and outcome of rabies were so much more recognizable to contemporary readers than modern ones Hurston most likely would not assume that they, like Janie, would conveniently forget this warning by the end of the book (Haas 206).

The final scene's insistence that Tea Cake "could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" is thus bittersweet, since Janie's death will mean that both of them *are* truly dead, and their love will die with her (286). The possibility of a perfect, egalitarian heterosexual union, therefore, is so rooted in the abstract that soon it will exist only in the abstract in death. Perhaps, then, Janie's inability to transfer her vision to the real world is intentional, in preparation for leaving the body completely and joining Tea Cake in the afterlife. As the average interval between infection and full-blown rabies was only one or two months, Janie most likely will not have to wait much longer (Haas 215). Such an ending would certainly fit within her lifelong trait of waiting for change rather than seeking it out.

My assessment of the otherwise uplifting and optimistic ending therefore relies on the contradictory premise that Hurston wishes to maintain a critical view of her heroine and her heroine's motivations while offering a moving tribute to the heroine's dead husband and her ability to transform her grief into an empowering affirmation of love. Such a move, however, is warranted by Hurston's contradictory motivations for her plot: how to present a black woman's legitimate drive for sexual autonomy in an heterosexual relationship while acknowledging how this emphasis on physical love can overwhelm a woman's commitment to her other needs.

The final novel in this study may provide another seemingly contradictory premise merely by juxtaposing the character of Janie, in many ways the most positive depiction of black female autonomy to date, and that of Willa Cather's title character in Sapphira and the Slave Girl. At first glance, Janie appears to have little in common with innocent, passive Nancy Till, but Nancy also learns that control over her sexual autonomy requires

sacrifice and defiance of the proscriptions of her community and family. In this way Nancy is as much as a positive valuation of modern female sexuality as Janie, even if, like the other authors in this study, Cather is unable to fully depict a egalitarian relationship that allows Nancy to practice her autonomy.

Notes

¹ Robert E. Hemenway's 1977 biography lists 1901 as Hurston's birthdate, although he acknowledges one brother's claim that she was born in 1891, a date John Lowe argues is confirmed by the family Bible and the Census (13, n8 32; 160).

² First husband Herbert Sheen later told Hemenway, "The demands of her career doomed the [four-year] marriage to an early, amicable divorce," while Carla Kaplan, in her introduction to Zora Neale Hurston: A Life in Letters, asserts that Hurston "found it [difficult] to combine marriage and her career," noting a 1957 letter in which she insists, "artistic people just don't go for much tying down even for the economic angle" (qtd. in Hurston, 94; 19). Although Hurston made few comments on her love affairs even in letters to friends, she does complain Sheen "tries to hold me back and be generally obstructive" and later calls him an obstacle (Hurston: A Life 114, 222). Kaplan also believes Hurston married a third time, in secret, in 1944 (Hurston: Life 433). Hurston, in her 1942 autobiography, Dust Tracks on a Road, claims one lover, presumably the model for Tea Cake, always encouraged her to give up her career (186).

³ Critics who explore the influence of her background in ethnography on the novel include Cynthia Bond (214-15); Lloyd W. Brown (40-41); Hazel V. Carby ("Politics" 79-90); Kimberly Rae Connor (48-49); Emily Dalgarno (519-39); Philip Goldstein (64); Robert Haas (219-20); Thomas F. Haddox (20-21); George Hutchinson (Harlem 62-70); Karen Jacobs (329-49); Yvonne Johnson (56-59); John D. Kalb (169-80); Daphne Lamothe (157-72); Cyrena N. Pondrom (196-200); Rachel Stein (465-78); and Cheryl A. Wall (Women 151-99). Those who discuss how her patronage by Charlotte Osgood Mason and Fannie Hurst affected her writing include Jane Caputi (697-705); Robert A.

Coles and Diane Isaacs (10); Rachel Blau DuPlessis (83); Goldstein (56-57); Tommie Jackson (32-33); Jennifer Jordan (105); Kaplan (Hurston: A Life 41-42, 47-49); Holly Laird (91); Michael North (175-78); Elaine Neil Orr (53-57); and Wall (Women 153-58). More on Hurston and Hurst's relationship can be found in Virginia M. Burke; Caputi (705-710); and Gay Wilentz ("White") and their respective articles, "Fannie Hurst by her Ex-Amanuensis Zora Neale Hurston" (1937) and "Zora Hurston: A Personality Sketch" (1961). Hemenway comments on all of these conflicts in Zora Neale Hurston and "The Personal Dimension in Their Eyes Were Watching God," arguing in the latter that patronage never influenced the writing of Their Eyes (33-36).

⁴ Critics who discuss Hurston's place within the larger goals of the Harlem Renaissance include Michael Awkward (Introduction 9-15); Carby (73-74); Coles and Isaacs (8-10); Sharon Davie (453); Thadious M. Davis ("Southern" 305-07); William A. Gleason (341-42); Lee Greene (384-85); Hutchinson (Harlem 62-65); Missy Dehn Kubitschek (112-113); Lamothe (167-71); North (175-78), Rich Potter (16); John Trombold (85-91); Cynthia Wald (76-77); and Wall (Women 146-47). For more on Hurston's conflict as a female artist in the Harlem Renaissance, see Wall (Women 4-5, 196) and Kaplan (Erotics 108-110).

⁵ For more on the call and response tradition, see John F. Callahan (115-49), Awkward (Inspiriting 45-50), and Gayle Jones (125-39). For signifying, see Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (171-215); Bond (204-16); and Houston A. Baker, Jr. (Blues 56-60); see Carol Batker (202-10); Klaus Benesch (634); Lorraine Bethel (180-81); and Maria V. Johnson (404-12) for the blues. Clair Crabtree (54-66); Joanne Gabbins (248-52); and Pearl M. Peters (127-45) discuss Hurston's connections to folklore.

⁶ Feminist readings of Hurston's novel were crucial in reestablishing the novel's prominence as a significant American work in the 1970s and 1980s, and although some critics, notably Laura Hapke, Ann duCille, Christine Levequ, and Carby, have problematized strictly affirmational readings in a trajectory familiar to other feminist texts, such as Gilman's The Yellow Wallpaper or Chopin's The Awakening, many continue reading Their Eyes in the same vein, an approach which does not fully appreciate the novel's complexity and elides certain elements. See, for example, Kathleen Davies, Dolan Hubbard, Connor, and Cathy Brigham as well as the others listed in note 10. This tendency is perhaps partly due to that fact that despite its prominence in the canon, critics may see the novel's position as precarious having been written by an African American and a woman, so they continue to justify its place rather than risk ambiguous or challenging readings which could, as with classics from The Scarlet Letter to The Sound and the Fury, broaden an appreciation of its artistry and continued value to the American tradition.

⁷ Brigham's conclusion is typical: "This [final] image of female empowerment, emphasized by its strategic position as structuring device in the talking frame and privileged as the primary topic in the narrative's multivocal discourse, completes the reconstruction of Eatonville as an egalitarian, black nationalist utopia" (419). See also Patricia Felisa Barbeito (382-83); Benesch (634); Bethel (189); Bond (215); Barbara Christian (Black Women 57); Cooke (149); Crabtree (66); Davies (111); Sally Ann Ferguson (195); Gates (183); Addison Gayle (175); Holloway (138-39); and Mary Jane Lupton (42).

⁸ Much of this criticism focuses upon the framing narrative device as a problematic and awkward convention; see, for example, Bernard Bell (123); Hemenway (Hurston

233); Lillie P. Howard (94); and Robert B. Stepto (166). Although Levecq uses these examples to argue, “most of the scholarship produced since 1980 directly or indirectly refutes that kind of criticism,” she does not point out that this refutation still airs the debate over Hurston’s narrative technique as if it must always be defended (90).

⁹ Other critics who discuss this dispute include North (175-89); Laird (91-94); Pondrom (200-202); Peter B. Messent (245-46); and David M. Sheppard (63-65). Goldstein, North, and Hutchinson (Harlem), among others, are also significant in that they reconnect the main goal of the Harlem Renaissance, the promotion of African American culture to reject centuries of harmful black stereotypes, and the modernist aesthetic.

¹⁰ Critics consistently read the novel as a promotion of black female subjectivity without placing it within a historical context; examples include Barbeito, Bethel, Christian (Black Feminist), Gayle, Hemenway, Howard, Barbara Johnson, Kubitschek, Lupton, and S. Jay Walker. Recent examples which demonstrate the continued attractiveness of this position include Deborah Clarke, Julie A. Haurykiewica and Susan Edwards Meisenhelder (“False”).

¹¹ Zora Neale Hurston, Their Eyes Were Watching God (Urbana: U of Illinois P, 1978), 285. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

¹² For similar interpretations, see June Bobb (4-5); Howard (Hurston 105); Janice L. Knudsen (225); James Krasner (119); Elizabeth Meese (65); and Peters (145-46).

¹³ See also Batker (209) and Kaplan (100). Critics who argue against this interpretation include Davie (456); Meisenhelder (Hitting, 64); and Davies (150-51).

¹⁴ See also Bobb (2); Darryl Hattenhauer (53-54); Donald R. Marks (154); and Peters (131).

¹⁵ DuPlessis similarly argues that after her vision, Janie's sexual "desire, as Nanny then tells, if not innocent and naive, must be informed and infused with the history and genealogy of race," but suggests that this position is Nanny's, not Hurston's, which Janie later refutes with Tea Cake (91).

¹⁶ In contrast, some critics argue that the pear tree vision represents Hurston's radical reaffirmation of the black cultural connection with nature; for example, see Bethel (180); Connor (149-50); Vanessa D. Dickerson (226); Alice Fannin (2-3); and Lupton (41). Lamonte and Stein offer similar interpretations using voodoo (162-63; 466).

¹⁷ See also Sander B. Gilman.

¹⁸ Only a few critics discuss Leafy's rape, and many presume the rapist is white, such as Lloyd Brown (42); Christian (Black Feminist 9); Haurykiewica (46); Jacobs (343); Orr (n34, 137); and Maria J. Racine (285).

¹⁹ Lynching statistics vary but contemporary sources estimate the total at 436 for 1888-1922, 3,724 for 1889-1930, and 5,112 for 1882-1937 (Lerner 213; Somerville n3 181; Klotman 55). References to lynching would have been clearly recognized by readers of all races since the anti-lynching movement garnered extensive press in the 1930s thanks to associations like NAACP, the National Association of Colored Women, and the Association of Southern Women for the Prevention of Lynching. For more on the anti-lynching campaign, see Gerda Lerner (193-215) and Paula Giddings (89-92, 206-10).

²⁰ Batker and DuPlessis also note the class implications in making the rapist a teacher (205; 91).

²¹ Other critics who define Logan's values as bourgeois, Protestant, or white include Bonnie J. Barthold (131); Ferguson (187); Gates (187); Gayle (41), James Giles (52); and McGowan (111-12).

²² Critics who acknowledge that Janie shares Joe's or Nanny's emulation of the white bourgeoisie include Lloyd Brown (42) and Hattenhauer (52-53).

²³ Molly Hite and John Lowe draw different conclusions about this double-entendre (450; 165).

²⁴ See also Robert Bone (129); Ferguson (186-87); and Peters (133).

²⁵ bell hooks has argued how a female slave's worth was determined by her breeding capacities (Ain't 39). For more on the sexual worth of female slaves, see also Victoria E. Bynum, Catherine Clinton, Winthrop D. Jordan, Patricia Morton, and Deborah Gray White.

²⁶ Marital rape was excluded from every state's rape statutes until 1975.

²⁷ As Carla Kaplan asserts, "Hurston didn't have much to say about the Depression," either in Dust Tracks or in the letters in Kaplan's collection, but I agree with her that Hurston would not have been unaware or unsympathetic to the rising tide of black poverty in the thirties (Hurston: Life 163).

²⁸ I am using Kaplan's dating here, which place Janie's birth at 1881 or 1882, her marriage to Logan at 1897 or 1898, and her return to Eatonville at the novel's start at 1921 or 1922 (Erotics 108). Since the novel states that she was seventeen when she marries Joe, the date would be 1898 or 1899 (111).

²⁹ For other examples, see Awkward (Inspiriting 25-26); Bobb (3); Callahan (133); Carr (196); Christian (Black Feminist 174); Geneva Cobb-Moore (31); Janice Daniel (70); Lee R. Edwards (216); Gates (189); Elizabeth T. Hayes (179); Howard (160);

Jordan (109); Lowe (170); Wendy J. McCredie (26); McGowan (113); Wilbert Reuben Norman, Jr. (33); Pondrom (191); Racine (287); Wilentz (“Defeating” 287); and Susan Willis (50).

³⁰ See also Bertram D. Ashe (580). In contrast, Hattenhauer believes Janie shares Joe’s emulation of white standards of beauty (50), and P. Gabrielle Foreman attributes the prejudice to Hurston (661).

³¹ For example, see Brigham (410); Benesch (634); Carr (196); Gates (195); Maria Johnson (405-06); Levecq (102-3); Lowe (174); Barbara Monroe (173-74); North (183); and Maria Tai Wolff (32).

