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**(DE)CONSTRUCTING IDENTITIES:
Self-Creation in Women Writers of the Harlem Renaissance**

by Cristina Bianchi

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of the University of Ottawa
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the requirements for the degree of

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in
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and
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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 1: BEING LOADED AND OTHER MIDDLE-CLASS TRAPPINGS	12
CHAPTER 2: SHATTERING THE TEA CUP.....	41
CHAPTER 3: WILL THE REAL ZORA PLEASE STAND UP?.....	71
CONCLUSION.....	98
APPENDIX.....	105
NOTES.....	107
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	114

Abstract

During the early twentieth century, in the midst of African American migrations from the rural South to the urban North, thinkers began to recognize race and identity within their social and historical context. The Harlem Renaissance was born in this era. The women authors of this movement create female characters who each construct their identities with a multitude of tools and from a variety of different standpoints. This speaking in a polyphony of voices when applied to the construction of self translates to a rich and full, though sometimes contradictory, identity.

This study examines the works of three Harlem Renaissance authors: Jessie Redmon Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. In this study, I explore the multiplicity of identity in four of Fauset's short stories, "Emmy" (1912-3), "Mary Elizabeth" (1919), "The Sleeper Wakes" (1920), and "Double Trouble" (1923); in Nella Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929); and in Zora Neale Hurston's autobiographical text, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). The variety of discursive genres here reflects the diverse construction of black female identity these works represent. More particularly, such variety parallels the multiplicity of identity itself and of the experiences of these women. The women represented in these works are all different in their ages, colours, classes, and backgrounds. This study focuses mainly on the multiplicity of positions from which any given woman may speak and construct her self. A picture of identity that is flexible, malleable, and ultimately unknowable in its entirety thus emerges.

These three women authors were among the first of *all* authors to understand what is now our firmly established apprehension of the intimate links between race, class, gender, sexuality, and education within that identity. Each broke new ground upon which the next could sow and reap her work, and they all act as "foreparents" of the American literatures we know today.

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**To Mum, a strong woman who taught me that
my identity is what I make it**

It is dangerous for a woman to defy the gods;
To taunt them with the tongue's thin tip,
Or strut in the weakness of mere humanity,
Or draw a line daring them to cross;
The gods own the searing lightning,
The drowning waters, tormenting fears
And anger of red sins.

Oh, but worse still if you mince timidly—
Dodge this way or that, or kneel or pray,
Be kind, or sweat agony drops
Or lay your quick body over your feeble young;
If you have beauty or none, if celibate
Or vowed—the gods are Juggernaut,
Passing over . . . over . . .

from Anne Spencer "Letter to My Sister"

INTRODUCTION

“Identity crisis” is a term oft-used in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries. It may apply to an adolescent who is seeking to define herself, to a forty- or fifty-something individual who is seeking to *redefine* his identity, or most recently, to a person in her mid-twenties who has so many options open to her that she cannot decide which avenue to follow (Brooks). The term also applies more generally to anyone in crisis who has survived difficult moments. In times of transition in one’s existence, one begins to question the nature of life and more particularly one’s own identity and how it corresponds with the surrounding world.

The first few decades of the twentieth century saw an unprecedented migration of African Americans from the rural South to the urban North. Many of these Negroes, as they were called in the era, were “mired in a cycle of vicious racism and limited economic opportunities” in their homes in the South (Earle 102). They thus left their homes to seek out new opportunities in what they saw as the great, free North. They settled in urban areas where it was believed most opportunities for employment were to be found. They had followed friends or family who had arrived previous to them and sent for those who remained in the South. Between 1910 and 1920, cities such as Chicago, Detroit, Cleveland, and Norfolk, VA saw a seventy percent increase in their Negro population (Earle 102). This mass relocation produced new and shifting social realities. Hazel V. Carby observes that because Negroes from varying class backgrounds, education, class, and geography were mixing and meeting, it was no longer possible to believe in the myth of a black monolith; that is, the notion that *all* individuals from a certain “race”¹ fit into a single all-encompassing category (1987, 163). The change of environment left American cities with increased racial tension and interracial misunderstandings, misgivings, and mistrust. It also

left the migrants with self-questioning and a search to define them/selves (Howard 1997).

Perhaps not coincidentally, it was from these times of great change and upheaval that the Harlem Renaissance—or the New Negro Movement, as some call it—emerged. As Negroes sought out their identities and sought to create these identities, they explored the world of art and artistic creation through which to achieve their construction of individual and communal identity. Jane Skelton notes that the Harlem Renaissance was only a “part of an historical continuum of American letters” and not an aberration (54). There is little doubt, however, as Lillie P. Howard observes, that “the Harlem Renaissance represents the most phenomenal outpouring of art in all its forms—music, drama, poetry, fiction, dance, sculpture, painting—by Black Americans since Africans reached these shores in the 1600s” (249). Through their artistic endeavours, Negroes were not only making art, they were making themselves. In these times of upheaval, Howard notes, “masses of people, but Black people in particular, were taking the picaresque journey toward the self, toward freedom, possible opportunity” (249).

These opportunities presented themselves in various guises. In the 1920s, a greater number of Negroes were attending college and university, more and more were expressing themselves artistically, and the community as a whole was proving that Negroes are as intelligent and as capable as white folks. In his famous introduction to *The New Negro*, an anthology of Negro letters he edited for publication in 1925, Alain Locke reflected upon these improvements in the mostly-urban Negro communities across the United States. In his introduction, Locke speaks of the “spiritual emancipation” (962) of the New Negro and he predicts a new and dynamic phase for the Negro community. During these interesting times, the New Negro would desire “the necessity for fuller, truer self-expression, the realization of the unwisdom of allowing

social discrimination to segregate him [sic] mentally, and a counter-attitude to cramp and fetter his [sic] own living" (965). This short opening segment thus encapsulates both the project of the New Negro within the Harlem Renaissance and the problems within this project itself.

The project of a "true" self-expression is an important one in the Harlem Renaissance. Negroes had heretofore been bound by their white masters, publishers, and readers, and their creativity had been discouraged if not almost completely suppressed. African Americans have a tradition of saying one thing but meaning another, notes Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (1990, 6), a tradition which dates back to the slave era during which time subversiveness meant survival of culture, of community, and of identity. Thus, the Negro community had always found ways around restrictions imposed by their slave masters. The vernacular tradition codified African American history in symbols and stories. Later, antebellum and even postbellum slave narratives exposed the horrors of slavery and racism, as did personal testimonies in the form of poems, songs, essays, sermons, and autobiographies. As Negro literacy grew, so did the demand for reading material on Negro history. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, many Negro biographies and historical accounts of African American history were published. Finally, by the 1920s, the Negro community had not only survived but it flourished. Locke and another key figure of the Renaissance, W.E.B. Du Bois, called on Negroes to liberate their true selves and to create art through which these selves could speak. Literature was the medium of choice for many young artists. In it, Negroes could reinvent and represent themselves and their community. They could create a Negro vastly different from those formulated and consumed by white authors previously. Because so many stereotypes about Negroes had been built up within (white) literature, one of the most effective ways in which to break them down would be through the

same medium. For this very reason, “the very act of writing has been a ‘political’ act for the black author” (Gates 1990, 5). Therefore, art and literature in particular were the means of choice by the New Negro intelligentsia to fight against discrimination. Art provided a public forum from which the Negro could speak to a great number of individuals and to the community(ies) at large. This was the project of the New Negro.

The one glaring problem with this project, however, was in its formulation. In his introduction, Locke used the exclusive pronouns “he,” “him,” and “his” and thereby underscored the exclusion of the entire Negro female population from the Negro community. By using this androcentric language, Locke also continued the cycle of exclusion of women from political and public arenas. In his famous essay, *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois practiced the same brand of exclusion when he expressed how “[o]ne ever feels *his* twoness--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [emphasis added]” (1997, 615). Both men’s profound understanding of the race issue—Locke’s call for truer self expression and Du Bois’s recognition of a duality within his and others’ identity—is revolutionary for the time. Thus, in the midst of these migrations and social upheavals, thinkers began to recognize race (and identity more generally) within their social and historical context. Locke and Du Bois, who were founding *fathers* of the Harlem Renaissance, were among the first to acknowledge the importance of social and historical context in the formation of race (Omi and Winant, Rampersad 1990, Wall 1995). However, despite these ground-breaking understandings of race and of race construction, both men dismissed women’s experience by using exclusive pronouns. Du Bois further alienated women by defining subjectivity in terms of binary opposites. In fact, black

women were made to experience an even further fragmentation and exclusion than were black men. Of course, the use of exclusive language by men and women alike was the norm in the era (it was the norm until quite recently, in fact). However, this linguistic exclusion is symbolic of the very real exclusion of black women from social and political life. Deborah E. McDowell outlines the extent of black women's banishment from decision-making during the Harlem Renaissance. In the 1920s, *The Messenger* ran a monthly symposium entitled "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs." McDowell notes that "[w]hile a few female contributors stressed the importance of women being equal to men socially, professionally, and economically, the majority emphasized that a woman's place was in the home" (1994, 434). Although male Harlem Renaissance thinkers advanced revolutionary ideas about race and race construction, they denied women participation in their notions about the cultural movement (Omi and Winant, Wall 1995). This study will undertake to examine Harlem Renaissance women's multiple and complex creation of identity despite these denials and exclusions.

My first exposure to the Harlem Renaissance was in my first year of university when I read Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. The language captivated me; the search for identity held me. Soon, I learned that Hurston was not the only author to depict characters who seek out and forge—sometimes with great difficulty—strong and independent identities. The women authors especially seemed to capture the complexity of identity. As African Americans, they sought to emancipate the Negro race from its ties to the ugly past and from its entrapment in unjust stereotypes. As women, they sought equal rights and respect as persons. Yet they had no one place from which to speak. Negro men often demeaned black women, and white women

often ignored and ostracized them. It would not be until the late 1970s that black women would begin to unite formally as *black women* (as opposed to assembling as Negroes *or* as women), so Harlem Renaissance women would have to be creative and sadly solitary in their respective constructions of identity. It is important to note, moreover, that black women do not experience or construct their identities as Negroes *or* as women but rather as Negro women. The difference may be subtle but it is undeniably significant. Black women's identities include the overlapping experiences of sexuality, race, and class, among other factors, but these experiences consist of more than the sum of their parts for black women issue from a multitude of backgrounds (Smith 1989, Stanley and Wise). Black feminist thought views experience holistically, beyond Du Bois's either/or dichotomy (Collins, Mama). Black feminisms are of particular use in this study since "black women intellectuals have long expressed a unique feminist consciousness about the intersection of race and class in structuring gender" (Collins 7).

The women authors I will examine in this study—Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston—all create female characters who each construct their identities with a multitude of tools and from a variety of different standpoints. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson considers that because of their overlapping experiences of race, gender, and class, "black women must speak in a plurality of voices as well as in a multiplicity of discourses" (22). This speaking in a polyphony of voices when applied to the construction of self translates to a rich and full, though sometimes contradictory, identity. Fauset, Larsen, and Hurston each create vibrant and complex female characters in their fiction. Each of these characters consciously or unconsciously seeks out her identity, pursues a deeper understanding of her/self and her community, and endeavours to construct an identity in spite and because of the contradictions she has found

within and without.

In this study, I will explore the multiplicity of identity in four of Jessie Fauset's short stories, "Emmy" (1912-3), "Mary Elizabeth" (1919), "The Sleeper Wakes" (1920), and "Double Trouble" (1923); in Nella Larsen's novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929); and in Zora Neale Hurston's autobiographical text, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942). The variety of discursive genres here reflects the diverse construction of black female identity these works labour to represent. More particularly, such variety parallels the multiplicity of identity itself and of the experiences of these women, the different manners in which they choose to represent these, and the mainstream as well as marginal discourses these women endeavour to adopt, adapt, and articulate. The women represented in these works are all different in their ages, colours, classes, and backgrounds. They are alternately homemakers and anthropologists, young and old, wives and mothers, poor and socially prominent. Moreover, they each draw on various sources of power to define themselves: among others, white supremacist discourse, the male gaze, "New Negro" Movement parlance, and an emerging (white) feminist point of view. This study will focus mainly on the multiplicity of positions from which any given woman may speak and construct her/self. What emerges is a picture of identity that is flexible, malleable, and ultimately unknowable in its entirety.

Fauset was a ground-breaker for women in the Harlem Renaissance. She was present via her many published articles and short stories as the movement began to flourish in the late 1910s; at its height in the mid-1920s, Fauset was the literary editor of a major Negro magazine entitled *The Crisis*. She opened the door to many young Negro artists, acted as their mentor, and strongly

encouraged women (both Negro and white) to publish their work. Yet her work is sometimes cast aside and often not studied at all. The reason for being so maligned is simple but unfair: Fauset's concentration on middle-class Negro life is frequently viewed as vapid, inauthentic, and not representative of the Negro experience. In her short stories studied here—"Emmy," "Mary Elizabeth," "The Sleeper Wakes," and "Double Trouble"—Fauset creates apparently superficial and dull fairytale-like stories wherein her middle-class heroines live tedious but easy lives. Nevertheless, a close reading of her fiction will reveal a great deal of crosscurrents beneath the seemingly calm surface.

In the first chapter of this study, I will explore Fauset's ironic representation of middle-class values, the strict and rigid categories these mores create, and how these allow her to probe the notion of female agency and the ways in which women create their individual identities even within the strictures of middle-class standards. In her romantic tales, Fauset hides an important social message. In them, the author demonstrates how middle-class values entrap her female characters within their confines. A woman must struggle against the strictly-defined categories of race and gender roles determined by middle-class society. In these early days of the Harlem Renaissance, however, Fauset can only be ironic in her handling of the development of a Negro female identity within middle-class values. Larsen, who writes during the apex of the Harlem Renaissance and whose oeuvre will follow Fauset's short stories by a few years, is able to represent more openly the struggle for identity against strictly-defined categories.