³² For similar views, Yvonne Johnson (47-48); Meisenhelder (Hitting, 69); Wall (Women 186); and Mary Helen Washington (241).

³³ Besides the previously described porch scene, the men earlier debate whether women prefer money or talk, one bragging, “Dey loves to hear me talk because dey can’t understand it. . . . You don’t know de women Ah kin git to mah command” (58, 59). For a different reading of this scene, see Benesch (630).

³⁴ For a different reading of the townspeople’s reaction, see Awkward (Inspiriting 33).

³⁵ For examples of criticism which analyze this scene as a feminist triumph without acknowledging this contradiction, see Bell (125-26); Bond (211), Carr (197); Davies (153); Sarah Ford (409); Gates (206-07); Clenora Hudson-Weems (197-98); Debra Walker King (77); Sigrid King (690); Sally L. Kitch (73); Valerie Gray Lee (268); Peters (141-42); Dianne F. Sadoff (17); and Jerome E. Thornton (265).

³⁶ For similar interpretations, see Benesch (628-29); Bond (211); Cooke (143); Jacobs (345); Maria Johnson (410); Lowe (176-77); Meisenhelder (Hitting, 68); Sandra Pouchet Paquet (504); Peters (142); and Racine (287).

³⁷ Lowe comments on this Biblical reference (2 Sam 6:20-23), pointing out that the story ends when “David spurns Michal’s bed and she dies childless, a condition shared by Janie,” but does not comment on the irony in this comparison (177). Michal’s childlessness is clearly a punishment for her defiance, while Janie’s childlessness may be an advantage, not only because she can follow her heart more easily but also because the novel equates maternity with violence through Nanny’s and Leafy’s examples.

³⁸ Critics continue to disagree on whether Janie’s remorse or guilt is genuine; those who share my view include Nancy Chinn (83-84) and Davie (451). Those who share Darwin T. Turner’s assertion that her insult to Joe was “vindictive” and dispute her remorse include Davies and Haddox (108; 153; 26).

³⁹ See also Messent (273).

⁴⁰ The dominant view of the muck, although notable exceptions include Carby (“Politics”) and Hapke (139).

⁴¹ Hurston identifies Punter with the misleading initials “A.W.P.”, perhaps to deliberately confuse him with her second husband, Albert Price, another much younger lover. Hemenway leaves this man’s identity open, while Carla Kaplan identifies him as Punter (Hurston 231; Hurston: Life 338).

⁴² Critics who characterize this act as rebelliousness include Awkward (Inspiriting 35); Howard (103); Jacobs (348); Pondrom (192); Racine (286-88); and Daniel J. Sundahl (250).

⁴³ See, for example, Coles and Isaacs (9); Connor (157); Edwards (218); Howard (105); Kalb (177-78); Diane Matza (46); Meisenhelder (“False,” 1441-442); Paquet (505); and Thornton (262). Critics who interpret both terms positively are Holloway (129); Cooke (146); and Lowe (194).

⁴⁴ See also Messent (256-57); Lupton (49-50); and Joseph R. Urgo (“Tune” 52).

⁴⁵ For example, see Barthold (134); Bell (127); Bobb (4); Christian (Black Feminist 174); Crabtree (64-65); Toni Flores (57); Howard (105); Hudson-Weems (198); Jacobs (346-47); Maria Johnson (405); Kubitschek (111); Meisenhelder (Hitting, 69-70); Norman (35); Peters (146); Geraldine Smith-Wright (23); Priscilla Wald (194); Alice Walker (88); Wall (Women 190); and Wolff (30).

⁴⁶ Critics include Ashe (583); Elliot Butler-Evans (53-54); Callahan (138); Carr (199); Davie (456); Flores (57); Hapke (138), Hudson-Weems (199); and Knudsen (226).

⁴⁷ For example, see Jacobs (347); Kubitschek (111); Lowe (186-87); McCredie (27); Priscilla Wald (94); S. Jay Walker (521); and, to a certain extent, Urgo (“Tune” 52).

⁴⁸ See, for example, Bell (128); Brigham (415); Ferguson (194); Susan Lurie (51-52); Meisenhelder (Hitting, 72-73); Racine (289-90); and Wall (Women 190-1).

⁴⁹ For critics who agree with Lurie, see Davies (155); Sadoff (22); and Alice Walker (306-06).

⁵⁰ See, for example, Jordan (110); Lowe (186-87); Marks (156); Deborah G. Plant (167); and Sadoff (21). Some critics do refer to Hurston’s description of a fight between her and Punter which begins when she strikes him and ends with “no broken bones, you understand, and no black eyes,” but do not mention Hurston’s expressed regret over the incident, how “I realized afterwards that my hot mead could tell me to beat him, but it

would cost me something,” an explicit recognition that physical violence in intimate relationships is not acceptable whether instigated by a man or a woman (Dust 187).

⁵¹ Both Meisenhelder and Lurie reconcile Janie’s feminist rage with this notion of “loving service” by arguing that Hurston intentionally provides conflicting interpretations, although they disagree on her motivations, but both overemphasize this statement (Hitting, 90; 52). .

⁵² For examples of this interpretation, see Cassidy (261); Liliros (92); Meisenhelder (Hitting 73-74); and Gordon Thompson (744).

⁵³ See also Callahan (141); and Lurie (67).

⁵⁴ See also Awkward (Inspiriting 56); Bond (216); and Debra Walker King (61-62).

⁵⁵ Exceptions include Bell (127); Pat Carr and Lou Ann Crouther (56); duCille (123); Haas; and Hattenhauer (46-48).

Chapter 6: "Within Her Rights"

The Redemption of Female Desire in Willa Cather's Sapphira and the Slave Girl

As the final author in this study, Cather may appear out of place. The year of her birth, 1873, precedes the other writers by twenty years (the closest in age being Larsen, born in 1893), so Sapphira and the Slave Girl, although started in 1937, was not published until her sixty-seventh birthday (Lewis 181). This age difference places her squarely within the earlier New Woman generation, a significant detail considering this group's characterization as more sexually conservative and less artistically experimental than its heirs. In many ways Cather's biography appears to correspond. College educated, Cather initially supported her writing career with teaching and journalism jobs. She never married and her greatest loves appear to have been with women, including Louise Pound, Isabelle McClung, and Edith Lewis, yet she chose not to define herself publicly as homosexual, perhaps the reason she took great pains to control public access over her personal life even after her death in 1947. The contemporary consensus on her artistic style fits her generation as well. Her deceptively straight-forward narratives were often hailed for their humane and lyrical pathos, each, in one reviewer's words, a "tale of a time that is past . . . [where] one can see in the harmony of perspective, the design and meaning of coursing events which buffeted and confused those who participated in them" (Ross, "Willa" 1). But as the decades progressed her popular success was often credited to her unwillingness to sacrifice plot and character for radical narrative experimentation of the modern consciousness. As another reviewer points out during the height of modernism in 1928, although her novels explore "those intricate secrets of the heart which are insoluble," they are by no means "'psychological' novels . . . [which] dissect

and explain her people” (Whipple 39). Rebecca West similarly contends that unlike Lawrence, Joyce or James, who focus on “the fissures in the solid ground of life,” Cather’s fiction “move[s] on the sunlit face of the earth, with the gracious amplitude of Ceres, bidding the soil yield richly” (71). Her work clashed with the politically-conscious social realism of the 1930s just as it did with 1920s modernist experimentation, one critic fuming in 1933 that she “has never once tried to see contemporary life as it is; she sees only that it lacks what the past, at least in her idealization of it, had” (Hicks 144).¹

Cather’s novel may also appear thematically out of place in this study since the setting of Sapphira is not the rapidly changing urban world of the early twentieth century nor the rural black towns of the post-Reconstruction South but antebellum Virginia in a rural community, appropriately named Back Creek, so small that the stereotypical southern plantation, replete with columned mansions, armies of singing field hands, and graceful belles, is the exception, not the rule. Less a psychological novel than “a study of manners,” Sapphira focuses only on the intimate lives of one family, their household of slaves, and a small group of neighbors (Brown and Edel 311). This focus, as well as Cather’s avowed avoidance of political fiction, often presupposes critical assumptions about Sapphira’s classification as not a racial novel, a novel explicitly written to critique or uphold racial attitudes, but as a semi-autobiographical story, an attempt to come to terms with her own historical connection to slavery through her Virginia ancestors, as I explain below.² The novel’s critics and biographers have long struggled to reconcile its disparate elements and connect its themes to Cather’s other works, but this enigmatic and contradictory novel fits its time period – and this study – because of its willingness to

examine issues of gender, race, and sexuality and to confront disturbing social truths. Cather provides two models of female sexual autonomy in these title characters which conflict with traditional interpretations of a plantation mistress and a mulatta slave. In fact, she appears less constrained by race or setting than by male/female relations as neither model is based upon an equal and fulfilling heterosexual relationship. Before fully examining these matters, however, this study will posit why traditional critical views of Sapphira do not do justice to its complex social commentary.

“Those Unknown Persons”

Sapphira has often been characterized as an anomaly within Cather’s oeuvre thanks to a number of puzzling components. Its most unusual aspect is its epilogue, set in 1881, twenty-five years later than the preceding chapters, and shifting to first-person narration; even more confusing is how the narrator, an unnamed and genderless five-year-old child, simultaneously emphasizes its familiarity with the other characters (“Every since I could remember anything, I had heard about Nancy”) and obscures it (Sapphira and Rachel, presumably the child’s great-grandmother and grandmother, are simply “Mrs. Colbert” and “Mrs. Blake”).³ Despite these and other inconsistencies, the epilogue is still often assumed to be the interpretative key to Sapphira’s origin as a semi-autobiographical novel, making Cather the child narrator and the novel’s other characters her own ancestors, notably her maternal great-grandparents Jacob and Ruhamah Seibert and her grandmother Rachel Seibert Boak.⁴ Such a reading not only fits conveniently into the traditional view of Cather’s novels as nostalgic explorations of the past but also allows more skeptical critics to resolve Sapphira’s troubling ambiguities, particularly its

treatment of blacks and slavery. In other words, like Passing, many critics assume that the novel's irresolution is unintentional, that its unwillingness to neither fully absolve nor condemn its characters is the fault of an author too close to her subjects who "refused to maintain the distinctions between fact and fiction" (Skaggs 180). A similar view sees Cather, like other Southerners of her generation, as trying to be "loyal to and critical of the South at the same time," unable to fully indict her slave-owning ancestors for slavery's turbulent legacy so producing instead "a troubled version of reconciliation and forgiveness of the South and North" (Camacho 66; Pollard 50).

I certainly would not dispute that Cather's own attitudes towards race and her family's legacy with slavery most likely contributed to the novel's ambiguous depiction of blacks. Reconstructing Cather's own position on African Americans is difficult, though, given the paucity of extant material – letters, memoirs, etc. – on this topic. One popular anecdote is recounted by Edith Lewis: the child Cather, petted by a visiting judge, stuns the elderly man and her mother by shaking off his affection with the cry, "I'se a dang'ous nigger, I is!" (13). Most critics, including Lewis, presume that the story represents less a racial commentary than a gender one, Cather's active defiance of her mother's restrictive Southern culture by choosing, in Sharon O'Brien's words, an "identity most opposed to the one her mother had fashioned for her. . . . a disruptive, unruly, lower-caste outsider" (43-44). Lisa Marcus applies a more fitting analysis by recognizing that the scene is better explained by Toni Morrison's term "American Africanism" from Playing in the Dark, the ability of white Americans to perform race in order to destabilize other identity categories such as gender, class, and sexuality (98-99). Marcus takes into account the other popular story of Cather's racial affinities, her early

infatuation with her family's Confederate past. Marcus updates the more traditional view, voiced first by O'Brien, that Cather's youthful obsession with a maternal uncle who died fighting for the Confederacy was really a craving for maternal affiliation and affection (110). Analyzing Cather's two texts on the subject (a 1902 poem and 1907 short story) which share the significant name "The Namesake" in addition to the "dang'ous nigger" anecdote, Marcus asserts that they represent Cather's desire to "transgress the constraints of her gender" even while disregarding the "racial and gendered implications of southern womanhood," the complexity of which she does not address until Sapphira nearly a lifetime later (109, 108).

But even if we reject these biographical explanations for such disturbing racial loyalties, can we construe Cather's racial attitudes through a few texts nearly fifty years apart and some colorful youthful antics? For one, I find it difficult to believe that Cather's only influence on the "race problem" was her childhood upbringing or family ancestry, particularly given the media attention focused on African Americans in the late nineteenth- and early-twentieth centuries, from race riots to lynching to the Harlem Renaissance. As Janis P. Stout asserts, "we cannot suppose that she was entirely uninformed about the [racial] struggles that had gone on during her thirty-plus years as a New Yorker" (Cather 288). For another, her friendship and acquaintances with various bohemian artists, such as Floyd Dell and Mabel Dodge Luhan, as well as some Harlem Renaissance artists and sponsors, including Langston Hughes and Carl Van Vechten, suggests another avenue of liberal influence.⁵ And yet the last clue to Cather's perhaps deliberately obscure personal views on blacks is a cryptic reference in a 1941 letter to Violet Roseboro when she claims her last novel attempts to depict, in Marilyn Arnold's

paraphrase, “a disturbing elusive aspect of the world,” what Cather calls, “the Terrible” (325). Even though most critics read this reference as Cather’s deliberate engagement with the psychological repercussions of slavery on its owners and its victims, but Cather here does not seem to specify a particular time period or region, only a cultural or psychosocial practice.⁶ Thus, after decades of extreme cultural unease about race, Cather perhaps choose to address how white-dominated American society imposes its own anxieties, prejudices, and romantic notions on African Americans and the price African Americans pay for attempting to break free of these cultural stereotypes.