In her only two published novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Larsen explores the falsity of categories and the consequent allowance for the flexibility of identity. Through the trope of race, Larsen investigates the flexibility of categories which have been rigidly defined.

None of her female characters may be inscribed in any one category, such as gender, sexuality, or class: their respective identities are too permeable and difficult to define. Larsen's female characters each transgress the lines that separate the various categories of race, gender, and class. The many crossings of the lines between these rigidly-defined categories expose the arbitrariness inherent within each category. In this second chapter, I will examine Larsen's work as proto-postmodern in its rejection of categories and its espousal of fluidity of categories and of identity. Even Larsen's texts defy classification. Her use of autobiographical detail in her fiction allows the author to cross the line between genres. Categories cannot define Larsen's works as pure fiction or as autobiography, just as categories cannot contain any of her female characters.

Hurston's so-called autobiographical work, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, also defies categorization as autobiography or as fiction, just as the author's own identity cannot be easily defined. The woman's identity was well-hidden beneath layers of personae and masks she presented to various people in her entourage and in her oeuvre. Ironically, in the text in which readers would expect to learn most about the woman—her autobiography—readers learn very few details of the author's life. She outlines her family history, her birthplace, and some scenes of her life as a young woman. Yet in these seemingly revealing moments, readers learn nothing about some rather important details of Hurston's life. She artfully conceals the true events of her life in order to hide her self; *Dust Tracks* therefore is not a "tell-all" autobiography. Indeed, the text presents a contradictory image of its author, who is portrayed at times shy and demure and at other times as happy and wild. Readers thus learn quickly that Hurston was herself an enigmatic woman whose identity could not be known. In this final chapter because Hurston depicts "truth" in terms of its multiplicity and its unfixedity, I explore how Hurston's work and her self elude

definition and thus make her identity ultimately unknowable.

I begin this thesis with a rather elementary examination of heretofore barely-explored texts. Fauset's short stories were not complex in their telling, but her ideas and her irony grew increasingly labyrinthine as her career as a writer and as an editor advanced. Fauset demonstrated the close ties between race, class, and gender as she recounted seemingly mundane stories in a subversive and ironic voice. Larsen picked up where Fauset left off with her short stories, and she wove an even tighter tapestry of race, class, gender, and sexuality—a tapestry into which her own biography was knit. By the apex of the Harlem Renaissance in the late 1920s, Larsen moved beyond the use of an ironic tone—although she still employed it—and she began to use a more frank and blunt voice in her exploration of race and its related issues. Hurston went beyond even that: she seemed frank and blunt in her autobiographical account when she may have been completely ironic. When the Harlem Renaissance was but a memory to writers like Hurston who were still trying to eke out an existence through their writing, Hurston had much to protect—namely, her self. She was acutely aware of the relationships between race, class, gender, sexuality, and education, and her position within this vast web. The “facts” she hid or disguised point to this consciousness. These three women authors were among the first of *all* authors to understand what is now our firmly established apprehension of the constructed nature of identity, and of the intimate links between race, class, gender, sexuality, and education within that identity. Each broke new ground upon which the next could sow and reap her work, and they all act as “foreparents” of the literatures we know today.

CHAPTER 1

BEING LOADED AND OTHER MIDDLE-CLASS TRAPPINGS

The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. They may allow us temporarily to beat him at his own game, but they will enable us to bring about genuine change.

- Audre Lorde

The curtain rises on the Harlem Renaissance. A number of players fill the stage, some working together, some strongly disagreeing, all generating great movement. Tan and brown, black and white, the multitude of individuals mill about, quietly and loudly, wildly and elegantly. In the midst of the crowd, diligently working, is the oft underestimated Jessie Redmon Fauset. Besides playing her important role as author in her own right, Fauset cues other younger players to enter the scene: Langston Hughes, Georgia Douglas Johnson, Jean Toomer, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Countee Cullen, and Gwendolyn Bennett. Fauset and her achievements as the literary editor of *The Crisis* magazine between 1919 and 1926 have often been eclipsed by W.E.B. Du Bois's great shadow. As general editor of the publication and a great thinker and visionary of the era, Du Bois is most frequently cited as *the* great early influence on the Harlem Renaissance. If Fauset's work in discovering and promoting new black talent has been undervalued, her fictional oeuvre—especially her short stories—has been more undervalued. One critic, Robert Bone, has referred to Fauset as part of the “Rear Guard” of the Harlem Renaissance (in McDowell 1995, 62). Fauset's depiction of middle-class, urban Negroes has been the cause of such derision. Alain Locke had called her writing “early Victorian” (in Sylvander 76), an epithet which carries with it an undertone of whiteness: Fauset's work, the characters she portrays, and perhaps Fauset herself were not “black enough” for some of the New Negro intelligentsia, or even for a number of late-twentieth-century critics.

In “Emmy” (1912-12), “Mary Elizabeth” (1919), “The Sleeper Wakes” (1920), and

“Double Trouble” (1923), four short stories each originally published in the pages of *The Crisis*, Fauset undertakes to expose interracial and intraracial conflicts which run deeper than the quaint and banal love stories she has been accused of writing. Even initially in her writing career, as early as 1912 with the publication of “Emmy” at the predawn of the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset demonstrates an awareness that individuals are not always as they seem, and that *who* or *what* they are exactly cannot be fully apprehended. In each of these four short stories, Fauset illustrates the falsity of middle-class values which entrap women within their confines. Her female characters thus develop their respective personal identities within (and at times, without) these strictures. In order for these female characters to achieve any personal goals, they must struggle greatly against the confines of the strictly-defined categories of race and gender roles established by middle-class society. I seek to demonstrate in this chapter that Fauset’s ironic depiction of middle-class mores and the categories these values create allows the author to examine female agency and the ways a woman adopts the dominant discourse or discards it in order to create her/self.

Gender, race, class, and the intersection(s) between each of these categories play an important role in the development or deployment of identity. Close readings of Fauset’s works reveal a woman sensitive to gender, race, and class issues and how each of these work together and against each other within black women’s identities. Fauset’s involvement with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and its organ, *The Crisis*, reveals a profoundly race-conscious and race-sensitive woman. Before turning to an examination of Fauset’s fiction, I shall therefore first outline the role of the NAACP and its organ, *The Crisis*, as well as Fauset’s background and her emergence as a major player both at *The Crisis* and in the

Harlem Renaissance more generally.

The year 1909 witnessed the birth of the NAACP, an association dedicated to the demolition of, as the editor of *The Crisis Reader* Sondra Kathryn Wilson formulates it, “the stubborn stereotype that had misrepresented and malformed implicitly every external view of African-American life” (xx). The NAACP is known for its involvement in civil-rights court cases where it exposes racial prejudices and calls for fair and equal treatment of African Americans. The Association along with its publication, *The Crisis*, which first appeared a year after the foundation of the NAACP, both contributed a great deal to the birth of the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. As the editor of *The Crisis*, Du Bois fostered an environment fertile for the Negro intelligentsia and the Negro artistic community. The project of both the NAACP and its magazine was the improvement of race relations. *The Crisis* showcased Negro literature and poetry as intelligent, thought-provoking, and of the highest quality, thereby establishing the beginnings of an artistic movement. The contribution of *The Crisis* (and of the other two important Negro magazines of the era—National Urban League’s *Opportunity* and Marcus Garvey’s *Negro World*) to the very existence of the Harlem Renaissance, notes Wilson, should not be overlooked or underestimated. David Levering Lewis has even suggested that because of the publications’ involvement in the development of young artists, the Harlem Renaissance “was a somewhat forced phenomenon” (in Wilson, xx). But I shall not overstress the matter since the Renaissance *did* in fact exist outside of these magazines, in smaller publications, in the theatre, in the salons, in the cabarets, in the galleries, and beyond Harlem, across the United States.

Jessie Fauset’s career and life were oriented toward the racial issues and race-consciousness early. In 1903, at the age of twenty-one, she began a correspondence with Du Bois.

The prominent leader soon found Fauset's work to be excellent, "of the kind he wished to encourage and publish" in *The Crisis* (Sylvander 46). Not only would he publish many of her works, which ranged from essays to poetry and from literary reviews to her own fiction, but Du Bois saw in Fauset a talent for analysis and for recognizing good poetry and prose, which led him to hire her in 1919 as the literary editor of the magazine. Fauset flourished in her role at *The Crisis*: she contributed much to the publication through her gift for identifying and developing new, young talent and also through her own writing. *The Crisis* was widely read, even beyond the NAACP membership. Writing and editing for such a wide audience—which consisted of the young and the old, the highly-educated and the unsophisticated, the black and the white—was not an easy task, but Fauset seemed to take to it well. In order to appeal to such a diverse readership, Fauset needed to be sensitive to racial, class, and gender issues, among many others. She included works which ranged from the conservative to the radical. She herself had a keen understanding of the state of race issues. The number of lynchings was on the rise in the first decade of the twentieth century, Jim Crow laws were strictly enforced in most communities and cities across the United States, and race relations were thus strained (Feeney 366). Fauset's insights into these racial affairs made her an outstanding editor. When looking back on the Harlem Renaissance, critics often cite Du Bois as the key figure to the movement while they overlook Fauset's many contributions (as noted in "Harlem Renaissance" 931, Knopf xxi, and Feeney 382). Although I do not disparage Du Bois's role—for his was a very important one—I do wish to highlight Fauset's work at *The Crisis*. Langston Hughes had appreciated her impact when he recognized her role, along with that of Locke and Charles Johnson, as that of "midwifing" New Negro literature (in Sato 66). I would suggest that Fauset was even more than a

midwife. Her work with young writers has earned her a place of honour in Harlem Renaissance history. The author's profound knowledge of the social and racial issues of the day, her involvement in encouraging many young Negro artists, as well as the sheer volume of work she produced—she was one of the most prolific writers of the Harlem Renaissance, male or female (Wall 1995, 36)—place her in the pantheon of the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia.

Critics have found or fabricated many reasons to castigate Fauset (Knopf xxi), not the least of which is the grievance that she only portrays middle-class life and that her sheltered experience both as a child and as an adult contribute to Fauset's "inauthentic" representation of Negro life. The Fauset family lived in a "distinctly white neighborhood" (Wall 1995, 38), and Jessie Fauset had been the only Negro girl in her classes in an all-girls school, but this did not cause her to adopt a white identity. If anything, Fauset became more aware of her race because of the contrast. Fauset had grown up in a period of strict racial segregation, a fact which cast a long shadow over her adult life from which she could not escape. In an essay entitled "Some Notes on Color" published in *The World Tomorrow* in 1922, Fauset iterates her race-consciousness: "I cannot if I will forget the fact of color in almost everything I do or say in the same sense in which I forget the shape of my face or the size of my hands and feet" (in Sylvander 83). Later in her career, in an interview with *The Pittsburgh Courier* in the May 11, 1929 issue, Fauset describes the agony she felt at being ostracized by girls who had been her friends in grade school (Sylvander 27). Fauset's experiences of racism in her young life, even though she lived in a middle-class home, could not be deemed "inauthentic." Furthermore, Fauset's biographer, Carolyn Wedin Sylvander, suggests that the Fauset family may have known poverty for Jessie's first twenty years, although the term "middle-class" still applied to the family given their high

level of education and their social prominence: Redmon Fauset, Jessie's father, was an African Methodist Episcopal minister and thus an important member of the Negro community. In any case, black feminists such as Barbara Christian, Patricia Hill Collins, bell hooks, Amina Mama, and Barbara Smith rightly take issue with the notion of *an* or *the* authentic black experience. Creating such a monolithic categorization is false and counterproductive. Relegating *all* individuals from a certain race into *one* all-encompassing category creates stereotypes, and stereotypes contribute to alienation and deep-seated racism. Besides, Fauset does not easily fit any single category once one looks beneath the surface. Although Locke had called her work "Victorian" and Claude McKay had condescendingly described her writing as "precious" and the author herself as "prim and dainty as a primrose" (in Sylvander 62), Fauset had participated in the "wilder" aspects of the Harlem Renaissance. Sylvander notes that, contrary to popular memory, Fauset was active in the Harlem nightlife, partaking in dancing and attending cabarets (77). The existence of such forgotten or rarely mentioned aspects of Fauset's biography, which add dimensions to an otherwise unidimensional picture of the woman's identity, suggests that the woman's writing is also multifaceted and more complex than most critics have heretofore assumed.²

Although Fauset was part of the "ultrarespectable group" of Harlem Renaissance writers (Kent 42)—she herself admitted, after all, to disliking coarse language (Sylvander 84)—Fauset did not condone or unquestioningly uphold black middle-class values as ideal, irreproachable, or even more valuable than others. In her discussion on Fauset, Ann duCille reads Fauset's work as ironic, as a condemnation of the conventions she portrays (8): she does *not* hold up those conventions and mores for all to imitate but rather critiques "*both* the pretension of the petite

(petty) bourgeoisie *and* the primitivism assigned to the transplanted urban masses [emphases added]" (70). Fauset does not want to depict "her people as good as the whites" as Hiroko Sato asserts (69). She does not present middle-class Negroes who adopt white middle-class values in a positive light; in fact, she shows bitterness against white America (Feeney 367). Because Fauset wrote for a diverse audience, the short stories Fauset published in *The Crisis* have a double structure: the author often foregrounds a romantic story, which appeals to a number of readers as she allows serious social commentary to run in the background as a counter-structure. Through her apprehension of what McDowell terms the "color-coded" system of social hierarchies (1995, 61), Fauset demonstrates a clear understanding of the relationship between colour and class. This theory of social stratification works on the principle that lighter-skinned individuals rise to more prominent and important social and economic positions while those darker individuals will drop to (or remain at) lower positions. This creates a kind of social-coloured spectrum where whites are at the "top," fair-complexioned Negroes are next, and the gradation in colour runs down the social gamut to the low end where very dark Negroes exist. Of course, this is a generalization, but it seems to be a semi-consciously created trend which exists in reality and is depicted in fiction.³ According to duCille, Fauset's novels tackle "some of the most significant social contradictions of the emerging modern era, including the questions of black female agency" (74). Fauset's short stories act as prototypes to her novels as they explore the same notions but in a slightly less developed or mature manner. The undercurrents of her short stories expose the unattractive aspects of the seemingly "perfect" middle-class Negro life. Fauset's depictions of interracial and intraracial strife as well as those of the Negro woman's search for respect and autonomy offer the reader an alternate view of black bourgeois culture while they implicitly

condemn it: appearances may be deceiving. Fauset questions middle-class values and mores that inescapably ensnare and inscribe women in strictly defined roles and identities.

Fauset's earliest short story studied here, "Emmy," which was published in two parts in *The Crisis* (the first instalment appeared in the December 1912 issue and the second in the January 1913 issue), explicitly examines the complexities of racial divisions. Beneath the surface, however, lurk questions concerning the entrapment of women and the narrow confines from which these women must create their identities. "Emmy" opens with a classroom scene in which the eponymous character, who is a young girl, is called upon by the teacher to name the five races. Emilie Carrel, known as Emmy, confidently identifies each of them: white or Caucasian, yellow or Mongolian, red or Indian, brown or Malay, and black or Negro. But when asked to which of these she belongs, Emmy hesitates. She is not embarrassed but rather confused. She goes through the list in her mind and eliminates the possibilities. She knows she is not white because her skin is too dark, she is not Chinese because she does not have almond eyes, and she is not Indian because she does not wear a feather in her hair. Then her thoughts become less focussed and she begins to question her identity. Her arms, she notes, are brown, but she does not resemble that "horrid ugly-looking thing with a ring in his nose" in her textbook known as a Malay (51). Emmy identifies with the better-looking "Hottentot, chosen with careful nicety to represent the entire Negro race" (51). The girl answers at last: she belongs to the black or Negro race. At the long-awaited correct answer, her teacher breathes a sigh of relief. The schoolyard conversation between Emmy and her friend Mary following this scene demonstrates others' awareness of Emmy's racial identity even if the Negro girl herself seems relatively unconscious of it. Mary wonders if Emmy "minds" (being a Negro). Emmy, oblivious to any

possible reason for disliking her identity, asks Mary, “Mind what?” (52). Emmy genuinely likes her appearance and would not change it if she could choose to do so. Later in the day as they walk home from school, Emmy asks her friend Archie why she *should* mind being brown. The boy, described as Emmy’s “faithful squire” (52), answers that he does not know why she should mind, that it is always white people who mind about skin colour. He admits that he envies Emmy’s dark skin: he has white skin, despite his Negro blood. He wishes that everyone around him would know “just what” he is. Yet, interestingly, if Emmy were judged by her skin colour (as Archie is), she would be deemed a Malay, according to the accepted standards outlined in the girl’s geography book. The grossly generalized description of the delineations of racial lines here underscores the sheer impossibility of categorizing individuals by “race” according to their skin colour, especially in a world in which Negroes may be “black,” “brown,” or sometimes even “white.” The falsity of such categorization shall be explored in greater detail in the following chapter which considers Nella Larsen’s oeuvre. Here, however, the inability to classify individuals according to neatly defined groups is but Fauset’s surface concern in the short story. One of Fauset’s principal aims in “Emmy” is to examine women’s gender-assigned roles.

Most of the story centres on Archie, his quest for a stable career, and his experiences with racial passing and consequent ostracism by others; hence, Fauset minimally develops Emmy’s character. After the initial two segments (of nine parts), any description of Emmy is in reference to Archie. The two young people grow and soon develop a strong and loving relationship, even when Archie leaves Plainville to attend preparatory school and later a top-rated technical school and finally to follow his career in engineering in Philadelphia. Archie must not only conceal his true identity from his employer but he must also hide the existence of the dark Emmy, even

though the two have decided to marry. Although the choices Archie must make are difficult, I wish to explore here Emmy's experience specifically as a gendered character, and following from that, the choices offered to her in the narrative. As Archie builds his career, Emmy stays behind in Plainville, ostensibly doing nothing but reading and rereading her sweetheart's letters, poring over them "alone in her room at night," and planning her own sweet responses (61). Emmy seems merely to wait for Archie's wedding proposal. But Emmy soon finds out that she will have to wait much longer than anticipated: Archie must first establish himself professionally. Mr. Nicholas Fields, the owner of the company for which Archie works, has offered the young man a junior partnership in his firm and has offered to groom him for the top position since his own son, Peter, has shown no interest in the family business. Mr. Fields does not know, however, that Archie is a Negro and he certainly would not embrace a dark woman as the wife of his partner and heir apparent—it would be completely inappropriate for a man of such potentially high social standing as Archie to commit the crime of miscegenation. Being sensitive to this, Archie carefully plans around Emmy's colour: he will buy a house in a neighbourhood far removed from his workplace, he will establish himself within the company, and only then will he be free to take the chance on having his fiancée's true dark identity revealed. Of course, this has been a difficult decision for Archie to make. But at issue here is not Archie's hardships or even race questions (although they are integral to the story and cannot be dismissed); rather, what is at issue is Emmy's sheer reliance on Archie.

When Emmy visits her sweetheart in Philadelphia where he resides and works, the girl is too curious about and interested in her new surroundings to notice how others perceive her. Besides being denied access to the floor seats at the Academy because of her colour, Emmy is

judged harshly because of the contrast of her skin with her beloved's complexion. As the young couple stroll along in a white neighbourhood, the elder Mr. Fields catches a glimpse of his employee with the Negro woman. He does not assume that the two are a conventional couple but rather thinks to himself that Archie had "seemed too proper" for such a liaison (64), insinuating that the relationship is merely a sexual one. Because of her proximity to a light coloured man, Emmy seems to some to be a licentious woman completely dependent on Archie.

As a woman, a black woman at that, Emmy does not have many opportunities open to her. She could possibly become a teacher, but a black school teacher in the mostly-white neighbourhood where Emmy grew up is not presented as a viable option. Few other jobs (for few "careers" existed for many women in the era) are available, and no others besides translating are mentioned in the narrative. None of these options are associated with Emmy in any manner: the narrator does not suggest or even imply that Emmy take up a vocation of any kind. In fact, Emmy's teacher, Miss Wenzel, comments on the peculiarity of the independence of some Negroes in the neighbourhood as she wishes aloud, "I must say I like people to look and act like what they are" (54). This person, of course, is the same teacher who had earlier insisted that Emmy not only name the five races but that she identify with—inscribe herself within—one of the five narrowly defined categories. With much of the community apparently feeling the same way, the options for women of colour are limited.

Emmy's mother is the one exception to the rule. As a translator, the widowed single mother has a well-paid and highly-regarded career. This black woman's respectable, middle-class independence at the time was highly irregular. In Mrs. Carrel, Fauset creates a strong, independent, and reserved woman. Mrs. Carrel does not say much throughout the narrative, but

when she does speak, the early twenty-first-century reader may be surprised at the advice she offers her daughter. This highly successful woman, who provides well for her daughter and who, in a complete reversal of expectations, even has a (white) French maid, admits to her grown daughter that her life “has been nothing ever since” she lost her beloved husband Emile (75). Mrs. Carrel holds herself up as a sorrowful example to her daughter who has deliberately broken Archie’s heart. Emmy cast her beloved aside when she learned of the postponement of their wedding and the reasons behind the delay. Mrs. Carrel asks her daughter to reconsider her decision. At this point in the narrative, Fauset’s detractors would deem the tale sheer melodrama. But there may be an explanation for Mrs. Carrel’s capitulation to such sentimental middle-class values: Fauset may be denouncing women’s physical as well as psychological dependence on men. Fauset herself did not marry until very late (she was forty-seven), after she had established a career for herself as a teacher, as a prominent editor at *The Crisis* and for the *Brownies’ Book*, and as a celebrated author in her own right. In “Emmy” Fauset paints the secondary character of Mrs. Carrel as an intelligent and independent woman, who has been successful in her career, and who builds a comfortable home for herself and her daughter. Yet she demolishes this seemingly solid image in the space of two pages when she has Mrs. Carrel admit that she is “nothing” because she does not have her husband. Mrs. Carrel’s reputation and social standing are not in question here since she is a widow and not an unwed, single mother. And although it is a romantic notion to cling to the love of one’s life, Mrs. Carrel’s devotion seems extreme. Without her Emile, Mrs. Carrel’s career, her success, her home, even her own daughter seem meaningless to her. The contrast between Mrs. Carrel’s strong public persona and her dependent private one is striking. Fauset’s characterization of a financially independent woman as completely emotionally

and psychologically dependent on a man is ironic. In terms of personal development, it seems rather implausible that Fauset would hold Emmy's mother up as the example to follow.

Emmy herself misunderstands her mother's situation as well as her own conundrum when she blames the entire situation on race. "It couldn't have happened at all if we hadn't been colored . . . it's wrecked mother's life and now it's wrecking mine" she tells herself (75).

Although her race does enter into the equation, Mrs. Carrel's unhappiness does not stem from the fact that she is a Negro but rather from her womanhood and her absolute dependence upon a man for her fulfilment. She has implicitly dismissed her career and even her self as possible sources of self-achievement, and Emmy would appear to have followed her mother's example. She has not sought out any employment (at least, the narrator has not indicated as much), and she has allowed Archie to become the centre of her existence, for without him, she falls into a deep depression. The middle-class values with which she has been reared and which she has espoused have caused her this great anguish.

Despite the pain both women suffer at the loss of their respective sweethearts, the story ends very happily, at least for Emmy. Archie returns to her on Christmas Eve, admitting that he could not allow himself and her to be humiliated even by his bigoted boss. He has quit his job, he is considering prospects in the Philippines, and he asks Emmy if she will have him back. Emmy enthusiastically accepts his proposal and agrees to go with him, at which point they receive a telegram from the younger Mr. Fields offering his father's apologies and asking Archie to return to the company. The "lovely" scene closes with a marriage in the works for the following day. The tidy, almost fairytale ending is trite and too easy, yet that may be Fauset's message to her reader. Fauset's role at *The Crisis* demonstrates her clear understanding of race relations, of

violence done against Negroes, and of unwavering racist attitudes. Her experience with these realities would not allow her to buy into the easy ending she creates. Such endings are *not* plausible nor even possible. Fairytales condition women to idealize marriage and romantic love (McDowell 1995, 66). Such notions, teaches Fauset, are but mere ideals: they are not realities. A man such as Mr. Fields who believes that black women are only objects with which to play and later discard but never to marry, who had threatened to fabricate charges against Archie and even perjure himself to see the young man locked away, and who hurled the loaded and injurious epithet “Nigger!” at Archie—such characters cannot suddenly and without explanation change their opinion on Negroes so effortlessly. Their deep-seated hatred and animosity cannot simply disappear within a matter of weeks or months. Even if Mr. Fields were willing to change, Emmy’s life as a black woman in Philadelphia would be difficult and trying. Here, Fauset is again being ironic in her exploration of bourgeois ideals and fantasies. The “happily ever after” ending can only conceivably be sustained for a few days until the pair returns to big city and Archie to his job; then the real and arduous task of living would begin.

The question of identity is very much at work in “Mary Elizabeth,” although in a decidedly different manner. This short story written six years after “Emmy” shows a more mature Fauset. The story is by far the shortest of the four studied here and it may possibly be the strongest. The unity of time and place—with the exception of a few tales articulated by the characters within the narrative—allows the reader to follow along easily and to focus more sharply on the characters and their development rather than on the action. The story centres on two women. Sally Pierson, an upper-middle class Negro, narrates the story, and Mary Elizabeth, the title character, is her housekeeper. On the surface, the two share very little in common

besides their race and their gender, but the veneer will be scratched away and their similarities shall soon be revealed.

The story opens with an unhappy breakfast scene. Mary Elizabeth has not arrived yet and as a consequence Roger Pierson's breakfast is not ready. Sally has not even made coffee for her husband. The woman suggests to her husband that he eat breakfast out this morning, and Roger criticises her and tells her that she is the only woman in the world who would "send her husband out on a morning like this on an empty stomach" (40). Through this statement, Roger not only questions his wife's love and devotion to him but he doubts her femininity: she does not conform to the feminine mould to which, apparently, *all* the other women in the world do. Sally does not seem to have any particular interests or abilities, besides playing cards with their neighbours, the Cheltons. She certainly does not have a job outside the home, she explicitly cannot cook, and there is no sign that she organizes fund-raisers or even social dinners. When Mary Elizabeth finally arrives, Sally is so dejected after the earlier altercation between her and her husband that she follows her housekeeper about the house just to have some company. Sally seems to be a completely idle woman, with no prospects of her own and no sources of joy outside of her husband and insignificant petty bourgeois preoccupations. Mary Elizabeth, on the other hand, leads a very full and busy life. She keeps house for the Piersons and cares for her aging and senile husband, Mr. Gales, and is always full of engaging tales which hint at her rich personal history. She was late that particular morning because she had been out all night looking for Mr. Gales who had simply left their home without a trace. Mary Elizabeth's life seems to be a normal working-class Negro existence. She cooks and cleans, she speaks in a southern Negro dialect, and she enjoys telling stories of her past. The two women, employer and employee, ostensibly

have little in common, but one of Mary Elizabeth's stories will change that perception.

Mary Elizabeth's parents, Maggie and Cassius, had been slaves in the South. The pair married in a traditional Negro ceremony by jumping over a broomstick because there was no clergy to marry them legally. When Mary Elizabeth was still very young, her father was sold down South to another slaveholder. Over the years, Maggie lost hope that her husband could return to her—indeed, lost hope that Cassius was alive at all—and she eventually remarried. But Cassius did return, twenty-six years later. He came looking for his long-lost first wife and found her as well as his grown daughter. He revealed his identity, embraced Maggie, and asked her and Mary Elizabeth to come away with him. The happy reunion between the pair was cut short by the vision of Minnie, Maggie's daughter from her second marriage. Sally interrupts the story to insist, "Surely she went with him after all those years. He really was her husband" (45). But Mary Elizabeth reminds Sally that Maggie's second marriage was legally binding and that she could not simply go off on a romantic whim. No, Maggie and Cassius did not reunite. The reader does not have the satisfaction of knowing what exactly transpired between Maggie and Cassius once it was revealed that both had remarried—Cassius three times since. Sally, completely disillusioned, leaves the room and asks no further questions of her housekeeper.