The popular view of the novel as autobiographical is supported in part by Cather’s own letters in which she apparently told a number of friends that the epilogue was a childhood memory.⁷ As James Woodress paraphrases, Cather insisted to one that “it all happened just as she told it, and it was the most exciting event of her life up to that time” (26).⁸ At the same time, this admission is complicated by Elizabeth Shipley Sergeant’s caveat of how Cather admitted to her “not long before she died, that she had, she felt, made an artistic error in bringing herself into the story” (270). What meaning for the text, if any, can be derived from this passing anecdote? In fact, the novel’s endnote, a late addition to the text, repeats the epilogue’s confusing mixture of distance and familiarity, for in it Cather insists that the names of several characters were derived from “acquaintances” of her parents but also confesses that it is “merely as names,” not personalities, that “those unknown persons” manifested “a lively fascination for me,” and, in fact, she has “in no case . . . used the name of a person whom I ever knew or saw” (295).⁹ As Stout has observed, “by introducing them ‘merely as names’ [Cather] calls attention to the verbal signs themselves and drains them of *either* fictive *or* nonfictive

reality” (Cather 296). Could this final letter to the reader be Cather’s first glimmering of doubt regarding her artistic choices in the epilogue? Perhaps Cather wanted this perplexing endnote to further distance the author from the child narrator by reiterating how the characters are, finally, words on a page, even if based on an “actual” Mrs. Bywaters or Nancy Till. In the end, then, the effect of the epilogue and endnote is to simultaneously disavow the author’s intimacy with these “unknown persons” and to claim them as her acts of creation, to emphasize her transformation of the unknowable into the known, the names into flesh and blood, the fascinating into the familiar.

Once Cather’s own doubts are illuminated, returning to the novel’s autobiographical influences in order to explain its incongruities seems even more reductive, but, as with “The Namesake” or Cather’s childish appropriation, critics continue to use an autobiographical alibi to shape the novel’s conflicting depictions of race and gender into a persuasive whole. Stout, O’Brien, and Cynthia Griffin Wolff have argued that the novel represents Cather’s willingness to come to terms with her problematic relationship with her mother, Virginia Boak Cather, and the strict Southern conventions of gender that she represented. Too often, though, slavery becomes obfuscated in favor of the novel’s familial subject matter until, like Their Eyes Were Watching God criticism, the novel’s subtle shading is washed out in order to present a rosy portrait of female interdependency and ancestral lineage, an oversight that continues to hamper interpretation of this novel. For example, after a nuanced discussion in her 1984 essay, “The Unknown, Well-Known Child in Cather’s Last Novel,” Eugenie Lambert Hamner concludes, “Sapphira is therefore an illuminating study of the interrelationships of a group of strong women, including a little girl who was fascinated by their real life models,” while Judith Fetterley

opens the 2000 collection of essays Willa Cather's Southern Connections with the assertion, "Sapphira is not about slavery or race in any directly legible sense. Though one has to wonder about the implications of Cather's appropriating the story of Nancy and Till to tell her own story of the relations of mothers and daughters, . . . perhaps the most devastating thing one can say about her is that she did not think race mattered" (356; 16).¹⁰ Just as the race commentary in Passing is, for some critics, merely a screen for homosexual jealousy and triangulation, to some Sapphira critics slavery is ultimately only a means, not an end, for the novel's story of mother/daughter conflict and reconciliation. Thus, while relatively persuasive from one viewpoint, from another autobiographical readings too often misrepresent the novel's plot by simplifying its biting commentary on racial relations and female sexual autonomy.

Of course, the sheer number of mother/daughter pairs makes it impossible to dispute the importance of matrilineal relations to the novel's overall schemata. Besides Sapphira Colbert, her daughter Rachel Blake, and her granddaughters Mary and Betty, the plot revolves around the slave families of Jezebel, her granddaughter Till and Till's daughter Nancy as well as Lizzie, the cook, and her daughter Bluebell. These familial ties do heighten the novel's interpersonal tensions and dispute the assumption that maternal bonds naturally produce empathy, love, and respect. But what I find to be the most troubling trend in Sapphira criticism is the number of critics who move beyond an analysis of the parallels between black and white families to argue, as Fetterley does, that "Nancy is as much [Sapphira's] daughter as Rachel is" (17).¹¹ The conflation of a mistress/slave relationship with a mother/daughter one is more than a little disturbing, regardless of whether the critical pendulum ultimately swings toward an optimistic

resolution or a pessimistic irresolution of Cather's intergenerational rivalry. To place Nancy's subordination to Sapphira within such a context, even with the best intentions, risks repeating the pattern of paternalism that white Americans have so often used to oppress other races.¹² Even if the novel provided evidence that Sapphira once harbored maternal feelings for Nancy (an interpretation which I dispute below), the machinations of slavery time after time reveal the true dynamics of their relationship as owner and slave, not the very least of which is the novel's central focus, Sapphira's conspiracy against Nancy, for it demonstrates that Sapphira's proprietary ownership over Nancy is *more* absolute than a maternal attachment. Sapphira not only demonstrates her control over Nancy's body by repeatedly placing it in her profligate nephew's way, but she also greatly influences Nancy's state of mind, as Nancy's desperate suicidal speech exemplifies (216-17). In contrast, Sapphira is consistently unable to control her own daughter at any time in Rachel's life; even as a child, Sapphira labels her as having "always been difficult, – rebellious toward the fixed ways which satisfied other folk," and an adult Rachel defies her mother by having "opinions on matters which did not concern women at all," such as slavery (15, 132).

To Cather's credit, she does not supply any evidence to suggest a mother/daughter reading of Sapphira and Nancy's relationship; Sapphira's attitude towards Nancy is never influenced by familial emotions of affection or responsibility. Granted, Cather relates how her past behavior was more positive compared to her recent petty cruelty, but the description does not imply anything more than a vain woman's enjoyment in exhibiting a favorite pet or object: "Until lately Mrs. Colbert had shown [Nancy] marked favouritism; gave her pretty clothes to set off her pretty face, and liked to have her in attendance when

she had guests or drove abroad” (18). Sapphira’s pleasure in Nancy’s company is closely connected to her ownership of the pretty slave, who, like Sapphira’s ostentatious carriage with its glass windows and the “Dodderidge crest” and elaborate gardens with “flower-beds, shrubbery, and a lilac arbour,” requires the admiration of others to fulfill her usefulness to Sapphira’s ego (35, 20). In a similar way, Sapphira’s reminiscences with a dying Jezebel mainly concern Jezebel’s horticultural skill in creating and tending the gardens, as if Sapphira can only recount those traits which directly benefited her self-aggrandizing sense of propriety (87-88). Even Sapphira’s willingness to provide Jezebel with an elaborate funeral feast is revealed to be another opportunity to accrue public envy, for she threatens Lizzie, the cook, with the sale of her daughter if she repeats her past “stinginess” with the food, which Sapphira insists “put disgrace on me, and it was talked about all up and down the Creek” (99). Later, when Rachel reconsiders her role in Nancy’s escape, she never raises the possibility that Sapphira will miss Nancy *the person* – her sweet nature, for example, or her aesthetic sensibility. What Rachel regrets instead is “the hurt this would be to her mother’s pride. . . . her mother hated to be overreached or outwitted, and she was sorry to have brought another humiliation to one who had already lost so much” (246). In other words, Rachel feels sorry for her mother *the owner*, for her public humiliation in failing to keep her property secure.

Rachel’s musings are a critical moment in the novel since they offer a telling revision to her earlier observation about Sapphira’s “inconsistencies” towards her slaves when she had contrasted Sapphira’s “entirely self-centered” disposition with her kind treatment of Jezebel and her willingness to feed and clothe a slave who does not work, Tansy Dave, and to allow him to wander freely after being heartbroken in love (220).

Indeed, critics often follow Rachel's lead to argue that Sapphira's "singular indulgence with Tansy Dave, her real affection for Till and old Jezebel" evinces some inner core of generosity and sympathy for her slaves, and some move even further to argue, as Deborah Carlin does, that such relationships reveal Cather's "nostalgic and fond remembrance of slavery" (220; 170).¹³ But Sapphira's "real affection" for Jezebel is limited, as her previously-described selfish behavior during Jezebel's illness and death demonstrates, and Rachel now admits that although Sapphira never minded the "property loss" of Tansy Dave's labor, if he had succeeded in his escape attempt to find his true love in Baltimore, her mother would "have had him seized and brought back" (246). Thus, Sapphira may sometimes be benevolent but she is never maternal; Cather shows that Sapphira's self-interest in her relationships with her slaves is an extension of her egotistical materialism, tainting even those seemingly solicitous moments. But, as I discuss below, Cather instills in Sapphira the self-determination, intellectual focus, and economic independence that typify the twentieth-century's flapper persona.

Recent critics have also disputed the mother/daughter dynamic of Sapphira and Nancy's relationship but from the opposing end of the sexual spectrum, asserting that Sapphira's plot is instigated by her own erotic feelings for Nancy which she then acts out through Martin Colbert. Again, these critics, including Julie Abraham, Naomi E. Morgenstern, Jonathan Goldberg, and Minrose C. Gwin, work hard to present a compelling argument and do partially succeed, given the complex sexual threads that hold the plot together. However, readings which interpret any erotic tension as lesbian in a displacement or triangulation theory risk, in Marilee Lindemann's words, turning the novel into "a nightmarish perversion of the 'truth' of [Cather's] desires" (134). Like the

intergenerational Sapphira theorists, these critical approaches usually assume that the novel's ambiguities rise from Cather's psyche, that she is unable to resolve her own psychosexual conflicts and so reverts to a "conventional figuration of lesbian sexuality as both masculine and powerless" (Abraham 58). Within this framework, presumably Cather's own doubts and confusion influence her presentation of "female-female desires . . . [as] intense, murderous, incoherent, and incapacitated" (Goldberg 37). While I do believe that Cather's sexuality most likely influenced her views on how sexuality is understood culturally, such readings reproduce stereotypical assumptions about lesbian identity without any biographical foundation. Moreover, I argue that Sapphira's sexual power arises from confluence of her personality with the flapper persona which is, as Chapter 2 explained, firmly planted within heterosexual normativity. Even more credible accounts which argue that Cather's novels consistently portray heterosexual sex as violent and dangerous move into the same territory when they link these depictions to "Cather's own rejection of heterosexual relationships [and] her apparent desire to be a man" (Gwin 145).¹⁴ At the same time, my argument is compatible with these interpretations since I contend that ultimately, Sapphira's motivation in implementing the plot is less critical than its intended, and then its actual, result.

Admittedly, a number of autobiographical parallels between Sapphira and Cather can be drawn, particularly Sapphira's increasing infirmity and accompanying decline in sexual relations, mainly because of Cather's age and health problems during the writing of Sapphira, including bouts of the flu and a painful hand injury (Woodress 478-79). Her mental state was no doubt further exacerbated by the deaths in 1938 of Isabelle McClung, one of her first loves who remained close even after her eventual marriage, and her

brother Douglass. In addition, Cather's sexual orientation most likely contributed to her sensitivity to cultural depictions of sexuality and, as a number of critics have argued, her novels reveal that she is attuned to the many ways gender is socially constructed and controlled. Sapphira's attitude towards her own sexual needs is, as I discuss in the third section, a modern view that her author most likely shared. And yet, despite other, more commonly documented autobiographical elements in the novel, none of its sexual ones have been designated autobiographical correlates, including Sapphira's rape scheme, the ambiguous circumstances of Nancy's conception, and Martin Colbert's predatory sexual reputation.¹⁵ Furthermore, erotic desire, as this study first demonstrated with Passing, means more than simply who a person desires and how that desire is consummated. Since sexual passion also cannot be separated from racial dynamics, any examination of the sexual tensions in Sapphira must take into account its depiction of female sexuality across this spectrum as well as how each individual woman appears to perceive her own sexuality in contrast to, and in competition with, the sexuality of other women. Although the novel's complex figuration of sexual desire may make it difficult sometimes to distinguish a woman's jealousy of another's sexual desirability with locus of that sexual desire, my analysis contends that Cather actually takes pains to differentiate Sapphira's need to feel sexually desirable from her jealousy of Nancy's sexual desirability. What stymies these positive depictions of modern female sexuality is an outlet for these desires, for nowhere in the novel does Cather provide an image of a healthy and fulfilling sexual relationship.

Pure in Heart or Purely Pathetic?

In order to assert Sapphira and the Slave Girl's interest in twentieth-century sexual models, its historical authenticity must first be evaluated, as some critics, notably Gwin and Ann Romines, have already done. Most importantly, the assumption that the master, Henry Colbert, would be having an affair with his female slave is appropriate, and Sapphira's vengeful anger is also an understandable reaction for a nineteenth-century plantation mistress, given her limited legal and social power. However, when it comes to pin-pointing the true intent of Sapphira's plan, most critics are silent on why the mistress of the house, jealous of her husband's attentions to a female slave but unable to sell her without the master's consent, would invite her rapacious nephew for a visit in order to rape the slave and what she hopes the effects of the rape would be.¹⁶ Some critics contend that Sapphira is simply trying, in Gwin's words, to reestablish "her power over [Henry] in their relationship," and Sapphira's despotism is obvious throughout the novel (133).¹⁷ But such an explanation does not take into account Henry's complete acquiescence to his wife's domination, as his comments early in the novel, "You're the master here, and I'm the miller. And that's how I like it to be," demonstrate, nor does it resolve the initial question of why the rape would reestablish power in Sapphira's favor (50). Other critics, like Angela M. Salas, believe that the rape conspiracy is intended to ruin Henry and Nancy's close relationship by "put[ting] an end to Henry's attraction to her," yet the novel indicates that Martin's efforts actually arouse Henry's erotic passion, not subsume it, for even Henry admits that the "poison in the young scamp's blood seemed to stir something in his own. The Colbert in him threatened to raise its head after long hibernation" (98; 209).¹⁸ Since Martin's lascivious presence alone is enough to

disrupt Henry's carefully contained affection for Nancy, so much so that he eventually begins to avoid her, there would be no need for Sapphira to provide Martin with multiple opportunities to violently consummate his desire for Nancy (209).

There is a logical explanation for Sapphira's motivation but one that defies historical accuracy. The key occurs in the novel's first conversation when Henry refuses Sapphira's initial request to sell Nancy, saying, "This isn't a slave-owning neighborhood. If you sold *a good girl like Nancy* off to Winchester, people hereabouts would hold it against you" (8, emphasis added). After Henry reiterates, "I'll never sign for Nancy," his wife says to herself, "Then we must find some other way" (9). This conversation indicates that what she intends to do "some other way" is to sell Nancy, so she concocts a plan to prove that Nancy is no longer "a good girl" (9). This plan is necessarily complex given Sapphira's limited options; the easiest, disclosing Henry's alleged sexual affair with Nancy, would question Sapphira's own sexual worth and destroy her family's long-standing moral and social position in the community, whereas instigating and then exposing Martin's involvement would have two desired effects: one, it would destroy Nancy's repute, and two, it would not affect Martin's because he is a notorious rake. Martin's standing is also less important to Sapphira since he is a Colbert, not a Dodderidge, and a visitor to Back Creek. Once Sapphira's scheme is clearly laid out, it clearly reflects the social context of its writing rather than its fictional time period because in the 1850s the sexual morality of a female slave would not be such a weighty issue.¹⁹ As Toni Morrison summarizes, in a slave-holding society, "there can be no grounds for Sapphira's thinking that Nancy can be 'ruined' in the conventional sense" (25). The paucity of slave owners should not suggest that, as Joseph Urgo presumes,

“slavery is not accepted” in Back Creek, for Henry’s comment is an oversimplification; while the Mill Farm far exceeds the usual number of “four or five Negroes,” slaves still supplement the households of many area families (Novel 159; 22). Cather also indicates that the anti-slavery sentiments held by Rachel, Mrs. Bywaters, and David Fairhead are the minority view. Moreover, anti-slavery sentiments do not automatically confer upon whites an egalitarian attitude towards blacks, as Rachel’s motherly attitude and “resolute cheerfulness which she did not always feel” towards slaves seems to suggest (17). Despite the nostalgic tone of the novel’s colorful details and scenic descriptions, then, the plot hinges on a modern definition of black female sexual propriety, and traditional assumptions of the black female libido are disrupted even from the beginning as the opening chapter posits that a black woman is not inherently or naturally lascivious but must be forced, with violence, into sexual immorality in order to alter her moral standing in the community.

Nancy’s sexuality is thus a critical point of contention in the novel. Not only is Nancy’s sexual reputation at stake, but Cather also constructs the plot around a pivotal detail: Sapphira assumes first Henry and then Martin will find Nancy sexually desirable, as both eventually do.²⁰ At the same time, Nancy’s erotic allure seems at odds with her innocent and child-like nature. What, then, makes Nancy sexually desirable? Is Cather merely replaying conventional stereotypes about black female eroticism? Is Nancy aware of her own desirability? And is she merely a sexual pawn or does she have any sexual desire of her own? Focusing on Nancy’s physical appearance is the first step in determining how her sexual desirability is constructed by those around her, and, indeed, her youthful vitality seems to be her most attractive asset, particularly in contrast to

Sapphira's age and debilitating illness. The first full description of Nancy in the second chapter emphasizes her "white teeth," "pretty face" and "slender, nimble hands . . . like a child's" (17, 18). But if Sapphira's jealousy is aroused by her envy for Nancy's "blooming, fresh sexuality," as critics like Marcus assert, then why does it not extend to the other young women on the farm (110)? During her nighttime jealous rage, Sapphira mentions, "the four young coloured girls, not counting Bluebell" who could be sharing Henry's bed instead of Nancy only to have her fear dissipate at the sight of Nancy sleepily answering her clapper bell, a reconfirmation of the focal point of her anxiety (106). Consequently, there must be something about Nancy that makes her more sexually desirable than her peers, and the novel repeatedly describes the "eager affection" and "eagerness to please" that make her "warmer and more alive" than dull Bluebell and reticent Till (17, 43). Nancy's countenance certainly endears her to Henry, who describes her as "a soft spring breeze; a shy, devoted creature who touched everything so lightly" and compares her with "sweet" Mercy from Pilgrim's Progress (192-93, 67).

However, Nancy's has a much more obvious characteristic which distinguishes her from the other slave women: her racially mixed heritage, visible in her "pale gold" skin and "straight black hair with no kink in it" (17, 42). This racial distinction between Nancy and the other black women is a key component of Sapphira's plot since Sapphira knows that any hint of sexual indecorum around Nancy, regardless of whether she is the innocent victim of sexual violence, would recategorize her from "good girl" to "bad" mulatta. Cather is relying on what Joel Williamson calls in his study, New People: Miscegenation and Mulattoes in the United States, "the archetypal image in the white mind of the supersexy and probably sinful 'high-yellow' woman" (162). As Williamson

indicates, the dual threat of the mulatta is carried in part by the assumption that white men find light-skinned black women more sexually desirable than other black women, a belief clearly shared not only by Sapphira but also by Mill Farm's slaves. Indeed, the suspicious rumors perpetrated by Lizzie and Bluebell about Nancy and Henry's relationship are specifically connected to Nancy's racial lineage; Lizzie taunts, "An' you makes his bed cumfa'ble fur him? Ain't dat nice! I speck! Look out you don't do it once too many. Den it ain't so fine, when somethin' begins to show on you, Miss Yaller Face," while Bluebell explains to Martin that Nancy is considered "stuck up, havin' white blood" amidst hints about why the "Marster . . . prefer Nancy" (60, 185, 184). The other half of the sexual menace carried by "the yellow girl" arises from the belief, inherent in the "tragic mulatta" stereotype, that she would, in turn, sexually desire only a white man as an outgrowth of her "warring blood," since, in Sterling Brown's words, "the whole desire of her life is to find a white lover" (45). This singular focus on Nancy also undermines the critical assumption that Sapphira sexualizes all blacks since Nancy's desirability is the only one Sapphira, or anyone else, finds disruptive. Therefore, Nancy's status as a mulatta, not a slave woman, is what makes her sexuality threatening, and Cather appears to take as doctrine racist stereotypes of the sexually seductive, always available mulatta.

Or does she? As I mentioned, Cather works to disassociate Nancy's warmth and devotion from the erotic by emphasizing her childlike disposition, whether in physical features like her "slender, nimble hands" or in her "natural delicacy of feeling. Ugly sights and ugly words sickened her" (18, 43). Significantly, the latter observation, part of the novel's most thorough assessment of Nancy's personality, is offered by the narrator,

not through another character's consciousness, a crucial factor which increases the relevance of this detail, although other characters do recognize Nancy's ingenuousness, demonstrated by Rachel's and Henry's constant address of her as "child" and Sampson's observation to his owner, "I never seen Nancy do nothin' free nor unbecomin' when she comes an' goes" (191). Granted, to some tastes, Nancy's childishness may make her more, not less, erotic, but this puerility is emphasized by Nancy's delicacy towards sexual matters. Cather describes how she runs off whenever she "sense[s] a dirty joke coming" and bursts into tears under Lizzie's "lewd" accusations about her and Henry (44, 61). Therefore, Nancy is not necessarily unaware of sexual relations and sexual desire but appears to avoid them, focusing, for example, on the good fortune of being related to a man who could paint "wonderful" pictures rather than on the horrifying notion that she is the product of the sexual coercion of her married mother (42). Even when Martin arouses her fears and misgivings, she is still willing to overlook his previous sexually aggressive behavior and show him kindness during the cherry orchard scene when she decides that he "didn't look wicked. Maybe he only meant to tease her anyhow, and she just didn't know how young men behaved over in the racing counties. . . . Maybe he was just young and foolish like, not bad" (179-80).

The implications of these personal qualities have often led critics to arrive at radically different conclusions about Nancy. On one hand, this conflict is purely a matter of sympathy. At best, Nancy is, in one critic's words, "young, unschooled, inexperienced," raised on an isolated country farm and relatively spoiled as a favorite slave of both the master and, until recently, the mistress (Wasserman 7). Endowed with an aesthetic sensibility and "desire to create beauty," she symbolizes "art in being," an

artist who uses “housekeeping as an expressive, loving language” and the only tools available to her, like flowers, to convey her inner joy and affection (C Wolff 222; Newman 62; Romines, Home 178). Although physically a woman, her mind has not yet adjusted to her sexual maturity, so she is “an innocent victim of the changes within her body,” powerless to fight against adults who view her sexual desirability as a threat or an invitation (Rosowski, Voyage 237). And, like Cather’s other heroines, she is “the pure in heart whom no evil can defeat wholly,” another young woman who must “struggle to free [herself] from a hostile environment” (Zabel 224; Randall66).

At worst, Nancy’s disposition is overly simplified to emphasize her powerless, virginal demeanor and the horror of Sapphira’s attempted crime against her, resulting in not just “a perfect victim,” but “a blank space, a stock figure,” perhaps even “intentionally . . . characterized as forgettable” (Morrison 24; Morgenstern 191; Yoshikawa 79). To use Morrison’s oft-cited phrase, she is “pure to the point of vapidty,” as well as cloying, “pathetic,” and “hysterical” (19; Fetterley 17; Geismar 199). So enfeebled that she is unable “even to know what she wants,” her juvenile mind cannot formulate an adequate defense against Martin’s threatening behavior, forcing her to rely on whites like Rachel to help her out of the situation (Gwin 144). Even when she is shown the door to freedom she begs to return to bondage, crying that she would rather “go back an’ try to do better” than flee a sadistic mistress and tenacious rapist into “nowheres” (237).

On the other hand, critics use these references to Nancy’s immature temperament in order to raise questions about Cather’s attitude towards African Americans in general. For instance, Nancy’s puerility is even more disturbing with the detail that she is actually

older than all three Colbert daughters were when they married, but whether this naiveté is the result of her station, race, or personality is unclear (191). Does Cather mean to imply, as Gwin argues, that “slavery makes children of blacks” or a more troubling stereotype plucked from slavery defense rhetoric that “slaves are childlike and therefore need to be looked after,” as other critics assert (143; McDonald 101)?²¹ Granted, the latter conclusion seems feasible when set against other moments in the book where Cather’s view of Nancy is articulated in explicitly racist terms, notably the reference to Nancy’s “dreamy, foolish, nigger side” (178). Besides descriptive terms for blacks like “an old rat” and “lean old grey monkey,” Cather also blames Till’s serious demeanor on her childhood separation “away from the emotional darkies” and has Sampson refuse his owner’s offer of freedom as if proving Henry’s belief that slaves do not know how “to take care of themselves or to provide for tomorrow” (33, 86, 70, 108).

I do not want to dismiss or excuse these problematic elements in the novel, but I similarly do not want to fall into the critical trap of being unable to move beyond a condemnation of the novel’s racialist characteristics to analyze its other cultural elements or reducing the presence of race to a single negative evaluation. As Goldberg has summarized, “facing racism would seem to make it impossible [for critics] to think productively about sexuality in the charged situation represented by Sapphira and the Slave Girl” (365; 34-35). What I find most intriguing about this novel is Cather’s conscious decision to make sexual jealousy and sexual reputation the central dynamic between the main female characters during a time period when cultural depictions of female sexuality were changing rapidly. Cather’s genuine sympathy for this slave girl led her into a plot scenario that provides a positive, even radical reassessment of black

female sexuality even if this specific focus was beyond her original intent. Nancy's progression in the novel may be the journey of a young, black woman who learns that she has the right to control her sexual destiny and in the process revises many, although not all, negative sexual stereotypes of black women. I still agree that Cather's authorial choices do sometimes, in the words of Hermione Lee, make for an "embarrassing reading," and am troubled by, to paraphrase Morrison, her compassionate gestures towards slavery, but as Judith Berzon points out in her groundbreaking study Neither White nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction, in white-authored literary history, Nancy stands out as a "very appealing[,] . . . sensitive, proud, brave, and independent" black woman (365; 28; 71). Even though we are unable to discern how consciously Cather constructed her novel to address such issues, Sapphira nevertheless disproves traditional cultural conventions of female sexuality, black and white, with a modern sensibility and so engages with the on-going debate over female sexual autonomy.