That evening, after Mary Elizabeth has left and the Piersons have dined together, Sally and Roger apologize to one another and reconcile. Sally cannot forget the tragic story of Maggie and Cassius, and she ponders their situation and admits to herself that she has not thought of slavery in a very long time. She was born in Pennsylvania, and neither her parents nor her grandparents had been slaves. She wonders what her life might have been like had she and Roger lived in those days. She cannot bear the thought. Soon, Sally is telling her husband the

lamentable story, but Roger's reaction is probably not what Sally had expected. "Isn't that just like a woman?" he throws out (46). "She might have waited," he judges (47). Sally reasons with Roger that Cassius had also remarried, three other times. Roger dismisses this presumption, chalks it up to the man's loneliness, and catches Sally's hands so tightly "he hurt them." He then states coldly, "if I had been Cassius . . . and I had married fifty times and had come back and found you married to someone else, I'd have killed you" (47). Roger holds his wife to standards that he himself could not keep; he creates a glaring double-standard. The remarkable irony is that, as far as the reader knows, Cassius, who had once been a lowly slave, acted more becomingly and compassionately than Roger, an educated professional, would have.

The story of Maggie and Cassius has changed Sally's and the reader's perceptions. When Sally had initially heard the story, she had romantically wanted the pair to reunite and to run away together, but Mary Elizabeth, in her simple rationality, explained that each had moved on, period. Later, when Sally discusses the slaves' story with her husband, she takes a different, more reasonable position. However, when Roger insists that Maggie should have waited, it is not out of a sense of romance and love but rather out of his ideal of an undying feminine devotion to a man. Once again, Fauset here exposes middle-class romantic notions as controlling and as designed to subdue women and to keep them in their "rightful" place, serving men first and foremost, casting aside their own personal goals. Roger's manacle-like grip on Sally when he utters the death-threat underscores the entrapment of women and their identities within middle-class marriages. Mary Elizabeth, a working-class Negro, dismisses romantic beliefs and simply does not subscribe to them. Sally soon understands the dangers of middle-class values surrounding heterosexual couples. In *The Coupling Convention*, duCille underlines how Fauset

uses the coupling trope as a “metaphor through which to examine and critique the color consciousness, class stratification, social conventions, and gender relations” (67). In this way, Fauset breaks down these conventions between the women in her narrative and creates a bond between them which transcends their separations. Sally had not thought of slavery for a very long time, but she realizes that its spectre lives on in her marriage to Roger and in his expectations of her slavish devotion to him. “So thus, and not otherwise,” Sally ends the narrative, “Mary Elizabeth had healed the breach” (47). The breach Mary Elizabeth has healed is that of separation in time, space, and class of women. Sally has more in common with Maggie and Mary Elizabeth than she has with Roger. In “Mary Elizabeth” Fauset thus breaks down the romantic plot to show its falsity while she unites women who have seemingly irreconcilable differences because of social standing in order to join them together in their common fight for self-determination and personal agency.

Female agency is of central importance in “The Sleeper Wakes.” Just as in the case of “Emmy,” race appears to be the central concern in the narrative; a closer, however, reading uncovers questions of female identity. Amy, the protagonist of the story, is of unknown racial background. The girl is evidently white, but her parentage is questioned in the narrative, and readers are left to wonder if Amy has Negro ancestors—if she is not in fact a Negro herself. For her first five years, as far as Amy can recall, the girl seems to have lived with a “tall, proud, white woman” (2). Then she was brought to the Boldins’, a newly-wed Negro couple, where she was accepted and welcomed with loving, open arms. When Amy first meets the Boldins, she asks the white woman, “Am I going to be colored now?” (2). The woman hesitates but finally answers that yes, Amy would now be colored. At the age of sixteen, Amy would ask about her racial

identity again: “am I white or colored?” she asks Mrs. Boldin (2). The woman cannot respond since she herself does not and cannot know. The girl will not feel particularly attached to any one racial group until much later in her life. In her youth, Amy’s love for the Boldins, especially Cornelius, her foster-brother, does not seem to translate into a deep attachment or even devotion to the family or to their race. Amy soon leaves home at the age of seventeen without an explanation to her adoptive family.

The narrator does explain Amy’s motives to the reader: she feels “caged, imprisoned. ‘Trenton is stifling me,’ she would have told you, in her unconsciously adopted ‘movie’ diction” (5). So Amy sets off for New York City where she soon makes friends and forges a new identity—or has one fashioned *for* her. The most important figure in Amy’s life in the New York section is the blonde and golden Zora Harrison. The older woman takes an interest in the unaffected girl and the two become fast friends. Zora, always interested in the fantastic, fabulates an identity for Amy. First, she supposes that Amy, with her looks and her birth, belongs to the Kildares of Philadelphia. The woman remembers a story about one of the Kildare sons who ran off to marry “an actress or someone” (6) and implicitly links Amy with this long-lost Kildare. Amy willingly accepts the woman’s fabulations concerning her birth—so much so, in fact, that she comes to believe the tale. Next, Zora insists that Amy had run away and come to New York in order to study art. Although the narrator offers no sign that Amy has accepted this version of her own story, the narrator does not indicate that Amy refutes this version. Indeed, Amy comes to live with Zora whose house is “inhabited only by artists” (6). Finally, the older woman holds up her life as an example for Amy to emulate. Zora had deliberately married a rich man and just as deliberately divorced him within the course of four years. Now she studies art and is funded quite

handsomely thanks to her alimony cheques. Zora insinuates that Amy should marry wealthily since, after all, “one can always get a divorce” (6). And Amy does just that: she marries a rich man but without the plan to divorce. Amy allows someone other than herself—a near stranger—to create an identity for her based on the few hints Zora receives on the young woman’s appearance and demeanour. I would note that Amy does not innocently and naively accept Zora’s opinion on all subjects; in fact, the teenager demonstrates a somewhat discerning mind in some instances. She does not like the manner in which Zora uses others for her own gain, including how she has used her former husband, but the girl does not “probe too far into this thought” (7). It is only in the arena of identity that Amy apparently unquestioningly embraces Zora’s interpretation of experience. Amy allows Zora to chisel out an identity for her as she adopts the elder woman’s philosophies on life.

Amy’s acceptance of Zora’s ideas and suggestions concerning her self and her options leads her to meet and ultimately marry Stuart James Wynne, a fifty-five year old retired broker who happens to be wealthy. Zora had recounted to Wynne the story she had fabricated for Amy. The apparently-white girl seemed to Wynne “everything a girl should be—she was so unspoiled, so untouched” (9). Amy’s cold and aloof reaction to his wedding proposal convinces Wynne of the young woman’s “native superiority” (9), even though she has just admitted that she is “poor, ignorant—a nobody.” But he does not listen to her protestations. Rather, he insists that he could offer her everything she had ever wanted. Wynne assumes that money can buy everything, including happiness, and for a little while, this is indeed the case with Amy.

Wynne “loads” his wife with gifts, dresses, and jewels (11). The imagery of being “loaded” with these trappings implies a weightiness, almost a suffocation under the burden of

Wynne's love. Through his gift-giving, Wynne demonstrates his belief not only that material gain can make one happy, but that his wife is shallow if she can only be made happy simply with gifts; he does not seem to consider any other means by which to offer joy to Amy. Though she has always shown a love of fine clothing, Amy had once held interests other than in *things*. She has allowed her husband to dictate her tastes, desires, and feelings. Amy does not notice this, however. The narrator indicates that Amy notices very little, in fact. Amy is described alternately as a woman who makes "no attempt to understand anything" (10), as "content to let her days pass by" (11), and as "too unquestioning, too selfish, too vain" (12). Amy no longer immerses herself in art. She begins to learn French and acquires a knowledge of politics, commerce, and social questions—all interests, one must note, of Wynne's. Amy has put aside her own personal preoccupations to take up her husband's. Through Amy's blindness to her own addiction to the accumulation of goods, Fauset criticizes middle-class values (here, *white* middle-class values) as vain, shallow, and capable of causing great harm.

Soon, however, Amy will again begin to identify with Negroes. For years, Amy had stopped thinking of herself as a Negro—probably because both Zora and Wynne have treated her as though she were white (for they do not know that she may be anything *but* white) and in effect have told Amy that she *is* white. This acceptance of others' identity prescription is normal since, as Gayle Wald points out, one is treated as a function of how one looks (1). Amy, however, has translated how others treat and define her into how she perceives herself and how she identifies her self. Nevertheless, Amy begins to identify with Negroes. She feels injured whenever Wynne, who is very bigoted and intolerant, insults one of his black employees. She takes a great interest in the household staff, especially in the young valet, Stephen. With his "short-sighted, patient

eyes,” he reminds her of Cornelius, her beloved foster-brother (12). So when her husband insults or degrades his Negro servants, Amy admonishes him privately. She asks him how he can say such insulting things, but she does not voice her concerns in front of the servants, nor does she hint at her possible/probably racial background. Nevertheless, when Wynne and Stephen have an altercation and Wynne threatens to have the young man lynched for his disrespectful behaviour, Amy defends Stephen and even endeavours to help him escape. Amy holds her husband back, but her small frame cannot keep him from chasing after his valet. Thus Amy’s only option is to declare herself. She begs of Wynne, as a personal favour, that he not punish Stephen. Realizing she holds no sway in this matter, she blurts out desperately, “he is my brother” (14). Even after this confession, Wynne cannot consider the fact that his wife may be a Negro. “Don’t you suppose I know a white girl when I see one?” he asks (14). His statement reveals two important bigoted assumptions: one, that miscegenation simply *cannot* occur (he does not consider that Stephen and Amy might share a *white* parent—that Stephen may be a mulatto); and two, that Negroes are necessarily black (he does not consider that Stephen and Amy might share a *black* parent—that Amy might merely be passing as white). Amy might have agreed with him, for Stephen is not really her brother in any case. But she does not. She does admit that she has no blood ties to Stephen, but she defiantly declares: “I *am* colored” (14). In this case, Amy fabulates for the first time her *own* identity, one which runs counter to her husband’s and white middle-class society’s views of an ideal or proper identity.

Amy’s first conscious act of self-definition has bought her a quiet but rather profitable divorce. The young woman has not yet found freedom, however. Although she moves back to New York, Amy lives in a home entirely financed by Wynne. Because her days are so empty and

desolate, Amy finds employment at a “modiste,” an exclusive dress shop in New York (15). The owner of the shop, known only as Madame, notices that Amy has a good eye and is happy to hire the woman. Amy, now a self-consciously wealthy woman, will donate her salary to a charity. Yet despite her work on fashion, Amy misses Wynne a great deal, but not for sentimental or romantic reasons, however. She misses him “chiefly as a *guiding influence* for she had rarely planned even her own amusements. Her *dependence* on him had been absolute [emphases added]” (16). Self-definition is taxing and difficult. Amy feels lost without her husband to dictate to her what she should do, what she should like, or who she should be. To a certain extent, Amy allows Peter the butler to take Wynne’s place. Knowing the upper-middle-class lifestyle in New York City, Peter keeps Amy abreast of all “the meetings, the plays, the sights she ought to attend or see” (17). For this, Amy is grateful to him since it seems that Amy cannot even decide for herself what she should do or which parties and meetings she should attend. But Amy’s world of comfort and reliance on others will come to an abrupt end.

Amy finds—or is pressed into—her independence through sheer hard work in an effort to dissociate herself from Wynne definitively. Her ex-husband appears on the doorstep of the home he has financed Amy for the past ten months, asking for a reconciliation. Amy mistakenly understands Wynne’s return to be a second wedding proposal, and is shocked when Wynne tells her that he means for her to live with him but not to marry him. He has come with an immense sapphire ring and he offers Amy all the things she loves, noting that “[m]any a white woman would envy you” (19). He does not notice that Amy has found a measure of independence—enough to know that *things* do not interest her any longer, that self-respect is more precious than a world full of coloured gems. She refuses him. Wynne misunderstands the rejection and accuses

her of holding out for a higher bidder. At this insinuation, Amy strikes him with her ringed hand, and from that point onward she never looks back. The following morning she informs her house staff that she will be leaving the house, never to return. She has resolved to work and pay Wynne back for the debt she has incurred from his alimony payments. Henceforth, she will no longer rely on his money and she will reimburse him for every penny he has spent on her after the divorce. When she describes her situation to the faithful Peter, Amy characterizes the debt as a burden that weighs heavily on her, and that she must be rid of it at once (21). Amy becomes the regular designer for the French Madame at the dress shop in order to finance her independence. Over a period of four years, Amy works diligently, carefully saving much of her salary in order to repay her debt as quickly as possible. Although she works hard and has little time to herself, Amy has “a curious sense of freedom . . . a feeling that at last her brain, her senses were liberated from some hateful clinging thralldom” (22). In the end, she sends Wynne’s lawyer the payment for the ten months he had kept her. “She was free, free!” (23).

Through her difficult experience, Amy learns an important lesson. She concludes that there are two types of people in the world: the power-hungry who are cruel and proud, and the trusting who are ambitious but are humbled at the same time. Amy happily chooses to be of the second order. To this choice she adds her desire to be black: “She wanted to be colored, she hoped she was colored” (23). By developing her character in such a manner, and by allowing Amy to come to such a meaningful understanding of the importance of being humble rather than materialistic and proud, Fauset criticizes middle-class values which corrupt individuals, especially women. Amy has worked not for material gain but to pay off her slave-debt. Now she is free, and can *choose* her identity.