The Family Inheritance

The next assessment that must be made about the novel's female characters is whether any of them have sexual autonomy: the ability to have desire, to act on that desire, and to satisfy it. Critics who offer a queer reading of Sapphira's motivations construct one version of Sapphira's sexual autonomy, although for them her desire is expressed violently and fulfilled vicariously. Without this homoerotic paradigm, elements of Sapphira's erotic passion are still present and are still related to Martin's visit, but he makes her feel sexually desirable, not sexually aggressive. In fact, Sapphira

seems quite conscious of her sexuality and capable of seeking male companionship to satisfy it, albeit after her illness she is content with sexual attention rather than sexual relations. As a result, Sapphira more closely fits not the stereotype of the modest, demure nineteenth-century plantation mistress, the “Angel of the Household,” but of the twentieth-century flapper.

Sapphira, of course, does not have a career nor a college education, but within the standards of nineteenth-century behavior, she follows modern attitudes towards female independence. Sapphira, prior to her illness, was active in the plantation’s upkeep, a “good manager” over the farm’s extensive chores, which Cather indicates are many with a list of the “gardening and planting, butchering time and meat-curing. . . . preserving and jelly-making, the drying of cherries and currants and sweet corn and sliced apples” (54). Granted, in theory the plantation is an extension of the household, a nineteenth-century woman’s proper domain, and it also would be in keeping with Cather’s other novels, such as My Antonia and O Pioneers!, to demonstrate in detail the enormous physical toil that “women’s work” actually entails. But Cather takes care to emphasize Sapphira’s business acumen even before her marriage when as a young woman she attends her father’s business conferences with Henry, taking “some part in their discussion of the management of the farm lands and stock. It was she who rode over the estate to see that the master’s orders were carried out. She went to the public sales on market days and bought in cattle and horses” (24). Perhaps, then, Sapphira is a career woman despite her lack of salary or choice of the family business; like many young women in the twentieth century, including Cather, she works in a traditionally masculine environment and competes with men on their own intellectual and economic terms. Given the fact that

Mill Farm is her inheritance, she could also be said to be economically independent, responsible for maintaining her family's upstanding in the community as well as their economic well-being.

Just as her continued management of the farm shows her self-determination to not let her illness deter her independence, Sapphira's relationship with Martin reveals her continued need to maintain her sexual autonomy within her physical limitations. Cather describes his conduct with Sapphira as "easy, confidential, a trifle free in manner, as if she were not an old woman and an invalid," concluding "That was how [Sapphira] liked it" (154). In other words, he treats her as if she were young and able-bodied, flirtatiously kissing her cheek instead of her hand and freely discussing his roguish affairs (152). Even Henry acknowledges that Martin is "very attentive to her" (189). For her part, Sapphira admits to herself that she finds Martin's looks "attractive" and his cavalier ways appealing, making excuses that "spirited young men were wild and always would be" (153, 163). Cather certainly emphasizes that Martin's mien exudes sexuality, noting that even his laugh was "on the edge of being vulgar – rather loose, caught-in-the-act as it were" (164). Martin and Sapphira's coy relationship also makes sense considering the declining relations in her marriage as Sapphira and Henry spend little time together and presumably no longer share any physical contact. Henry now lives almost full time at the mill house, appearing just for meals and "an hour in the parlour" with his wife (47, 66). Until their last scene together when he weeps, "his head on her knee" and face in her hands, there are almost no incidents of physical affection between them at all (267). Unable to rely on her husband's emotional or physical attentiveness, Sapphira constructs other ways to recapture the male sexual interest necessary to her heterosexual female ego.

Sapphira's need for Martin's attention, her need to feel sexually desirable, is a significant detail because some critics have argued that Sapphira sexualizes African Americans by projecting her own erotic needs onto them. Morrison maintains that the "surrogate black bodies become her hands and feet, her fantasies of sexual ravish and intimacy with her husband," and Patrick W. Shaw similarly asserts that "the 'darkies' onto whom Sapphira displaces her erotic motivations are the objective epitome of the unresolved 'dark' conflicts which surrounded her own sexuality" (26; 182). Granted, Sapphira seems unwilling to confront the source of her unfulfilled sexual desire – her deformed, bloated body and distant husband. She also notices, for instance, that her slave Tap is "a handsome boy" (85). This tangled web of projected eroticism, though, designates blacks as both agents and victims of Sapphira's repressed desire, a confusing duality that is further complicated by the additional assertion that Sapphira is projecting her desire onto Martin as well, as both critics also contend. Cather certainly links the illness that distorts and cripples Sapphira's body with her perverse desire to ruin Nancy, noting how Sapphira, lacking physical activities and other hobbies like reading, now has time for "speculations" about her and Henry's relationship (54). Her nighttime musing over "the meaning of illness" also precipitates the "strange alarms and suspicions" about Nancy's behavior (105). But a closer look at who in the novel has sexual desire and who does not demonstrates that Cather's comparison of black and white female sexuality cannot be simplified into clear racial, or racist, categories. Like Irene Redfield, Sapphira's sexual needs are interrelated and multi-faceted, so she may be jealous of Nancy's sexual desirability and Martin's ability to freely satisfy his erotic desire while also desiring Martin's sexual gallantries as a substitute for her absent husband's. In fact,

Sapphira differentiates between sexual desirability, sexual expression, and sexual fulfillment and always more by gender and less by race; she is willing to give men, black and white, more sexual license than women and seems to find an aggressive male libido attractive more than enviable. As a result, Cather's presentation of modern female autonomy reveals not only women's new liberating attitude over their sexual gratification but also the restrictions on female sexual propriety and inequity in male/female relations that continued to form the foundation of normative heterosexual behavior.

Sapphira's validation of male sexual license is most evident in her indulgence of Martin's behavior, dismissing her husband's concerns that he will "demoralize the servants" by faulting not Martin's erotic drive but the slaves' foolishness if they do not "know their places better" and cannot "look out" for themselves (199). She seems similarly unperturbed by his flings with white mountain girls, and lest she appear merely class conscious, she also maintains the same indifference when considering her own daughter's suitor, appearing unconcerned when Michael Blake is revealed to have a womanizer's history and focusing instead on "his good manners, his handsome face and blue eyes" (133, 131). Even her husband is confused about why she continues to pamper Tansy Dave, a slave driven to alcoholism and waywardness by his passion for "a taking wench," yet from this perspective her behavior may be another instance of her sympathy for male cupidity (208, 205). Most importantly, Sapphira's attitude about the male sexual drive has influenced her marriage from the beginning. Rather than finding such gossip distasteful or shameful, she needles Henry frequently about his family's repute for male lasciviousness and admits that even if "she had married the only Colbert who had a conscience, . . . she sometimes wished he hadn't quite so much" (8-9, 199, 108). There is

even a hint that the Colberts' rakish reputation attracted her to him, for when Henry muses over the family's "bad blood," he confesses that he "knew the family inheritance well enough. He had his share of it. But *since his marriage* he had never let it get the better of him" (191, 192, emphasis added). Although Cather is careful to point out earlier that Henry "had never been charged with a bastard," this passage implies that Henry's sexual drive had previously been as strong as his brothers' and nephew's (66). Perhaps, then, this insinuation is the key to the mystery of the Colberts' marriage, the "strangeness" of their union that puzzles her friends even decades later (25). Behind the "plain, hard-working, little-speaking" façade, perhaps Henry's libido was so strong he could seduce the wealthy and cultured Sapphira Dodderidge (23).

Taken together, these references to Sapphira's sexual desire and need for erotic male attention again reveal how Cather's tale refutes convention and typifies twentieth-century attitudes, for as a nineteenth-century southern plantation mistress, Sapphira should embody "True Womanhood."²² A number of critics have pointed out that she is an inverse of this stereotype, being willful, domineering, cruel, and vengeful, but almost all overlook this significant detail about her sexual needs most likely due to her current lack of an active sexual life.²³ Even if she maintains gender-designated sexual roles by validating an active male attitude to sexual fulfillment and a relatively passive method of female sexual expression, Sapphira is a model of twentieth-century sexuality since she knows what arouses her erotic drive and is willing to fulfill it as best she can even when limited by age and infirmity. Nancy may be the impetus for Martin's visit, but she is not the catalyst for Sapphira's reassertion of her sexual autonomy. As a mulatta Nancy may be, in fact, a representation in Sapphira's mind of a threatening, aggressive female

sexuality: a force Sapphira previously imagined herself to be. Ironically, by trying to rescript the public perception of Nancy's sexuality to match Sapphira's conception of her, Sapphira reasserts her own sexual agency.

What, then, prevented Cather from presenting a modern woman able to fulfill her sexual needs in a psychologically healthy, relatively egalitarian relationship? She is, on one hand, constrained by the plot and character development. Sapphira and Henry's marriage overall seems to lack a stable balance of power in any domain or period of their relationship, and Martin is more than willing to play his subordinate role in Sapphira's plot. But Cather does not offer a model of such a relationship where it more logically could occur, in the marriage between Sapphira's daughter, Rachel, and her now deceased husband, Michael, as I discuss below. Similarly, as I later posit, the epilogue offers few details of Nancy's marriage, another missed opportunity to explore the normative and fitting fulfillment of a flapper's sexual autonomy. Perhaps, then, Cather was constrained as well by the limitations within the modern perception of female sexuality, notably its insistence upon monogamous monogamy built within a traditional power dichotomy.

Before proceeding to Nancy, I feel a full examination of the models of female sexuality must take into account the novel's other main white female character, Rachel, as she too is a rejection of the traditional interpretation of southern womanhood. Although she initially appears devoid of sexual drive, Rachel shares her mother's attraction to men since her slavish devotion to her husband Michael is unaltered by knowledge of his rakish past, even when he acknowledges that he has "liked his liberty," placing Rachel and her mother on the same moral ground regarding male sexual behavior (133). Despite their visible disagreements on other matters, such as slavery, Sapphira and

her daughter find sexual lasciviousness a natural, even alluring characteristic in most men. Such a viewpoint adds sexual innuendo to the description of Rachel's "will to self-abnegation . . . [which] took the form of untiring service to a man's pleasure" (141). Rachel may disapprove of the "scapegrace" Martin but given her previous attitude, it may be his aggressive tactics and extreme repute as "the worst rake in the country," not his sexual impulses, that she finds disdainful (220, 169).

At the same time, Rachel's pious modesty is explicitly emphasized against Michael's rapacious sexual history, justified with the explanation that, "Young bachelors who were free in their morals were very exacting that the girl they chose for a wife should be virginal in mind as well as in body. The worst that could be said of an unmarried girl was that 'she knew too much'" (134). Introducing this double standard amidst romantic details of Rachel and Michael's courtship is a curious maneuver, as it "undercuts the moment's sentimental preciousness," in Arnold's words (37). More importantly, this elucidation reveals the extent to which the female libido is controlled by social convention, implicitly positing that a virginal mind is less a natural state than an artificially constructed practice to maintain strict gender roles and reminding us how much sway such sexual categorizations hold over a woman's future. Such standards also exempt African American women like Nancy since she begins the novel "virginal in mind" but must learn "too much" about sex after being forced to defend her own sexual autonomy. Once again, in her characterization of Rachel, Cather alludes to the importance of female sexual autonomy but is unable or unwilling to conceptualize of an egalitarian heterosexual relationship in which this autonomy can be fulfilled.