The story does not end at Amy's emancipation, however. The woman decides to return home, although the narrator only anticipates and does not describe the reunion with the Boldins. The trope of homecoming is a problematic one. Some black feminists underscore the ambivalent nature of home. Wald for instance argues that home is associated with emotional nurture and political education but that it is also a place of humiliation for black women (51). The homecoming denouement may be troublesome because it reinscribes black women into the domestic sphere (Phillip Brian Harper in Wald 34). bell hooks on the other hand affirms that home is a "place of mind and heart, where we recover ourselves in love" (1992, 20). In this reading, Fauset's ending is seemingly a positive one. Amy has chosen to identify herself as a Negro woman and returns to her Negro adoptive family. Her success as a fashion designer will easily allow her to open up her own shop, where she shall service rich, white, suburban women, who care "nothing for realities, only for externals" (24). However, although readers may wish to believe that Amy has evolved, but they will be mistaken. First, Amy decides that she will hide her newly-chosen identity from her future customers. If they care only for externals, they will neither ask nor even think to consider whether Amy is white or black. And she will not voluntarily tell them. Second, Amy decides that she is simply a "[c]itizen of the world" (25). She has apparently already renounced her chosen race. Finally, although Amy is assuring her financial independence by planning to open her own boutique, the woman will presumably cater only to rich, white women. Amy shows no interest in serving Negroes and her shop, if only because of its planned location in the suburbs, will be exclusive. I do not suggest that Amy should dedicate herself to the cause of racial uplift, for that would be quite out of her character and would constitute a rather implausible ending. But if Amy has truly changed, she should not

devote herself to the continuation and perpetuation of materialistic and shallow, middle-class values of accumulation. Fauset questions these mores and highlights their power to hold women in their grip, even if the women themselves believe they are being changed. Amy thus has not truly evolved, since she returns to the Boldins the same girl she was at seventeen, attracted to clothing and uninterested in knowing “who or what she was” (25). Middle-class values have entangled Amy in their vast web of controlling images, roles, and identities.

Published one year before Fauset’s first novel *There Is Confusion* (1924) would appear in print, “Double Trouble” also explores the concept of women’s limited choices of identities in a stagnant middle-class society which confines and stifles women. In this final short story, the main character, Angélique, is entrapped by her very birth. She fancies, and is perhaps even in love with, Malory Fordham, a young man who shows his great love to her by defying his family’s wishes and asking her to accompany him to the Methodist Sunday School picnic. He cannot fathom why his mother and sisters object to his devotion to Angélique. All the attendees of the picnic are horror-struck when they see the two arrive together. Malory later learns the reason for their revulsion and for his family’s insistence that he not pay attention to the girl: the two are half-siblings. Knowing this, Malory forever severs his contact with Angélique. When the girl asks her cousin Laurentine if the rumours are true, she discovers her objectionable past—one over which she neither had any control nor agency. Angélique’s mother had run off with Mrs. Fordham’s husband, born a daughter, and returned with the child only to leave her in her sister’s care. Angélique must pay for her mother’s indiscretion, since the adulterous woman’s reputation continues to taint that of her daughter. Early in the story, the reader learns that boys—though never Malory—act “too nice” with Angélique (28). The description implies that these boys

attempt to take advantage of the girl and that they make assumptions about her virtue simply on the basis of her adulterous mother's promiscuity.

Cousin Laurentine must also pay for the sins committed by Angélique's mother. In the penultimate scene of the story, she reveals to Angélique that her current single status is entirely due to the cloud of adulterous infamy that has settled over the family. Angélique's very presence thus acts as a constant reminder to both the family and the community of Angélique's mother's sins.⁴ With great bitterness but without sorrow, Laurentine explains to Angélique that her prospects for a mate have been effectively ruined by Angélique's presence. One man has charitably offered to marry her, but he has not *asked*. She mentions another man's name but elides details. Laurentine cannot marry well; in fact, she may never marry at all despite her wonderful beauty. A disreputable identity has been ascribed to her, and her fate has seemingly been decided for her not simply by her familial relations but by the middle-class values that dictate the limits of feminine virtue.

Indeed, Fauset seems to suggest ironically that fate, or the factors which prescribe the options open to a particular individual, plays an integral role in the entrapment of women. Early in the narrative, Angélique mentions that she must go home to memorize the witches' scene in William Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. The title of the short story refers to the witches' refrain in the first scene of the fourth act: "Double, double, toil and trouble,/ Fire burn, and cauldron bubble." This scene of the play highlights the role of outside factors (or fate) in the outcome of one's life. The witches stir up a potion to ensure that their predictions for Macbeth's future shall occur. Having been told his fate, Macbeth believes he has no control over the events of his life. The explicit reference to this scene and the entire play suggest that personal agency is constrained by

one's own situation. It seems that no matter what Angélique or Laurentine may do or try to do, they cannot escape their familial ties and especially the manner in which others judge these ties. Middle-class values hold these women within their grip and allow only for a finite number of possibilities from which these women may choose their own fates and create their own identities.

In the guise of romantic narratives and simple fairy-tale-like stories, Fauset hides a profound social message. In each of the four short stories studied here, Fauset demonstrates how the middle class can hold women within its narrow confines. The dictates of "propriety" allow no margin for error. Though personal agency plays an important role, a woman's fate lies in her skin colour, in her relationships with men, and in her kinships. In order for her to achieve any personal goals, a woman must not accept those strictures and adopt them as her own, but she must struggle greatly against the confines of the categories of race and gender roles established by middle-class society. These categories stifle women in their narrowness. Fauset presents such categories as false, and her female characters wrestle with such values in order to wrest some measure of freedom for themselves despite the categories' hold over them. While Fauset can only be ironic in her treatment of female agency and the development of one's identity within these confines, we now turn to other female Harlem Renaissance writers who can and do present the struggle more openly. At the height of the Harlem Renaissance, women authors like Nella Larsen will explode the categories which entrap women in their heretofore inflexible roles and outwardly-defined identities. Treading the ground Fauset broke, Larsen explores the falsity of categories and the flexibility of identity.

CHAPTER 2

SHATTERING THE TEA CUP

It's the awful truth. But, who knows if I'll get through the damned thing. Certainly not I.

- Nella Larsen on *Quicksand*

Retrospectively, Nella Larsen has been recognized as an important Harlem Renaissance author and one of the most important woman authors of the movement—though only retrospectively. Previous to the mid-1980s, Larsen's work had gone out of print, and what little was remembered of it had been judged to be frivolous, too prudish, and, implicitly, too concerned with women's stories. The passage of time has provided critics with the distance necessary to appreciate the depths and complexities of the portraits she paints of her characters. Through the historical lens coloured by the Civil Rights Movement, second-wave feminism, the emergence of black feminist thought, and poststructuralism, readers and critics now view Nella Larsen as an astute commentator on race issues, and, more and more, they understand the author to have had a firm grasp on a variety of other social discourses such as gender, class, and intraracial relations. Via this multitude of intricately interconnected discourses, Larsen constructed the identity of four female characters: Clare Kendry and Irene Redfield in *Passing*, Helga Crane in *Quicksand*, and her/self, Nella Larsen, within the Harlem Renaissance movement. These female subjects all dealt with the instability—and sometimes volatility—of identity. In a burgeoning twentieth century which had opened with W.E.B. Du Bois's declaration that the issue of the century would be the problem of the colour line and his description of divided Negro consciousness, race provided the locus (for African Americans) of all other connected issues. That race should emerge as the primary focus of any analysis of these identities does not surprise; however, the investigation should not and cannot end there. Critics in the past decade have been adamant about exposing other themes at play, such as marriage (duCille, Larson), gender (Butler, Smith 1989), and

sexuality (Haviland, Johnson 1995, McDowell 1998), but each has insisted that the given theme was the dominant one, thinly veiled behind the “race problem.” I argue in this chapter that *all* these themes work together and against each other to expose the arbitrariness inherent within each category.

Not only is the race line obviously blurred, but the class line, the gender line, and even the sexuality line ultimately become indistinguishable in Larsen’s fiction thus revealing her proto-poststructuralist views on both the fluid *and* the fragmentary nature of reality. In *Feminist Practice and Poststructuralist Theory*, Chris Weedon refers to the project of poststructuralist feminism as the search “to deconstruct the hegemonic assumption that we are whole and coherent subjects with a unified sense of identity” (173-4). This could be the definition of Larsen’s project. In her work, she exposes the arbitrary nature of categorical lines. Identity, like the categories which attempt to circumscribe it, is unfixed and volatile. It is thus exposed as being fluid and permeable, falsely circumscribed by such lines as those surrounding the categories of gender, of sexuality, and especially of race. Larsen effectively explodes all these divisions and allows the pieces of each to mingle together freely. Larsen uses racial ambivalence only to bring to light the ambiguity of all categories.

The race issue, particularly the question of passing, provides the ideal trope through which to explore the fluidity of identity and the falsity of dividing lines. A number of African American theorists have discussed and defined passing, including Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, bell hooks, Thadious M. Davis, and Houston A. Baker, Jr. The most comprehensive and useful explanation for this study is Gayle Wald’s definition: passing is “to transgress the social boundary of race, to ‘cross’ or thwart the ‘line’ of racial distinction that has been a basis of racial

oppression and exploitation” (6). This line, however, has been recognized as a social and cultural construction; it is a consequence, notes Davis, of the social discourses which surround and envelop such judicially-based rules as the “one-drop” rule, founded on a staunch hierarchical binary logic upheld in *Plessy v Ferguson*. Racial boundaries were carefully drawn between “white” and “black,” white being by such definition inherently “pure” and black being the product of racial mixing—or anything but “pure”—a rule which dictates that if one is not white, one is, by default, black (Wald 11). The manifest problem with this rule, explains Joel Williamson, is that well “before one was down to the single drop of African blood, that heritage was lost to sight” (in Kawash 132); that is, one cannot know by sight alone if an individual is “black.” At issue here is the (im)possibility of “reconciling identity to appearance” (Kawash 134): the binary logic does not and cannot hold. Yet despite this obvious problem of “being able to tell,” the colour line, which was deeply entrenched in law—slavery in the South and segregation in the North—insisted on dividing the two “races” as reflected in Jim Crow laws. The purpose of these laws, explains Zora Neale Hurston in “Crazy for this Democracy,” is purely psychological: the “unnatural exaltation of one ego and the equally unnatural grinding down of the other” (168). The “unnaturalness” of the entire racial division was evident to the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, if not to all Negroes of the era, but this false division led not only to a dissatisfaction among Negroes, it also led to line-crossing, or “passing.” Wald points out that those who authored the colour line necessarily had to allow for the possibility of transgressing this line. The old adage that “rules were made to be broken” applies here. Samira Kawash’s study on the colour line suggests that passing was more a part of the social and cultural imaginations than a popular practice. Although it is true that the passing metaphor serves well, the act of

passing, either occasionally or permanently, was relatively common in day-to-day living. Davis reveals startling figures on the topic: black and white researchers each studying the passing phenomenon estimated that in the 1920s and 1930s, at the height of racial passing, as many as 30,000 Negroes per year passed as white; more conservative measures estimate the number to be 10,000 or even as low as 2,500.⁵ Walter White, an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance, believed the number of passers to be very large (364). Because of the implicit secrecy necessary to the act of passing, concedes Kawash, one cannot know for certain how many individuals attempted to, and did, pass (126).

No matter the exact number of passers, the frequency with which authors of the Harlem Renaissance dealt with the topic points to its importance within the New Negro imagination. The reasons for passing's immanence during the decades of the Harlem Renaissance are evident. The injustices caused by Jim Crow laws were to be flouted whenever possible. Even Mary Church Terrel, an important race activist in the early twentieth century, encouraged her daughter and her niece to pass, "to take advantage of anything which they had a *right* to enjoy [emphasis added]" (in Condé 95). Mary Condé elucidates the reasoning: "[p]assing is not a moving away, but a moving in, and a seizing of those rights to which all American women, black or 'black' or white, are entitled" (104). Passing, explains Davis, is practical and emancipatory (1997, ix). Certainly, not all black individuals agreed on this point (nor do they agree today). Indeed, some racially-defined leaders viewed passing as reprehensible, as an acceptance of and a bowing down to the dominant discourse (Wald 14). However, by partaking in the social advantages of being "white," passers not only cross racial boundaries and transgress class lines, but they also "disrupt social meanings" (Davis 1997, ix). By questioning the very nature (and "naturalness") of these

previously firmly drawn lines, all boundaries come under scrutiny. When gender differences and sexuality are revealed as fluid, the line between self and other begins to erode. The problem of “not being able to tell,” notes Wald, unsettles the authority of race (4).

Clare Kendry, of the four characters Larsen creates in *Passing*, transgresses the most. That is, she both crosses the racial boundary into the white realm and “sins” against social conventions in so doing. She throws into question all boundaries and runs roughshod over all lines. Clare threatens “the conservative hierarchical social order based on race, class, and gender” that John Bellew, her husband, and Irene Redfield, her friend, seek to maintain (hooks 1992, 18). The integrity of these categories, as well as the categories of sexuality and individuality, cannot be maintained, and Clare Kendry’s body and her identity stand as clear signs to that effect.

Clare’s racial ambiguity has already been discussed at length by many critics.⁶ I shall pick up the thread of racial instability here in order to knit in the other ambiguous aspects such as her sexuality and class status which constitute elements of Clare’s identity. Clare Kendry effortlessly and languidly slips into Irene Redfield’s life while both women are escaping the Chicago summer heat at the exclusive rooftop restaurant of the Drayton Hotel. Both, of course, are passing. Clare, married to a racist white man, has chosen to adopt a white identity permanently. Irene on the other hand crosses the race line only on occasion in order to frequent white establishments and to receive better service. Both pass but on different terms: Clare on a permanent basis, Irene merely for convenience’s sake. The women’s ability to cross such boundaries indicates the ambiguity of the classifications of “race.” Larsen carefully constructs the characters, and their world, in terms apparently free from racial markers. Readers may assume whiteness—or at least may have if the title of the novel were not so telling—since “whiteness” denotes by definition the race which

exists in the absence of racial identifiers; it had been (and to an extent still is) implicitly perceived as a kind of “default mode.” The only references to appearance (there are no references to race) in the first chapter ostensibly describe white individuals, or individuals white or, at most, ambiguous in appearance: Clare was a “pale” child, with “slanting black eyes,” and “bright hair,” and her father had a “pasty-white face” (10).⁷ Irene has “warm olive” skin which tends to blush in “red patches” (11). Even the first part of the second chapter in which Irene and Clare meet while passing contains no discernable racial markers—none until Irene believes she may have been found out, that the woman before her somehow knows Irene is a *Negro*. Irene dismisses the notion.

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell; and by the most ridiculous means, finger-nails, palms of hands, shapes of ears, teeth, and other equally silly rot. They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never, when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know. (16)

As Irene recognizes the absurdity of such superficial identification of the “black” body, she reveals the meaninglessness and invisibility of the line between the races. Yet within her seeming race-sensitivity lies deep ignorance. In her very thought on the permeability of “race,” Irene assumes that the woman who is staring at her is one of the “white people” who are “so stupid” about the race issue. She claims that such white people can never tell whether they are facing a Negro or a white individual, and she makes such an assertion while she herself unknowingly faces a Negro. Irene is as ignorant about Clare’s “true” racial identity upon her first gaze as Hugh Wentworth will be later in one of the famous Harlem parties where people of

various races intermingle. At one of these parties, Irene and Wentworth discuss race and being able to tell. He looks at the attractive newcomer to the party—Irene’s friend Clare—and wonders aloud at his inability to grasp her race. Irene does not indulge his curiosity by revealing Clare’s racial identity, however. In fact, she explains to Wentworth that although white people are often unable “to tell,” Negroes “know” (77). Irene seems to mock Wentworth and his previous claims to being able to decipher to which race one belongs. She apparently ironically quotes him when she says to him, “You usually know everything. Even how to tell the sheep from the goats” (77). When he encounters Clare Kendry, however, he cannot discern whether or not this beauty is a Negro. The juxtaposition of these two scenes brings to the fore Irene’s own similar inability to be able “to tell.” One’s own “race” plays no role in the discernment of another individual’s racial identity: Irene does not at first recognize that Clare is indeed a Negro, despite her assurance to Wentworth that Negroes know. Moreover, the white mystery woman is no stranger to Irene. In her utter blindness, Irene does not recognize her own childhood friend. Irene has unknowingly inscribed herself within the group of “white” people who are “so stupid,” for Clare has defied categorization, even by those within her “own” racial group who claim to know.⁸ Irene is not an utterly stupid woman, however, and her inability to recognize Clare does not lie solely in Clare’s racial ambiguity.

Irene may not identify the woman before her as Negro because her racial markers seem clearly “white,” but Irene does not identify the woman as her childhood friend because Clare has also crossed class lines. Irene has committed a common mistake by equating whiteness with wealth and thus has exposed race as a social category. The opening chapter of *Passing*, which is remarkably devoid of clear *racial* signifiers, stresses the *class* markers of Clare Kendry and her

father, “poor” Bob Kendry. Clare would do errands for a dressmaker, ostensibly in order to subsidize her father’s janitorial salary. Bob Kendry, who died in a saloon-fight, had been the subject of derisive songs concerning his “eccentricities in his careening”—and drunken—“gait” (11). A woman from such humble roots would not be expected to be seen at the Drayton.

Heretofore apparently fixed social lines have been crossed, but Clare’s move “upward” on the social scale is closely tied to her *racial* passing. Clare’s fair complexion has been alternately termed a ticket or a passport (Wald 49, Condé 96) to a freer existence, both in racial and in social terms. The travel imagery suggests movement, which in Clare’s case is both figurative and literal, and the movement is always upward.⁹ Later orphaned, Clare was conditionally taken in by her two religious white aunts who insisted Clare not reveal her racial identity. Despite the aunts’ desire to efface the traces of their niece’s race, they continually treated her as a servant, in effect as a Negro. Yet Clare remains explicitly grateful to her aunts for having provided her with a home and implicitly thankful to them for having ascribed to her their race, for it is their/her whiteness which allowed Clare to meet and ultimately to marry John Bellew, a man who would not (knowingly) associate with “niggers” (40). The pair eloped, and Clare was consequently whisked away from her black and “lowly” beginnings “up” to the white rich world. The high and low imagery translates into literal terms. The dressmaker for whom Clare did errands lived on the top floor of the building of which Bob Kendry had been the janitor, and Clare, by association, must have lived on a somewhat lower floor (possibly the basement, where residential janitors traditionally live). From the lowly tenements of Chicago, Clare Kendry has literally risen to the heights of the expensive and exclusive Drayton. However, her rise to the top could not have occurred without John Bellew. Because Clare is a woman, her social standing depends entirely

upon the principal man in her life. When she is young her father's lowliness is ascribed to her. As a married woman, Clare obtains her husband's social standing. Thus, Clare's racial and social ascendancy are tied to her gender, and it does not come without a price.

Because of her position as a woman, Clare relies completely upon her husband for social (and in her particular case, racial) identity. In this instance, identity in general and "race" in particular are associatively and mimetically produced. Judith Butler explains her proximity theory: if Clare "associates with blacks, she becomes black, where the sign of blackness is contracted, as it were, through proximity, where 'race' itself is figured as a contagion transmissible through proximity" (in Kawash 160). It is through this theory of association that duCille substantiates Clare's affair with Brian Redfield as making narrative sense: if coupling with a white man confirms Clare as white, coupling with a black man "may turn her black again" (106). I return to race here only momentarily to demonstrate how mere proximity and association may catapult an individual into another racial or social category,¹⁰ and one of the strongest ties (if not *the* strongest) a woman could have in the 1920s was to her husband. Clare herself understands the implications of her association with the white, racist Bellew when she vehemently complains that the fear of a row with him keeps her out of everything. "Everything I want. I could kill him!" (71) she states, recognizing the strength of her ties to him, which may only be severed by death. Ironically, it is the ties that *bind* women to their husbands which allow these very women the freedom to cross the threshold of categories. By cutting her ties to a lowly father and marrying an upwardly-mobile husband, a woman may more easily change social categories than a man may. A mere shift of association (with any given man) may alter a woman's social status. It is thus specifically the female gender which plays an integral role in the

social mobility and consequently in the blurring of boundaries.

Clare's light skin and her associated beauty bought her entry into John Bellew's own newfound world of ease and comfort;¹¹ but the price she paid was dear, yet "all things considered" it was worth it, claims Clare (28). She happily (at the time) renounced her Negro ties and seemingly allowed herself to be assimilated into her husband's upscale world. Clare's gendered position has both allowed her into and entrapped her in her lofty social position of rich white woman. Clare may seem tightly ensnared in her role as (white) woman but within the context of women's traditional gender roles, her identity again seems shifting. Her travels, notes Davis, break the traditional view of "female space" (1997, xiv). Wealth and social ease contribute to Clare's freedom to travel and to absent herself from the home. Readers never encounter Clare (as a grown woman) in the feminine realm of the home. Clare exists in restaurants, hotels, and other women's homes, but she does not act, within the narrative of *Passing*, in the domestic milieu. The grown Clare thus contrasts starkly with the child Clare, whom readers meet sitting on her father's "ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of red cloth together" (9). Clare Kendry has been transformed in all aspects. She had begun as a poor, domestic Negro girl and has grown into a rich, cosmopolitan white woman, yet she has not permanently moved from one set of categories to another: she exists alternately in all categories. That Clare's childhood should be recalled in a flashback contained in the present of the narrative (and not in a linear narrative which implicitly dissociates the present from the past) reinforces Clare's existence within the categories of poor/rich, domestic/cosmopolitan, Negro/white. The proximity of the descriptions of young Clare and mature Clare (both in flashbacks contained in the first part of the novel) also suggests the tenuous and precarious nature of each of these subject positions.

Clare has returned to reclaim part of her Negro heritage but all aspects of her anterior life may return. That Clare is referred to throughout the novel as Clare *Kendry* and not as Clare *Bellew*¹² underscores Clare's continued attachment to her childhood identity/ies. Clare's retention of her "maiden" name, which is associated with her poor Negro father, also puts into question John Bellew's hold on her as well as Clare's allegiance to the white world.

Clare's most obvious step over the gender line occurs when readers first encounter her in the flashback scene at the Drayton. The novel opens with Irene assessing a letter which Clare has sent her. While Irene ponders whether or not to read the note, the narrative turns to a recalled moment two years previous when Irene and Clare met for the first time since their childhood. This scene at the Drayton finds Irene observing an unknown woman. Although, as the mystery woman, Clare is initially the object of Irene's gaze, Clare quickly becomes the gazer who makes Irene feel uncomfortable and exposed. To Irene, the mystery woman seems oblivious to socialized gender norms, ignorant of the fact that she should not be staring.

But she evidently failed to realize that such intense interest as she was showing might be embarrassing, and continued to stare. Her demeanour was that of one who with utmost singleness of mind and purpose was determined to impress firmly and accurately each detail of Irene's features upon her memory for all time, nor showed the slightest trace of disconcertment at having been detected in her steady scrutiny. (15)

Irene, who knows the proper actions for women, had acted correctly earlier when she had been staring at the attractive-looking woman: when "conscious that she had been staring, she looked quickly away" (15). And under the other woman's scrutiny, she demurely slides her eyes down and averts her own gaze. Women in this social and cultural context do not stare. A man's gaze

certainly would be allowed—or at least suffered—but such an intense gaze on the part of a woman was intolerable to Irene. In this instance, Clare’s gaze not only obfuscates the lines of gender roles, it transgresses lines of sexuality.

McDowell makes a convincing case for the homoerotic undertones of the novel. Indeed, she argues that *Passing* passes for a novel about passing when in fact its subject is the lesbian desire of the protagonist (1998, 1995). It is Clare’s very sexual ambiguity which allows such a reading. In the rooftop scene mentioned above, Irene wonders what “could be the reason for such persistent attention?” (15). After assuring herself that she has not put her hat on backwards or committed any such gaffe, Irene wonders again, “*What* was it?” Clare’s gaze disturbs Irene while it holds a particular interest for her: “What strange languorous eyes she had!” (16). Clare’s beauty not only attracts men—a feature the narrator notes upon her entrance—but it also allures women, namely Irene. Throughout, the narrative voice—which is Irene’s thinly disguised consciousness—notes Clare’s “tempting mouth” (28), her appealing and seductive voice (33), and her “magnificent . . . luminous . . . slow and mesmeric” eyes (29). Clare does not reserve her alluring appearance for men alone; she offers her “seductive caressing smile” (37) to Irene and to other women. Clare neither limits her sexuality to heterosexual sensuality nor to homosexual flirting but rather allows her sexuality to flow freely between both categories and thus defies being bound by them.¹³ Furthermore, Clare does not limit her caressing manner to her smile: on two separate occasions when Clare comes to call on Irene, Clare enters Irene’s bedroom. On the first, Clare drops a kiss on Irene’s dark curls (65), and on the second, she “kissed a bare shoulder” (105). Irene’s reaction on the first occasion is “a sudden inexplicable onrush of affectionate feeling,” but by the second occasion, Irene has safely projected any attraction she

may have to Clare onto her husband, Brian (McDowell 1998, xxviii), and she shrinks away from Clare's sensual greeting. Irene's reaction to and awareness of Clare's sensuality and sexuality alerts readers to the possibility of lesbianism, bisexuality, or even omnisexuality: the interplay of the two characters once again foregrounds the fluidity of identity, sexual in this case rather than racial previously.

This interplay between Irene and Clare is so strongly present that one may suggest, as does duCille, that the pair are alter egos (105) and that their identities are so complexly intertwined in the narrative that the one's identity cannot be wholly extricated from the other's. Throughout my investigation of Clare's identity, it has been impossible *not* to introduce Irene and her identity into the discussion. Whether it be for comparison's sake or merely for the fact that Clare may only be viewed through the intermediary of Irene's consciousness, Clare's identity exists *in relation to* Irene's. An exploration of Irene's identity will elucidate the close relationship between the pair's respective identities and reveal the tenuous nature of the lines which divide them.

Irene's racial identity crosses the colour line as fluidly as does Clare's; the only difference between the two women's situations lies in their respective deployment of their racial markers (or lack thereof). While Clare passes on a permanent basis (that is, until her introduction to the Harlem scene), Irene passes for the sake of convenience.¹⁴ Irene's occasional passing allows her to keep her two identities separate one from the other, for she cannot encounter dwellers from the Negro world (who know her as a Negro woman) in the exclusive white world (where she is known as a white woman) and vice versa. For her, the line is clearly drawn—until Clare appears in both Irene's worlds, the Negro and the white worlds.¹⁵ The first instance of this disruption of

Irene's compartmentalization of worlds occurs at the Drayton, where the two meet while both passing. The second instance takes place at the Morgan where Clare and her husband take up residence while in Chicago. This scene begins with Irene, Gertrude, and Clare sharing a relatively pleasant conversation as openly-Negro women. With the entrance of John Bellew, however, the women are transformed into respectable white women in conversation with an outrageously outspoken racist white man. This transmutation occurs with the simple opening of a door. The man's bigoted comments enrage Irene's sense of personal pride and not, as one would assume, racial or collective pride: "What right, she kept demanding of herself, had Clare Kendry to expose *her* . . . to such humiliation, such downright insult? [emphasis added]" (44-5). Clare had led them over the colour line and had sat back to watch the pair—and herself—be degraded. But at least only the other passers, those familiar with the seeming discomfort of moving to and fro over the line, have born witness to the simultaneity of Irene's worlds: John Bellew remains solely part of the white world, aware only of Irene's white identity. Consequently, Irene forgives John Bellew for his harsh words since he could not have *known*. She even concedes that "under other conditions she might have liked him" (42). She does not hesitate, however, to blame Clare, even two years after the incident. The memory of that afternoon's events fade with time from Irene's consciousness, and her worlds return to their respective comfortable and safe divisions. But her worlds will soon violently and disturbingly merge again. The disruption is foreshadowed by the breaking of a tea cup at one of Irene's tea parties. The dark contents of the cup and the white fragments of the cup itself mingle on the floor, freely, chaotically. The peaceful stability of this tea-party of hers, so "like other tea-parties she had had" (91), is shattered, and it shall be smashed again and even more violently so when Irene meets John Bellew on the streets of New York city.