Arguing that a nineteenth-century plantation mistress epitomizes twentieth-century attitudes of the flapper may seem incongruous, but such a perspective redesignates Sapphira's characteristics as positive demonstrations of female strength and independence rather than relying on the more simplistic inverse explanation or even damning Sapphira to villainy, as some critics, most notably Joseph R. Urgo, have done, when he declared "Sapphira is among the most evil women in American literature" (Myth 92).²⁴ Urgo did not comment on the inherent sexism in his accompanying statement, "In creating her Cather bestows on the female character what she rarely possesses in American literary culture: power and responsibility," yet it fits neatly within my point regarding the assertion of self-determination and will that accompanied the 1920s revolution in white female sexuality (Myth 92). Cather takes pains to suggest that it is Sapphira's intent, not the source of her motivation, that is evil, and that her strength of character is perhaps even admirable when divorced from her plot to destroy the sexual autonomy of her slave. This is, perhaps, the message of the epilogue, where the novel's final ambiguous attitude toward Sapphira is also critical to this depiction of her sexual autonomy. Some critics have found the favorable portrait of Sapphira at the end of the novel disturbing and contradictory; Susan J. Rosowski, for example, argues that Sapphira does not become "a sympathetic character . . . until her last scene" when she "becomes, in effect, another character," while for Lindemann, "the text's strenuous effort to redeem the character [of Sapphira] in the end" is the novel's "most troubling" aspect (Voyage 234, 242; 137).²⁵ But in this context, redeeming Sapphira is necessary to validate her need for sexual attention and confirm a woman's rights to self-determination. To do so, Cather provides an alternate reading of Sapphira's egotistical personality through the other

characters. First Rachel ponders if abetting Nancy's escape was perhaps too harsh a response for her mother's vengeful behavior, considering "how much [Sapphira] suffers, and her poor feet," and then Henry reflects on how he has misunderstood his wife, for her "composure which he had sometimes called heartlessness, . . . now seemed to him strength" (247, 268). Instead of selfish and domineering, she is now "fearless and independent," always the "mistress of the situation and of herself" (268). Her ever-faithful servant Till encourages this view with her description of Sapphira's final days, particularly the image of her dying, alone, "upright in her chair" (294). Significantly, Till's description is also class-inflected, with references to the spirits of the "fine folks" waiting for Sapphira as well as a final condemnation of Sapphira's decision to move from Winchester to Back Creek "where nobody was anybody much" (294, 295). This poignant reminiscence, in fact, ends the novel, making Till's vision our last impression of Sapphira. Class distinctions work within the flapper paradigm since, as the second chapter argues, the white upper class was not only the model for the 1920s persona but also the class most likely to benefit from its proliferation. Without this revised view of Sapphira, Cather risks presenting the most sexually aware woman in the novel as merely a power-hungry monster made evil by her inability to fulfill her own sexual needs, but the stoic, dignified, and independent lady in its place also reconciles female sexual autonomy and self-determination with upper-class social respectability, a modern union available only in the twentieth century.

Absolutely (Un)Available

Rachel's and Sapphira's awareness of their own sexual drive and how to fulfill it is directly contrasted to the novel's black female characters, who lack a comparable sexual awareness, a reversal of traditional nineteenth-century racial dichotomies of female sexuality which labeled white women as modest and pure and black women as aggressive and lascivious. Even though the interiority of the black women is never fleshed out to the same degree as the white women, Cather's characterizations are still relevant as she disrupts cultural expectations by presenting a public perception of black female sexuality that does not merely reproduce derogatory stereotypes. For example, Jezebel's name signifies the libidinous persona of slave women, an image used to justify white male sexual violence against black women. The repeated references to her African tribe as a "fierce cannibal people" as well as descriptions of her as a "female gorilla . . . [who] could never be tamed" certainly bring up disturbing stereotypes of Africans as primitive, vicious, and animalistic, as some critics, like Carlin and Elizabeth Ammons, have noted (91, 93; 158-9; 135). Within the story of her journey, however, no mention is made about the attribute considered a slave woman's most valuable asset: her ability to bear children.²⁶ Bell hooks and other critics have documented that a female slave's worth was determined by her breeding capacities, with advertisements usually listing first her qualification as either a "child-bearing woman" or "too old to breed" (*Ain't* 39).²⁷ Neither the slave ship's captain, in his cool assessment of her anatomy as "a well-shaped creature," nor her Dutch owner and his friend the doctor in their "searching physical examination" make any reference to Jezebel's child-bearing aptitude (94, 95). The novel is also silent on who fathered Jezebel's only child, although the dates indicate that she

must have given birth to her before she was sold to the Dodderidges since she arrived the year of Sapphira's birth (96). Jezebel's story thus serves to counter the conventional assumptions of black women as implied by her name because she is never shown to be promiscuous or sexually aggressive nor does she ever appear sexually involved with a man, black or white. Moreover, by making Jezebel an African native by birth, Cather demonstrates that stereotypical lecherous traits are not inherent in black physiology. Ironically, despite the shocking image of a young Jezebel, naked and bleeding under the white captain's gaze, the slave's life is otherwise depicted as asexual as a nineteenth-century white True Woman.

Closer in time to the novel's main storyline, Till's sexual life is more detailed but also more ambiguous. The novel makes only a few passing references to the mystery of Nancy's paternal heritage but most are in favor of the Cuban painter as the father versus one of Henry's brothers, mainly because the two other characters besides Till who would most likely know the answer – Henry and Jezebel – insist on the former. Jezebel tells Nancy this conclusion outright, while Henry's impatient remark to Sapphira during the novel's opening scene when she claims otherwise ("You know well enough, Sapphira, it was that painter from Baltimore") reveals his belief that the matter is not open to question (42, 9). The text also implicitly suggests that Nancy's artistic nature is genetically inherited and explicitly points out her physical "resemblance to the portrait painter from Cuba" (66). The distinction is important for a number of reasons. First, as Mako Yoshikawa has explored, the open paternity question raises the prospect that "Henry and Martin Colbert, in desiring the mulatto Nancy, are respectively and incestuously lusting after a niece and a half sister" (75). Granted, Yoshikawa's assertion has historical

legitimacy as black women frequently endured sexual exploitation and violence by their owners, a fact that is partly responsible for the recurring link between incest and miscegenation for whites *and* blacks in literature, social theory, and law throughout American history, as other critics, notably Werner Sollors and Mary V. Dearborn, have posited. And it is puzzling that Cather did raise this implication through Sapphira in the opening scene when she teases her husband that perhaps he has “a kind of family feeling about Nancy” (9). But this repugnant notion is never again broached in the novel, not even in Sapphira’s nighttime musings about Nancy, so Cather perhaps did not mean to imply its feasibility.

Second, the possibility of Till’s sexual agency in the conception is more likely if the painter is Nancy’s father rather than one of the Colbert men with their aggressive and “bad reputation where women were concerned” (66). Sapphira certainly presumes that Till’s liaison was voluntary, even rebellious, telling her husband after he insists that Nancy’s father was the painter that “Till was within her rights, seeing she had to live with old Jeff” (9). Till’s decorous innocuousness regarding Martin’s real intentions towards her daughter also seems more reasonable, albeit slightly, if she was never the victim of a similar assault, particularly if her rapist was the father or uncle of her daughter’s. Therefore, the assumption by some critics that Till was raped even if the Cuban painter was Nancy’s father is presumptuous, despite its historical accuracy on black and white sexual relations.²⁸

Yet discounting the possibility of rape is not meant to substitute a rosy picture of Till’s “one grand romance,” as other critics have claimed (Yoshikawa 79).²⁹ In fact, Cather seems to raise the issue of Till’s agency with this bizarre statement by Sapphira.

What “rights” does Sapphira imply that Till, one of her own slaves, has over her own body? Not only is this agency a legal impossibility, but Sapphira also seems very unlikely to believe that one of her slaves could any autonomy given her controlling nature and willingness to manipulate their lives to her convenience, as the circumstances of Till’s marriage to Jefferson, a pathetic, “shriveled-up old negro,” reveal to a shocking extent (33). The majority of critics who point out that Sapphira marries her slave to a “capon man” do so to demonstrate, in Mary R. Ryder’s words, Sapphira’s “right to direct even the sexual lives of her slaves” since she wishes to prevent the inconveniences of pregnancy and nursing from decreasing Till’s attentiveness to her own needs (43; “Henry” 134).³⁰ Sapphira would not logically encourage or implicitly accept her slave’s extramarital affair when it could, and does, lead to the exact result that she was trying to prevent. Thus, Sapphira’s only motivation for asserting Till’s right to sexual fulfillment seems to be the context, the conversation with her husband when she announces her desire to sell Nancy and Henry refuses. Is Sapphira then deliberately goading her husband, Henry, with this remark? Perhaps Sapphira wishes to force Henry into admitting his belief that slave women have some control over their sexual lives in order to elicit some sort of complicit statement which she could then extrapolate to prove his guilt with Nancy.

In the end, then, this statement reveals much more about Sapphira’s attitude towards female sexuality than Till’s. Indeed, without an internal perspective of this episode with the Cuban painter, Till’s feelings are difficult to assess, even if one would presume that a mother would want to inform her own child that she was the result of a loving relationship. Cather only provides the following ambiguous description of the

episode during a long passage on Till's history: "Some years after she had moved her belongings from her attic chamber in the big house over to Jeff's cabin, the Cuban painter came along to do the portraits. He was a long while doing them" (73). As Romines has pointed out, "even when Cather is writing from inside Till's point of view, she does so with great circumspection, as if acknowledging that some privacies of a black woman's life may not be accessible to a white woman's imagination" (Home 180). This reticence may also be part of Till's personality, making Nancy's delicacy regarding sexual affairs either an inherited trait or an intentional imitation of "what she called her mother's 'nice ways.'" (43). Regardless, Cather leaves the circumstances of Nancy's conception deliberately unclear; what is relevant is that she can imply, however circuitously, that a discrete, serious, well-mannered African American woman such as Till could have an sexual affair. Further, Till's moral standing is never damaged in the eyes of her white owners and black peers despite Nancy's illegitimate origin, a crucial point considering the novel's emphasis on Nancy's sexual reputation. For instance, Sapphira never returns to the circumstances of Nancy's conception during her jealous rampages nor do Lizzie or Bluebell mention Till in their teasing speeches about Nancy and Henry's relationship. In this sense, Till, like her mistress, symbolizes the union of social respectability with female sexual autonomy even within the overall limited autonomy of the slave system.

Yet Cather provides more facts about Till's situation with Jeff, specifying how "Till accepted this arrangement with perfect dignity. How much it hurt her pride no one ever knew; perhaps she did not know herself" (72). Why would Till need "dignity" to still her "pride" if her marriage was considered an ordinary marital relationship? Most likely everyone from slave to mistress would realize that a marriage without sexual relations is

abnormal, even in arranged marriages. Moreover, Till's serious demeanor and attention to manners are critical, for they demonstrate how she can control her erotic desire (at least almost all of the time) even if she misses the traditional sexual outlet of marriage. Like her grandmother, Jezebel, Till is clearly drawn in contrast to the stereotype of the primitive, lustful black woman.

At the same time, placing Nancy's situation next to her mother's reveals a crucial difference in their characterization. Despite tangible evidence of her sexual impropriety, Till is never considered a sexual threat, while her naïve, indulged daughter is. To this effect, Till may not be such a radical departure from southern convention for she fits the image of the loyal, self-deprecating Mammy, a non-sexual being neatly dressed in "a black dress and white apron" whose "first duty was to her mistress" (72, 219). In this way Till and Nancy parallel another mother/daughter relationship, Delilah and Peola in Imitation of Life: the mothers possess no sexual threat as traditional, servile black females, while the daughters possess the threatening sexual desire, and desirability, inherent in the mulatta tradition.

Therefore, Cather's decision to present a black female character's almost complete absence of sexual awareness is a reversal of traditional nineteenth-century racial dichotomies of female sexuality which labeled white women as modest and pure and black women as aggressive and lascivious. Granted, this radical reversal is perhaps merely an outgrowth of Cather's more deliberate refutation of other plantation novel stereotypes, a viewpoint Skaggs convincingly argues in more much detail, but Cather's characterization still disrupts conventional perceptions of black female sexuality by raising the tragic mulatta stereotype but denying its central element, black female

lasciviousness (173-76). As a result, Nancy's erotic drive is never taken for granted by others, not even by the man who tries to rape her, even though Sapphira hopes Martin will change this public perception. Martin willingly pursues her without encouragement since his two attempts on the first day of his visit indicate that she is reluctant prey. First she disappears from his room so quickly after he begins to tease her about her attractive looks that "he was amazed to find her gone," then that evening when he forces a kiss, Cather adds the significant detail that "though the candlelight was dim, he saw she was really frightened" (158, 166). What is taken for granted in Sapphira's conspiracy is Nancy's sexual availability, the belief that a white man could have her if he tries; as Morrison has asserted, the plot is dependent on the "uncontested assumption of the sexual availability of black females" (23). But the fact that even with her mistress's implicit consent her rapist must scheme to catch her, not have her on demand, belies the assumption that Nancy's sexual availability is absolute. Cather takes care to point out that Martin "knew [Nancy] must be pursued carelessly and taken at the right moment, off her guard," while Henry protests Rachel's escape plan by arguing it is in Montreal, not Virginia, where Nancy's sexual availability would be absolute – as a prostitute in "one of them houses" (182, 226). Indeed, if Nancy's sexual availability was synonymous with her desirability, the central plot of the novel would be moot. Sapphira's comments to her husband in the first chapter, "Till was within her rights, seeing she had to live with old Jeff," may even be interpreted as an acknowledgement of the limits of her control over her female slaves' sexual availability (9).

Since, as a slave, Nancy's sexual availability is a predetermined element and, as a mulatta, her sexual allure is threatening to other women, Cather puts a radical twist on the

formula by allowing Nancy to wrest control of her sexual autonomy in imitation of the twentieth-century sexual standards. In order to recognize Nancy's strengths, we must move beyond the view of other characters, beyond Rachel's motherly attitude and Henry's now-shaken habit of seeing her as "scarcely more than a child" (191). As Goldberg summarizes, "The reader need not treat Nancy as Rachel does, as a child" (39). Despite her sometimes weak and hysterical temperament, Nancy is proactive in her own defense and aware of the dual threat Martin has become to both her private sexual self – her sense of control over her sexual relations - and her public sexual identity. In seizing control over her own fate, Nancy has to confront a subject she previously used to run from, literally: sexuality, including the force of both her own sexual desirability and the sexual drives of others.

Nancy's defensive tactics first become clear when she seeks help from Rachel to avoid being alone with Martin while picking laurel on the Double S road, euphemistically lamenting about how Martin will be able to "overtake" her in such an isolated setting (168). She also finds excuses to wake Sapphira when she hears Martin approach her in the corridor, later explaining to Rachel that she knows he intends to "jist slip into my bed any night if I happens to fall asleep," and she evades his attempts further by shirking her assignment to clean his room, which Goldberg points out (217; 35). In this context, even Nancy's wish to drown herself in the mill pond is an active decision, demonstrating her willingness to destroy herself rather than concede her physical being and public repute to a sexual aggressor, for her only request to Rachel is to clarify her rationale to her master to show him that she "didn't do it from wickedness. . . . tell him how I was drove to it" (217).

The most detailed confrontation between Nancy and Martin is in the cherry orchard, when she screams for her father even though she is paralyzed by fright and unable to “pull herself up [into the tree] with him holding her so hard” (181). Although some critics find this scene devoid of sexual violence and full of “sensuality and seduction,” the peculiar physical position in which Nancy finds herself trapped -- elevated, with her legs drawn “about [Martin’s] cheeks almost like a frame,” his face ominously moving “closer, . . . closer” -- seems instead to epitomize the danger Martin represents to Nancy’s sexual self (Carlin 168; 180).³¹ The position’s simulation of oral sex, a daring and modern choice on Cather’s part,³² recalls the most positive aspect of sexual interaction, pleasure, perhaps the reason some critics find it unthreatening, in contrast to the more menacing tone traditionally depicted with forced heterosexual intercourse as well as its more permanent results: the loss of the hymen, the symbol of virginity, and, of course, pregnancy. But Nancy refuses even these more enticing elements of sexuality because she does not choose them or her partner, and by doing so, Cather reiterates the importance of control to a woman’s sexual autonomy even when offered some of the most pleasurable sensations of sexual love.

Far from being helpless or “an object of contempt” because she cannot “fight for her own survival,” then, Nancy is actually resourceful for a girl who previously trusted others and was petted like a child in return (Fetterley 17). The emotional turmoil of her “homesickness and dread” that she displays during the final moments of her departure is a reminder of the high price she is paying for her sexual freedom, and this final act of self-defense, leaving her home and family, is not only the ultimate sacrifice for her sexual autonomy but also leads to its fitting completion because in Canada she is able to marry a

man of her choosing, making Sapphira and Rachel her sexual role models, not her mother and great-grandmother (237). Like the Colbert women, Nancy also defies convention by marrying outside social proscriptions since her husband is “half Scotch and half Indian,” recalling Michael’s Irish and Henry’s lower-class Flemish backgrounds (285, 132, 23). Thus, even before her triumphant return in the epilogue as “a tall, gold-skinned woman” in a fancy “black silk dress,” Nancy is a twentieth-century figure, assuming control of her sexual destiny and refusing to allow the needs of others to determine her sexual worth (283).

This revised interpretation of Nancy in the novel’s main section, in fact, reconciles the clashing perceptions of Nancy presented in the epilogue by the child “Willa.” The child has an image of “our” Nancy that corresponds more readily with the opening’s view of Nancy as a bright, eager child. However, the well-dressed woman who appears contrasts sharply with this image, perhaps the reason the memory was so vivid for the child, as Cather recounted in letters.³³ At the same time, the previous view of Nancy corresponds with a benevolent view of slavery, an accusation some critics have assigned specifically to the Epilogue’s nostalgic tone, as I previously mentioned, but the previous sections refute the view of the machinations of slavery as anything but benevolent. Therefore, it is Nancy’s overall characterization that represents Cather’s attempts to redeem black female sexuality by restoring a conscious level of autonomy and self-control that had been missing from traditional views. Granted, Cather’s version is missing a positive valuation of black female sexual desire in an relationship, for the Epilogue only mentions her husband in passing, but given the total lack of models of healthy sexual relationships, such an oversight is in keeping with Cather’s schema (285).

Like Hurston, what Cather demonstrates is that black women's consent cannot be assumed, that black female desirability is not synonymous with sexual availability, and that black women can, in fact, control their sexual lives.

A comparison of the novel's black and white female characters reveals another key point: Nancy is able to control her sexual autonomy in a way that neither black slaves, like her mother, nor white mountain folk, like Mrs. Ringer's daughters, can. Both of Mrs. Ringer's daughters, the novel explains, have been "fooled," a "disgrace . . . [that] brought any family very low" (120). Like Nancy Till, Mrs. Ringer has a real-life model, the Cathers' neighbor Mary Ann Anderson, whose daughter Marjorie left Virginia to work for the Cathers in Nebraska.³⁴ Besides this autobiographical parallel, the inclusion of Mrs. Ringer and her family is often assumed to be the novel's foray into local color and reiteration of the importance of community, "the need to have a place, to feel connected to others in the bonds of friendship and community," in Sally Peltier Harvey's words, both common elements in Cather's oeuvre (135).³⁵ Again, however, this story's sexual details have no biographical correlations, and in this tale of sexual reputation, the mention of the Ringers' disgrace provides additional weight to Nancy's predicament, particularly because, as Skaggs points out, the Ringer girls "retreat in shame or hide; Nancy, who fled from threatened seduction or rape, humiliation, and disgrace, comes home triumphant" (179). Even Rachel, who is otherwise accommodating and friendly, finds the mention of the girls' sexual misconduct distasteful and refuses to discuss it with their mother (122-23). And yet Mrs. Ringer's rationale for their current downfall is not to blame the girls' sexual desire but their brother's physical incapacity, arguing that if her son had not been handicapped, he "could a-tracked down the fellers an' fit with 'em, an'

made 'em marry his sisters. . . . Fellers is skeered to make free with a gal that's got able men folks to see she gits her *rights*" (122, emphasis added). Mrs. Ringer's defense is usually accepted at face value by critics, a demonstration, for example, of how "only the empowered men of their own families can afford these females protection from the ever-present danger . . . of sexual predators" (C Wolff 226).

Yet Cather refutes this guarantee of protection as well as the notion that a woman has "rights" to marital legitimacy after relinquishing her sexual propriety a few chapters later when she recounts the story of Martin's fake blue tooth. Like the Ringer girls, Martin's victim was a "pretty, homespun girl" from the mountain region who is also "fooled," but her brothers cannot make Martin marry her and instead provide only a "horsewhipping" with little permanent damage to Martin beyond his dental work (163). Granted, Martin's class standing differentiates him from the Ringers' seducers, as it seems unlikely an upper-class gentleman could ever be forced to marry a mountain girl, but the parallel situation reiterates Nancy's lack of options against Martin's sexual onslaught. Taken together, the tales of these mountain girls demonstrate that even women with male protectors are vulnerable to male sexual aggression and have little recourse to revive their moral reputation after failing to protect their virginity. Thus, Nancy's race and the limited capabilities of her male slave defenders, mainly her father, Old Jeff, and Sampson, are not solely to blame for her lack of options if free white women are similarly trapped by social convention. Her ability to seize control of her own sexual expression and sexual reputation is also all the more admirable. Like Passing, Sapphira reveals that the combination of sexual autonomy and sexual respectability is unavailable to black women and lower-class women of all races. Any "rights" a woman

has are neither natural nor conferred by male family members but instead require either upper-class status or incredible individual self-assertion. The lack of healthy, egalitarian heterosexual relationships in the novel reinforces a woman's control over her sexual needs. Like Sapphira and Rachel, Nancy's physical relationship with her husband is not depicted, and his absence, like the dead Michael Blake, seems to imply Cather's refusal to give credit to the male's contribution in a woman's sexual fulfillment. Men are a necessary correlate, in other words, to the fulfillment of a modern heterosexual woman's sexual autonomy, but not coincidentally, in Sapphira husbands are relatively weak, absent, or dead, allowing Cather to avoid confronting the marital power disparities that existed in the nineteenth century and that continued to exist in the next.

Decades after its publication, Sapphira and the Slave Girl remains a controversial novel, a novel that refuses simple categories of autobiography or fiction, nostalgia or social critique, pro- or anti-slavery. The novel may also be Cather's commentary on the difficulty of assigning racial categories to cultural depictions of female sexuality. Again, Nancy and Sapphira are certainly not paradigms of modern female sexuality; they are not on par with Brett Ashley, Janie Starks Woods, or Nora Flood, nor do they belong even in a category with Cather's resilient and independent female characters like Antonia or Thea Kronburg. And Cather's novel certainly does not present the complex and tentatively optimistic vision of black female autonomy of Their Eyes Were Watching God nor does it provide the depth and insight into black women's sexual consciousness as Passing does. But Cather's willingness to address such issues of race, gender, and sexuality without relying on simplistic or reductive cultural stereotypes places her in a unique category of white female writers of this time period. Nancy Till and Sapphira Colbert are

not female heroes in the usual sense but they share a modern sensibility in how they strive to control their sexual autonomy as best as they can given the confining social definitions of female sexuality.

Notes

¹ Paul R. Petrie reads Sapphira against the criticisms of the Left Critics to provide a fuller examination of their motives as well as Cather's theoretical stance on politics and fiction.

² Cather's most explicit comments on fiction with a political or social agenda were made in "The Novel Demeuble" (1922), where she argues, "If the novel is a form of imaginative art, it cannot be at the same time a vivid and brilliant form of journalism," and in a 1936 letter to The Commonweal, where she similarly contends that "the man who has a true vocation for imagination doesn't have to go hunting among the ash cans on Sullivan Street for his material" (Not 48; On Writing 24). For a discussion of these works in more detail, see Tomas Pollard (39-40) and Petrie (29-30). In a letter a few years later, she insisted, in James Woodress' words, that "she never tried to write propaganda, that is, rules for life or theories about the betterment of human society. . . . she thought it lost its strength disguised as fiction" (470).

³ Willa Cather, Sapphira and the Slave Girl (New York: Random House, 1975), 281. All subsequent citations are to this edition.

⁴ Other confusing details include the vague relationship between the child's mother and Rachel Blake (presumably her mother), the child's age (in 1881, Cather would have been seven years old, not five), and the child's relationship to Till. For a fuller examination of the epilogue's contradictions, see Eugenie Lambert Hamner's essay. While Hamner concludes that "the introduction of this child is unsatisfactory in terms of the artistry," she still reads the novel as a narrative depiction of Cather's earliest

memories, but other critics see the epilogue's narrative style and story omissions as consistent with the recollections of a child (356); see, for example, Jo Ann Middleton (65, 74); Merrill Maguire Skaggs (180-81); David Stouck (226-27); John N. Swift (24-33); and Joseph R. Uργο (Myth 84-86).

⁵ For more on her friendships with Dell, see Stout (Cather 128) and Woodress (236); on Mabel Dodge Luhan, see Phyllis C. Robinson (131, 246-47); Stout (Cather 231, 233); Woodress (363-64); Van Vechten, see Robinson (271-71) and Woodress (236). For her acquaintance with Hughes, see Stout (Cather 277); and Robeson, see Stout (Cather 288-89) and Woodress (488). Although these friendships and passing acquaintances should not be overstated, Fannie Hurst's off-quoted remark that Cather's New York apartment seemed "no more a part of Fitzgerald's twenties than of Mars" seems most likely also overstated, particularly given the contrast between Hurst's lifelong commitment to social and liberal causes (qtd. in Robinson 235).

⁶ In addition to Arnold's own interpretation (325), also see McDonald (97); Petrie (34), and Loretta Wasserman (3).

⁷ For examples of the various letters in which Cather makes this admission, see Lisa Marcus (116); Joyce McDonald (89); Sharon O'Brien (29-30); Janis P. Stout ("Playing" 195 n2); and Woodress (481).

⁸ As Cather critics, like Judith Fetterley, know, Cather's reputation as a "control freak" arises from the extensive provisions in her will that, among other requirements, prevent the publication of her letters in any form (10).

⁹ As Pollard documents, "The endnote was a late addition to Sapphira and the Slave Girl. In the galley proofs housed at the New York Public Library, the note by Willa Cather does not appear. According to the stamps on the manuscript, she received the

proofs on August 28 and returned them on September 13. So, apparently, sometime between September 13 and December 7 (the publication date being on her birthday), Cather added the note” (48).

¹⁰ For additional examples of similar criticism, see Sharon Hoover (249-50), Jane Lilienfeld (164), O’Brien (45-6), Ann Romines (Home 189-90), Stout (“Playing” 190-91), Swift (28-30), and Cynthia Wolff (223).

¹¹ See also Jonathan Goldberg (39); Hoover (241, 250); Susan J. Rosowski (“Subverted” 85); Mary R. Ryder (Classical 273); Stout (Cather 283); and Swift (30). A similar displacement occurs when critics contend that Mrs. Matchem or Sapphira become a stand-in for Till’s mother or Rachel for Nancy’s mother, such as Goldberg (39); Minrose C. Gwin (135, 144); Elizabeth Jane Harrison (79); Romines (Home 181, 186).