Irene is shopping—as a Negro-identified woman—with her obviously Negro friend Felise Freeland when she literally bumps into Clare’s husband. John Bellew is momentarily genial until he notices Felise and her Negro body and associates them with Irene, a woman he had heretofore associated with his white-identified wife. Irene is transformed, this time before his very eyes, into a Negro, a woman of that hated race. The narrative implies that it occurs to John Bellew at some point that by association with Irene, his own wife is a Negro and that he himself by the same rule. . . .but it is unthinkable. He had declared that Clare could not be a Negro: “No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be” (40). His categories have been thrown into doubt and now he must question his *own* racial identity.¹⁶ After withdrawing herself from John Bellew’s presence, Irene chides herself for not having spoken to him, for not having exposed Clare as a permanent passer to Felise. Irene believes her reticence was born of her loyalty to the race, her loyalty to Clare, but it could only have been out of her loyalty to herself. Irene had wanted to expose Clare, to hurt her, to be rid of her altogether. Only Irene’s self-interest prevented her from speaking to John Bellew. Had she addressed him, she would have confirmed his wife’s Negro identity and thus definitely and definitively freed Clare from him. The consequence of such an unveiling would have cleared the way for Clare to take Brian from her, and Irene could not have that. More importantly, Irene would have confirmed to herself the simultaneous existence of the two racial worlds—Negro and white—within her own body, and certainly she could not have *that*.

Not only is Irene’s racial identity ambiguous but her social standing is tenuous, and once more, this fact may be inferred from her relationship with Clare Kendry. Clare’s father, despite having been a janitor, had gone to college with some of the fathers of Clare’s childhood girl

friends (20). Irene's father, Mr. Westover, held a fondness for Bob Kendry and knew the reason for the man's fall from grace: all these facts suggest Mr. Westover was one of the men who had attended college with Bob Kendry, and but for a twist of fate, *he* might have been a lowly janitor. Class divisions were and are that arbitrary and flexible. This reality comes alive in the imagery surrounding Irene's ascent to the Drayton:

It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world, pleasant, quiet, and strangely remote from the sizzling one she had left below.
(13)

Here atop the Drayton, Irene need not mix with the lowly, "sweating bodies" (12) of those below. The imagery of the magic carpet suggests the intangibility of the reasons for the separation: some have the "magic" opportunity to move up—others simply do not. Irene cannot bring herself to acknowledge this permeability of classes, the easy movement from one level to another. Her consciousness merely relays the facts passively via the narrator to the readers who must assemble the pieces in order to discover Irene's own tenuous class status. Had she, for example, married another man from another class category, her husband's lower or higher social position would have been ascribed to her. Similarly, had she married a white man or a light-complexioned man instead of Brian, who "couldn't exactly 'pass'" (37), she might have just as easily adopted his race or his race-identification. Irene's gendered position, as all women's, is inextricably linked to her race and her class.

Of all the identity categories present in Irene, her gender appears to be the most fixed. Readers first meet Irene in her home, conducting the domestic duty of reading the morning mail. The second chapter finds Irene shopping in Chicago for her two small sons. Later, she is

alternately seen planning social functions and tea-parties, refusing to speak about sex in a true chaste and lady-like manner, and prettying herself for parties.¹⁷ However, under the feminine veneer lie a few well-hidden traditionally masculine traits, such as that of wielding power and knowledge in order to inscribe the other in rigidly-defined categories. These masculine characteristics are only revealed through her adoption of the white male discourse. When read side by side, John Bellew's statement concerning his knowledge of Negroes and Irene's thoughts about her own wisdom concerning her husband sound strikingly familiar. Both insist upon knowing the other better than the other knows her- or himself.

But I *know* people who've *known* them, *better* than they know their black selves
[emphases added]. (41)

She *knew* him as well as he knew himself, or *better* [emphasis added]. (58)

Both claim (collective or personal) knowledge of the other—statements which resemble those uttered during Irene's conversation with Wentworth about *knowing* whether or not any given individual were a Negro. In both instances, Irene deploys white male discourse in order to empower herself: she *knows*,¹⁸ and often she knows *better* than the individual in question, or so she claims. This discourse also resembles the words of the Judeo-Christian God who assures His followers that He knows them better than they know themselves; this God is notably a "white man's God" (*Quicksand* 130). Irene's knowledge allows her to order her world—an ordering, therefore, modelled on the white male discourse, embodied in John Bellew, which insists that race lines cannot be crossed, which in theory insures the discreteness of all categories.

The discourse of strict order cannot hold, however. Despite Irene's best efforts to plan and to secure stability even to the point of monotony, Irene cannot and has not planned for the presence of Clare. Clare's identity cannot be fixed no matter the efforts of others to place her within the rigid categories of race, class, and sexuality as described previously. Like the tea and the teacup (whose integrity cannot hold and must break) which images the intermingling of inside and outside, the various categories within Clare's body cannot remain separate one from another. The breaking of the cup—the fragmentation—interrupts Irene's carefully planned party—and life—which had been “so like many other[s]” (91). “Clare's existence,” explains Davis, “is an argument against absolutes, certainty, and permanence, precisely the ideologies and values that Irene cannot live without” (1997, xix). Yet Clare neither single-handedly nor solely disrupts categorical meanings; her presence merely serves as a reminder to Irene—and to readers—that the categories have been arbitrarily (and falsely) constructed. Clare's presence reminds Irene of her own subjective instability. Had her own life circumstances shifted slightly in one direction or another, Irene may have found herself in Clare's position. But Irene's consciousness refuses to acknowledge as much, and the narrative voice only offers a few well-placed clues to that effect, such as the close relationship between the women's fathers as well as their parallel racial passing choices. Thus a mirror is held up to Irene, and in it readers (if not she) perceive the instability of (Clare's) identity. Like the categories which attempt to circumscribe it, identity is random, unfixed, and volatile. In Irene's eyes, Clare's body is the locus of such instability, an instability which must be fixed at all and any cost.

The closing scene of *Passing* witnesses John Bellew's violent intrusion in the Freeland's Harlem party and Clare's consequent unmasking. Again, the opening of a door removes the

separation between the black and white worlds and has allowed chaos to enter. Clare stands composed, “as if the whole structure of her life were not lying in fragments before her” (111). Irene becomes terrified at the implication: ostensibly that Clare would be free to take Brian but also implicitly that Clare would reveal both to the white world of John Bellew and to the Negro world of Harlem that identity is mutable, that order is a fiction, and that knowledge—and consequently, power—is tenuous. Many authors have condemned Irene, implicating her in Clare’s death,¹⁹ and I shall not reiterate the evidence within the plot—which some call circumstantial—in this study. What I *do* stress, however, is the narrative and symbolic evidence against Irene in the case of Clare’s violent death.

Throughout the narrative, Clare’s passing—between racial, social, gendered, and sexual lines—has made Irene terribly nervous. Realizing finally with John Bellew’s entrance that Clare’s (and her own) identity could not ultimately be circumscribed by categories and lines, Irene experiences a “terror filled with ferocity” (111). She cannot allow Clare to be “free” (again, ostensibly of her marriage, but more significantly, she “couldn’t have her free” (111) from fixed categories). Clare’s death, notes Butler, “marks the success of a certain symbolic ordering of gender, sexuality and race” (279), or at least Irene’s perception of such a (re)ordering: Clare ruptures Irene’s perfect, complete world (Kawash 158). Without Clare, she need not identify with those she seeks to “uplift.” Without Clare, Irene need not question the stability of her own position as an upper-middle class Negro woman, and she may continue to live her ordered life within this stable category. But there may also be another, related, reason. If Clare acts as a foil to Irene and Irene has perceived the resemblance, Irene may have needed to kill the Clare within, as McLendon charges (165). In any case, the result, instead of refusing Clare her freedom, has been

(ironically) to set her symbolically free. Irene has sent Clare flying out the window, down to the streets from which she had ascended, and across the line between life and death. Clare cannot be contained in the room and moment in which her identities merge and conflict, neither can she be contained in *any* world, white or black, low class or high, feminine or masculine, heterosexual or homosexual.

Larsen presents similar problems of the unfixed nature of identity within the character of Helga Crane in her first novel, *Quicksand*, and thus exposes the falsity of categorization in this novel as well. Like Irene, Helga desires stability, but her very existence, like Clare's, acknowledges the fluid nature of categorical lines, and she transgresses a few of those lines herself. But the resemblances between the two narratives lie less in the similarities between the characters and more within the conclusions the critic may draw from the relative nature of the respective characters' identities. Unlike Clare and Irene, Helga's skin is not light enough for Helga to pass. The perception of her racial markers and their place within the spectrum of "Negroeness"—or in today's terms, her blackness—depends upon the individuals or groups of individuals who surround her. When surrounded by Negroes, Helga appears to be and to act "too black." But when she finds herself in the midst of white Danes, Helga seems to the white population not black enough. Her racial identity depends upon her association with a given individual or group (as it did for both Clare and Irene in the context of Butler's proximity theory). However, in Helga's case, proximity creates contrast with the other; it does not ascribe the other's race identity to her.

Helga's existence at Naxos, a school for Negro girls where she teaches, has become difficult and ultimately intolerable. The institution, which "had grown into a machine" is

described as a big knife, “cutting all to a pattern, the white man’s pattern” (4), and the great machine has “smudged out” Helga’s personality in the process. The narrator notes that the Naxos folk “yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction” (18). Helga’s colourful dresses and her other attempts at personal style are thus strongly discouraged at Naxos. “Bright colors are vulgar,” asserts the dean of women, and drab colours “are the most becoming colors for colored people” (17-8). But Helga’s “will to adorn,” a practice that does not seek in its execution to be conventional, is a characteristically Negro form of expression, explains Hurston (1994a, 80). According to the Naxos discourse, Helga is simply too Negroid, too black compared to the white hopes and standards Naxos holds up. Helga feels stifled under such heavy racial scrutiny and she must escape.

After a brief stay in Chicago, Helga arrives in New York City and comes to live with Anne Grey. For a time, Helga feels she has “found herself” (44), that Harlem is home. But Helga will soon begin to feel the weight of racial discourse which dictates “appropriate” behaviour for Negroes, by Negroes. Despite the Harlemites’ contempt and scorn for such institutions as Naxos, their behaviour, embodied in Anne, does not greatly differ from that of the dean of women at Naxos. Both groups seem to idealize “white” behaviour, dress, and manners. Anne is “obsessed” with the race problem and hates white people, yet she

aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement.

Like the despised people of the white race, she preferred Pavlova to Florence Mills, John McCormack to Taylor Gordon, Walter Hampden to Paul Robeson. Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality. (48-9)

Besides her professed interest in racial uplift and her supposed hatred of white *people*, Anne has unquestioningly adopted the white supremacist discourse²⁰ and way of life. It is from within this discourse that Anne judges Helga and her manners. Anne considers Helga's "cobwebby" black dress touched with orange "too *décolleté*, and too *outré*." She tells Helga, "[t]here's not enough of it, and what there is gives you the air of something about to *fly* [emphasis added]" (56). Helga had previously agreed with Anne but now, as she prepares to leave, she reconsiders and she shall wear it as a "symbol" of her imminent flight from Harlem. Again, within the Negro world, Helga's behaviour and personal style—if not her skin colour—is deemed too Negroid. She must leave. "At once."

Helga escapes to Copenhagen where her mother's sister, Aunt Katrina, welcomes her with open arms. There, Helga is put on display for others to gaze upon and admire. Part of Helga's image in Copenhagen is her attire, specifically her outrageous clothes and accessories, which make her into a "decoration," a "curio," a "peacock" (73). Aunt Katrina expects Helga to dress so outlandishly that she perceives the cobwebby black dress to be good, "but too high" and prim (69) and, by association within the racial discourse of the 1920s, too "white." Helga's very "racial authenticity" is brought into question when she encounters an old Danish countrywoman on the streets of Copenhagen. The woman asks her "to what manner of mankind [sic] she belonged" and when Helga answers "Negro," the woman becomes indignant and angry, believing Helga has taken her for a fool since she knows "that Negroes [are] black and [have] woolly hair"

(76). The reasons the woman cannot agree to the identifier “Negro” as defining Helga are twofold: first, she cannot comprehend that racial markers are arbitrary at best, and second, Helga does not belong fully to the Negro race—nor does she belong entirely to the white race. Helga’s audience—the readers or those individuals who surround her—may only determine the heroine’s race markers in relation to those of others, such as in contrast to Anne Grey’s ostensibly white manners. The relativity of such markers does not depend merely upon either Negro or white milieux, however.

While Helga’s racial markers had been deemed too “Negro” compared to those of the Negroes at Naxos and in Harlem, they appear to be too “pale” and not nearly colourful enough in the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green’s community in Alabama. Helga marries the Reverend quickly and unexpectedly after attending one of his near-Bacchanalian services in a store-front church. The pair leave immediately for Green’s hometown in Alabama. There, Helga is greeted with a cold welcome. The community of dark Negroes had expected the Reverend to marry Clementine Richards, a big, beautiful local woman who dresses in colourful and exotic fashions. When compared to the richly (and according to Helga, tastelessly) adorned Clementine, Helga appears plain and ordinary. Interestingly, here among Negroes darker than herself, Helga begins her project of racial uplift—a practice which she had repudiated both at Naxos and in Harlem. She helps the women of the small community with their clothes, she plans to start a sewing circle, and she instructs the children in “ways of gentler deportment” (119). Closely twined with racial categories, class categories play a significant role in Helga’s life, if only in her transgression of them.