¹² Hinting at even the possibility of a symbolic maternal relationship between white owners and black slaves also raises the unfortunate historical reality that biological ties did not improve the owner/slave relationship and, more often, worsened it. Slave narratives like Frederick Douglass’s Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave introduced into abolitionist rhetoric the cruel image of the father/owner violently renouncing his familial connection upon the body of his child/slave. For more information on this issue, see Douglass as well as historians Victoria E. Bynum, Catherine Clinton, Winthrop D. Jordan, and Deborah Gray White. I discuss the incestuous implications of the novel’s sexual relationships below.

¹³ For other critics who also mention Tansy Dave in this context, see Harrison (69-70); Ryder, (Classical 275); Skaggs (175); Stouck, (231); and Woodress (486).

¹⁴ For more examples, see Elizabeth Ammons (135) and Robert J. Nelson (123).

¹⁵ The most common autobiographical elements follow Cather's placement of herself in the epilogue, making Sapphira and Henry her maternal great-grandparents, although critics have also noted the characteristics the Colberts share with Cather's parents, such as Mildred Bennett (6); McDonald (90); Ryder ("Henry" 130); Skaggs (176, 180); Stouck (228); Stout (Cather 282). The Cather scholars who either do not mention any biographical parallels for these sexual elements or who also conclude that none exist include Bennett, E.K. Brown and Leon Edel, Hermione Lee, O'Brien, Sergeant, Skaggs, Stout (Cather), and Woodress.

¹⁶ Those critics who merely describe Sapphira's rape plot without analyzing its logical framework to this extent are numerous and include Annalucia Accardo and Alessandro Portelli, Jamie Ambrose, Marilyn Arnold, Brown and Edel, Maxwell Geismar, Sharon Peltier Harvey, Petrie, John R. Randall III, Phyllis C. Robinson, Romines (Home), and Woodress. Rosowski's analysis of the novel's Gothic elements in Voyage does present a number of convincing parallels but despite her willingness to define Sapphira as a "hero-villain," her explanation still mainly interprets Sapphira's intentions as simply evil (238).

¹⁷ Other critics who see Sapphira's plan as mainly an exercise in power include Fetterley, Harrison, Marcus, McDonald, Naomi E. Morgenstern, Stouck, and Cynthia Wolff.

¹⁸ See also Stout (Cather 286) and Wasserman (3, 5).

¹⁹ Morrison and Morgenstern recognize the same contradictions I do in Sapphira's reasoning, but the latter does so in order to return to the displaced homosexuality argument, while the former's ground-breaking analysis on the novel's Africanist presence concludes that the novel represents Cather's desire to work out her relationship with her mother. Louis Auchincloss does question whether Nancy can be ruined but his

terminology (“Would the girl really mind it [‘ruin’] as a white girl would?”) makes his observation problematic and incomplete (121). Lee and Henry Seidel Canby similarly acknowledge the novel’s contractions around this point without further explanation (369-70; 5). Roseanne V. Camacho also argues that the novel’s examination of gender and maternity places it in a twentieth-century context, but she focuses mainly on its depiction of female independence without addressing the novel’s sexual components.

²⁰ Comparing Sapphira to Passing on this point provides further evidence that Sapphira’s plot is not constructed around her own sexual desire for Nancy. In Passing, as previously discussed, there is little or no indication that Brian finds Clare sexually attractive, while Cather clearly portends Henry’s and Martin’s erotic desire for Nancy. Moreover, neither Sapphira’s internal descriptions of Nancy nor her outward behavior exhibit anything even remotely similar to Irene’s longing accounts and loving affection for Clare.

²¹ Other critics who interpret Cather’s treatment of blacks and/or slavery as racist include Ammons (135); Carlin (152ff); Goldberg (35); Gwin (135-37, 141-43); Harrison (66-67, 142-3 n4); Lindemann (138); McDonald (106); Marilyn Mobley McKenzie (87); Morrison (26-28); Shelley Newman (63); Stout (Cather 288); and Patricia Yaeger (148, 153).

²² Chapter 2 provides a fuller explanation of the True Woman persona.

²³ See, for example, Geismar (198); Harrison (74-5); Hoover (240); Marcus (109); Skaggs (173); and Wasserman (5).

²⁴ Other critics who deem Sapphira “evil” include Gwin (144, 147); Morgenstern (186); Pollard (50); Angela M. Salas (103, 106); Patrick W. Shaw (178, 180); and Stout (Cather 283).

²⁵ For other examples of this criticism, see Carlin (171); Gwin (133); Randall (65-66); and Stout (“Playing” 191).

²⁶ Gayle Wald also recalls the historical significance of slave reproductive capacities, noting how “the breeding of slave labor was a well known and profitable enterprise,” but she does not mention Jezebel in this context (92).

²⁷ For more on the sexual worth of female slaves, see Bynum, Clinton, Jordan, Patricia Morton, and White.

²⁸ See, for example, Goldberg (38, 41); Marcus (114); and Salas (100).

²⁹ See also Newman (58); Gwin (140); and Wasserman (5).

³⁰ For other examples see Abraham (59); Carlin (167); Goldberg (38); Gwin (140); Harrison (74); Lee (366); McDonald (101); Randall (63); Uργο (Myth 93); and Wasserman (5).

³¹ For other examples of critics who interpret this scene as unthreatening, see Gwin (145-6), Wasserman (7, 9), and, to a lesser extent, Nelson (114-15).

³² As the second chapter explains, oral sex reached a new legitimacy during this period through marriage manuals which advocated its practice as part of the new emphasis of female sexual satisfaction. See, for example, Theodore Van de Velde, Hannah and Abraham Stone, Millard S. Everett, and Isabel E. Hutton.

³³ A number of critics refer to these statements; see note 7 for details.

³⁴ The biographers who mention Mrs. Anderson include Lee (28); Bennett (57); Edith Lewis (10-11); O’Brien (29); and Woodress (23, 482).

³⁵ For other examples, see Brown and Edel (311-12); Lee (363-4); Skaggs (175); and Stout (Cather 289).

Chapter 7: Conclusion

In 1930, a thirty-two-year-old wife and mother named Victoria Kirk attended a Los Angeles high school as a seventeen-year-old girl and published her results in McCall's Magazine. The reputation of young people, she claims, has been slandered by an "unconventional" minority who live without "limits on their conduct," often the result of "homes without standards" ("A Tale"). She concludes, however, that in general, "most of the mystery of sex has vanished since it has become an allowed topic of conversation," and decides that such information, combined with commonality of failed marriages, results less in casual experimentation than in a wariness towards long-term relationships which she deems "sensible," summarizing the current attitude as "I don't intend to marry until I know what I'm doing and until there's money enough to make it all right, because when I do marry, I want my marriage to stick" ("A Tale"). Like the authors in this study, these Californian teens celebrated the new sexual autonomy for women but were cautious about its application in a society which continued to encourage the practice of this autonomy mainly only in traditional relationships like marriage. Although perhaps intentionally ambiguous, this statement may also suggest that women no longer wished to leave sexual education to their husbands or sexual experimentation for marriage and instead sought to accumulate such knowledge with the understanding that marriage was dependent upon a satisfying sex life for both partners. And by not attributing this viewpoint a particular gender, Kirk connects the middle-class requirement of conspicuous consumption, the presumption that money, and only money, would "make it all right" for a woman find the proper mate who will guarantee her economic and social status.

Kirk's article also makes clear popular discourse on sexual propriety continued into the thirties, indicating the anxiety as well as the acceptance of the great changes to female sexual autonomy that occurred in the twenties. We cannot, in the start of the twenty-first century, reexperience the jarring, confrontational dimension American culture experienced with the ascent of the flapper into mainstream discourse. Her overt sexual desirability and aggressive sexual demeanor seem, in contrast to today's average teen, quaint and restrained, but using these novels to evaluate both her regulatory function and liberating possibility is, I hope, a helpful method of situating her impact within historical context. As I have tried to convey, the flapper's presence was so overwhelming and so visible that any contemporary reader would have situated her as a dominant presence in any text devoted to female sexual subjectivity, even well into the 1930s. The flapper instigates Clare Kendry's forthright intention to find sexual autonomy without restrictive social parameters, Bea Pullman's acknowledgment that she needs a fulfilling sexual relationship that she did not find in marriage, Janie Woods' long search to find a partner to return her sexual passion, and Nancy Till's willingness to leave home and family to maintain control over her sexual worth. Furthermore, the flapper was such a radical reconfiguration of acceptable female sexual expression that there was literally no going back to the carefree Gibson college girl, the pious and passionless Angel of the Household, or the serious, asexual New Woman without acknowledging what such a return would cost, as evinced by Irene Redfield's psychic breakdown, Janie's disastrous marriages to Logan Killicks and Joe Starks, and Bea Pullman's inadequate attempts to repress her sexual urges.

Yet contemplating the flapper against these other iconic versions of womanhood is itself an indication of the powerlessness of cultural images to contain the experiences of all women. Not only are such personas formulated to uphold a racial, class, and sexual hierarchy, but they also designate, by their very construction, normal and diametric social categories. In short, what the flapper validates and rewards is the inverse of what she condemns and punishes. But we must do more than outline the flapper's regulatory function and delineate her shortcomings. As I have discussed, the flapper was predicated upon the cultural practices and beliefs of many of the very groups she was designed to exclude, including lower-class women, non-white women, and homosexuals, and therefore her presence in many ways attests to the reality of these women's experiences. By incorporating them into mainstream culture, she validated the sexual experimentation and fashion of the lower-classes and the right to economic independence of the career New Woman. Moreover, her excessive emphasis on the liberating potential of sexual autonomy could not be contained within her strictly defined parameters in part because of her very success in outlining this potential. Once the African American press, for example, began to offer fashion and romantic advice akin to the mainstream press, it was impossible to curtail impulses of modern autonomy within the middle-class model of moral motherhood. As a letter states in Half-Century Magazine in 1922, "The girl of today thinks and acts to please herself and does far better in life than the one that was raised [with the restrictions of the previous generation]. . . . It is a sad thing for a girl to grow up with no knowledge of men and the ways of the world" (M. 21). Likewise, in her study of homosexual practices among married and unmarried women, Katherine Bement Davis discovered that only 13% of unmarried women experienced physical relationships

with other women deemed such relationships “in light of a sex problem requiring solution,” and that for married women, such relationships prior to marriage did not affect the happiness of their married life (271; 309). Larsen, Hurston, Cather, and Hurst, then, are not alone in recognizing the liberating effect of sexual autonomy upon black women, lesbians, or lower-class women, which in turn, like Half-Century Magazine or Katherine Bement Davis, provide other models of sexual autonomy besides the white, middle-class, heterosexual flapper to their readers.

Finally, the exclusion of a fulfilling, sexual relationship among equal and loving partners, whether homosexual or heterosexual, married or unmarried, in these novels should not be considered a failing by the authors. On one hand, their potential does exist, visible in the relationships which hover on the edges of the texts, within Peola’s journey into the wilds of South America with her unnamed husband, through Janie’s abstract, disembodied union with a dead Tea Cake, or between an adult Nancy Till and her unseen Scotch-Indian husband. Other relationships may appear in some lights to represent such a bond, like Clare and Bellew, Sapphira and Henry, or Janie and Tea Cake, and even after exposed as somehow lacking, they remain a sign of future possibilities, as long as the “if only” factor is removed, be it the distasteful eroticism of racial ambivalence, the realities of age and infirmity, or the shocking intrusion of violence. On the other, the absence of such a relationship is also telling, as it may also indicate the authors’ awareness that the time and place for such a relationship has not yet come. How could, in other words, the flapper’s many inherent contradictions be resolved? The affirmation of sexual freedom and experimentation but only with men and only prior to marriage? The public visibility of female sexual power but mainly construed through a specific type of sexual

desirability predicated upon a continuous display of conspicuous consumption? The necessity of an equally fulfilling sexual partnership for a happy marriage but within an unequal economic and personal power differential structured around traditional gender roles? The validation of the importance of work for personal and economic independence but only for the limited time prior to marriage? Such contradictions have yet to be fully resolved even for today's women, where female sexuality is still often visible more through belly shirts, on-line pornography, and voyeuristic displays of affection with men and women than through assertive, open, and multi-faceted eroticism that acknowledges the complexity of female desire and a woman's right to experiment with its fulfillment. To me, these texts instead should be read less as harbingers of the flapper's failings than for affirmations of her power, real and visible even if limited. Each author saw, in her lifetime, the public view of female sexual desire shift dramatically, from denigrations of any visible desire as evil, immoral, even cataclysmic evidence of personal and social weaknesses to scientific and popular confirmation of its existence. However timid, repressed or even pathological Irene Redfield, Clare Kendry, Sapphira Colbert, Nancy Till, Bea Pullman, Peola Johnston, or even Janie Woods may appear in comparison to the vivacious, attractive, and sexually exuberant flapper, each in her own way affirms not only the flapper's existence and popularity but also her invisible, silent Other.

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