Despite her ultimate acts of racial uplift, Helga disdains for most of the narrative the

project of raising up the brothers and sisters of the Negro race. Perhaps Helga had objected to it so vehemently because it disrupts the fiction of the fixity of categories, or perhaps in her own experience it has been a snobbish practice, one which assumes the uplifters inherent position over the upliftees. In any case, Helga's discomfort within any and all categories—Negro middle class, Negro upper-middle class, white upper-middle class, Negro working class—attests to her inability to fit into *any* of the categories adequately. Helga's neither/nor position contrasts with Clare Kendry's either/or position: Clare can exist within many categories and crosses the line with ease, whereas Helga crosses the line often but cannot exist comfortably on any side of it.

Helga's most noted characteristic by critics is her sense of having "a lack somewhere."²¹ Howard notes that the lack is "something missing inside the person who is searching for identity" (251). Helga searches not within herself, however, but without. She leaves Naxos in the South to go to Chicago, from Chicago to Harlem, from Harlem to Copenhagen and back again, and from Harlem back to the South, in Alabama. Like Fauset, Larsen uses movement as a trope to survey the transgression of boundaries and borders. In each of the places Helga lives, the young woman looks to others for identification, sometimes adopting their words to describe and perceive herself. Despite Helga's long journeys, Helga metaphorically spins "round and round in the same spot until she is virtually bogged down inside of herself" (Howard 251). Helga comes to realize that she does not belong anywhere. Floating somewhere above set racial and social categories, Helga cannot identify with any of them. Nor does she possess the power to create new ones, nor transcend the existing ones. Howard suggests that the various characters in the novel—including James Vayle, Dr. Anderson, and Anne Grey—"point out that one might fashion an identity for one's self" (257), but I find this suggestion a little superficial. Although it is true that each of

these characters has found a brand of happiness, none of them has fashioned her or his *own* identity; they have each modelled their identity on the same “racial uplift” discourse. Just as each of these New Negroes longs to “merge his [sic] double self into a better and truer self” (Du Bois 1997b, 615), Helga attempts also to reconcile her various and varied identities. She fails. She neither feels comfortable in any of these milieux, nor does she forge an identity for herself. Helga simply adopts an identity based on the one ascribed to her by others. Helga does not merge these identities but merely drops one to adopt another according to the dominant discourse of the community in which she finds herself.

The double-consciousness to which Du Bois refers (which translates into a multiple-consciousness for the female characters studied here) represents a kind of ambivalence, a “laughing-to-keep from crying perspective toward life” (Bell 137). The equation Bernard W. Bell makes here between laughter and ambivalence or ambiguity is also taken up by Kawash, who points out that Irene’s crazed laughter in reaction to John Bellew’s nickname “Nig” for Clare is a response to that which lies outside racial order and thus cannot be articulated (157). Laughter occurs in both *Quicksand* and *Passing* in reaction to that which cannot be expressed. The ineffability of the “nature” of race and of other constructed categories lies at the centre of Larsen’s work. Expressing the full consequence of the categories, the arbitrary lines which separate them, and their intimate relation to one another becomes impossible (Butler), especially without the poststructuralist tools the early-twenty-first-century critic has inherited. The narrators of each novel simply describe looks which have “no name” (*Passing* 45) or unseen and unknowable obstacles which Helga Crane “couldn’t explain” (*Quicksand* 24).

Literary critics and biographers have found the nature of Nella Larsen herself to be

somewhat unknowable. Born Nellie Walker in 1891, Larsen would see her name changed a number of times in her childhood, and she would herself change her birth date, as did both Jessie Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston. In her biography of Larsen, Davis suggests an unusual chain of events surrounding Larsen's identity which began with Larsen's parents' staged breakup, followed by her father's permanent step across the colour line, a name change to match the identity shift, and Nellie's subsequent difficult existence as a dark child in an otherwise all-white family (Davis *passim*). Larsen left her white neighbourhood and family to attend Fisk University. Later, she would claim that she had lived in Denmark between 1910 and 1912, but documents show that Larsen applied for her first passport only in 1930 (Larson 189). Larsen also changed her identity through her adoption of a pseudonym for some of her shorter publications, a practice which constitutes a form of "passing" for a writer (Wall 1995, 88). Nella Larsen chose the masculine nom de plume "Allen Semi," an anagram of her married name. Charles Larson, another Larsen biographer, suggests that Larsen changed or hid some of the facts of her life in order to deal with the pain and difficulty of her young life. But "Larsen's habit of self-invention was not merely a psychological defense mechanism," notes Allison Berg, "but actually a creative achievement" (176). McLendon pushes the point further: Larsen "'writes herself' in order to rewrite history, to reinterpret certain cultural signs, to redefine tradition, and to move from margin to center in her own life" (153). Larsen becomes an actor in her own narrative, a *subject* of her own creation.

The fictionalization of one's own autobiography,²² or the "autobiographical urge," as Richard Yarborough terms it (112), finds its way into black fiction, as it does in Larsen's fiction. Yarborough presents an interesting discussion on the absence of the first-person narrative in pre-

Second World War black autobiographical fiction. The avoidance of the first person, he posits, “suggests a complex attitude toward issues of identity and self-disclosure on the part of the writers” (112). This reticence to use the “I” may well explain the third-person narrative voice in *Passing*, which is, according to McLendon, but Irene’s thinly disguised “I” (159). Yarbrough wonders if it had even occurred to Larsen to write the novel in the first person. Perhaps Larsen, who identified so deeply with her characters (she shared many characteristics with each of them), felt the imperative to distance herself from them: the use of the “I” simply was not possible.

For all her attempts at distancing her own identity from those of her characters, Larsen wrote of Helga in particular in her letters almost as though she were a ghost haunting her psyche. While writing, Larsen describes *Quicksand* as “the awful truth” (in McLendon 150), which may suggest that the novel is autobiographical. In a more direct link between Larsen and Helga Crane, Larson cites one of Larsen’s letters to Dorothy Peterson, dated July 1927: “I feel just like Helga Crane in my novel. Furious at being connected with all these niggers” (65-6). Larsen was as uncomfortable in all-black communities as she had been in her all-white family. Like Helga Crane, she could not find a space of her own.

The narrative voice in Larsen’s first novel is an omniscient third-person voice, with no hints of it being a part of the consciousness of the protagonist. In her second novel, however, Larsen experiments with a limited third-person narrator, one closely bordering on the first person. Perhaps Larsen allowed herself such freedom with the consciousness of the quasi-first-person narrator because her own identity was better disguised in the person of Irene than it had been in Helga. I do not suggest here that Larsen’s two novels were attempts at autobiographies. Yet each of the three characters as created by Larsen share common characteristics with her

author. Like Helga and Nella, Clare and Irene seek, consciously or not, to establish a stable identity, a space from which to speak. Irene's fears that Brian is having an affair with the fair Clare parallels Larsen's own well-founded fears concerning her unfaithful husband (Haviland, Larson, McLendon). Larsen blurs the line between fiction and autobiography and consequently "much of her fiction is autobiographical and most of her autobiography is fictive" (Haviland 296). In her work, Larsen questions the possibility of any kind of categorization.

Cheryl Wall suggests that Larsen must have known that her work was "dangerous" given its treatment of the intersection of race, class and gender (1995, 138). I would add that it was dangerous because the texts themselves defy classification and thus were misunderstood by many of her contemporaries and by critics then and now. Categories cannot define Larsen's works as pure fiction or as autobiography, just as categories cannot contain Helga, Clare, or even Irene. None of these women characters are depicted as *the* archetypal Negro woman. Indeed, as Hazel V. Carby astutely points out, "Larsen found it impossible to portray the experience of the black middle class as *representative* of the race [emphasis added]" (173). But Carby fails in one regard: she does not recognize that Larsen also found it impossible to portray the experience of rural South black folk as "representative" since such a concept cannot exist within such a heterogeneous group. Larsen has also been slighted by Barbara Johnson who has criticized Larsen's use of the mulatta character (or "tragic mulatto," as she terms it) in her work (1995, 252). The cliché, she charges, robs the character of an inner life. Yet therein lies the crisis: the "tragedy for these mulattoes is the impossibility of self-definition" (Wall 1995, 89). Larsen's work has been further criticized by the likes of Haviland, who accuses Larsen's fragmented style of being an "hysterical style" (298). Unfortunately, Haviland does not contextualize Larsen's

work within the Harlem Renaissance or even in the wider Modernist movement in order to understand better the artistic reasons for Larsen's deployment of such a style (certainly no critic would charge James Joyce or even Virginia Woolf with the crime of having an "hysterical style" solely on the basis of their fragmented writing).²³ Larsen's choice of subject and her style simply reflect in principle the fragmented and disunified constitution of her characters', and her own, identities.

CHAPTER 3

WILL THE REAL ZORA PLEASE STAND UP?

Now, women forget all those things they don't want to remember, and remember everything they don't want to forget. The dream is the truth. Then they act and do things accordingly.

-Their Eyes Were Watching God

While Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset depict the lives of middle-class, urban Negroes in their respective works, Zora Neale Hurston seeks to represent her own experience as a black woman from the rural South. She easily mixes her personal experience of the South with her anthropological knowledge in order to create rich and evocative texts. Like her peers explored in this study, Hurston is relatively radical in her depiction of identity and truth and in her construction of these. While she wrote about the South and what some Harlemites would have considered “authentic” black experience, she did not emphasize race as a burdensome factor in the identities and experiences of her characters, as these same Harlemites would have had her do. Her characters, who speak in black dialect, are undeniably Negro yet none of them experience race prejudice and none concern themselves with race consciousness. In her autobiography, *Dust Tracks on a Road*, Hurston creates such a character. The Zora of *Dust Tracks* does not wish to be pinned down by her race; indeed, she acknowledges that such an act of categorization would be erroneous. Hurston erodes lines between categories as she breaks down false dichotomies. The thick wall built up between fact and fiction cannot keep Hurston from creating a new realm in which fact and fiction cohabit. Hurston subverts binary modes of thought while she privileges intermediary spaces. For instance, her autobiography often reads as a novel, and in parts, it reads like her folkloric work, just as her fiction and her published research contain important aspects of “Zora”. In this final chapter, I explore how both Hurston’s work and her identity elude definition, and ultimately, Zora the woman—or the “truth” of her identity—is difficult to define or to know.

Hurston, in cultural anthropological fashion, discusses truth in terms of perspective and relativity. Truth is multiple; the nature of truth is unfixed. Within this frame of perspectival truth, the coherence and cohesion of identity comes into question.

Through this “understanding” of truth and identity, autobiography may be viewed in new (for the early twentieth century) and exciting manners. The very study of the topic of autobiography has become a difficult and problematic undertaking. The nature of autobiography evades apprehension. Readers could arguably classify autobiography as history, biography, fiction, or any combination of these. Setting universal boundaries around autobiography has become increasingly difficult for critics because of the rising novelization of autobiography (Bakhtin 7). The simple and obvious generic definition of the genre of autobiography as being the history of an individual written by herself generates more questions than it answers. Evidently, the author has chosen to weed out certain events and to highlight others. She has chosen, for numerous reasons both conscious and unconscious, disclosed and undisclosed, to undertake the writing of her life. She has also written her autobiography with a certain audience in mind. These and many other factors enter into the consideration and study of any autobiographical text. Underlying all these factors lies the ubiquitous question—how much of the narrative is fact and how much is fiction? If it has ever existed, the illusion of a factual autobiography has disintegrated. In the past decade and more, critics have even questioned Georges Gusdorf’s belief that the author/ subject of the autobiography knows *himself* (Benstock 1999, 8).²⁴ Roy Pascal notes that autobiographies should not be read “as factual truth, but as a wrestling with truth” (in Lionnet 92). In fact, autobiography questions the very nature of selfhood, and it does not take the self for granted as it attempts to portray and construct a

coherent self to place on the page (Benstock 12). The product called “autobiography” is a *process* of self-portraiture; it is a means to create the self and not an end or the self itself (Sidonie Smith 38, Lionnet 115).

If autobiography is its own genre (a classification upon which critics cannot agree), one still cannot assume to read all autobiographies in the same manner. African American autobiography differs widely from white Western autobiography, for example. Black autobiography has a long history in the United States, dating back to slave narratives. White Abolitionists encouraged free slaves to tell their stories, to expose the atrocities, and to give (white) readers a glimpse into their black selves. Despite the importance of such documents to the history and legacy of the African American community, William L. Andrews notes that critics have paid too little attention to the social, historical, and ideological significance of these texts (79). He further reminds readers of black autobiography that the texts are both constitutive and performative: black autobiography is born out of a strong oral tradition that places great importance on the performance of a text.

Within this oral tradition, black women’s autobiographies follow *their* own tradition as well. Early twentieth-century Negro women authors like Nella Larsen buried their autobiographical voices in their third-person fictional narratives, but throughout the 1920s, 30s, and 40s more and more Negro women proudly chose to use the “I” in their fiction as well as to explore explicitly the writing of autobiography (Yarborough). Therefore, Zora Neale Hurston was following a trend when she penned *Dust Tracks on a Road*: not only was she a Negro woman confidently writing her life’s account in the first-person voice but she did so at the request of her white publishers, just as her foremothers and forefathers had put their stories to

paper at the behest of white people curious to know more about the Negro experience. Furthermore, the oral aspect of her literary and autobiographical tradition may be heard throughout *Dust Tracks*. Hurston wrote her autobiography reluctantly, however (Hemenway 278). In 1941 she had wished to begin a new novel, but her publishers had other plans for her. Being realistic about the publishing industry and her own precarious financial state, Hurston bowed to the pressure and set to writing *Dust Tracks*. Yet the readability of the first half of the work suggests that Hurston had not completely discarded her novelistic plans but had merely backgrounded them. Hurston's deep roots in the South and in the folk tradition, an area I shall explore later in this chapter, fed her gift for mixing truth with storytelling, or "lies."²⁵ *Mules and Men* (1935, *MM* hereafter), Hurston's first of two volumes on the folk traditions of Negro peoples, finds Hurston collecting folk stories in her hometown of Eatonville, Florida. The storytellers and the listeners alike refer to these stories as "lies" (*MM* 8). To the folks in Eatonville little difference exists between fiction and lying: the two are of the same substance since they both create a reality distinct from factual events. Truth is thus understood to be partial and relative to the speaker and to the listener, respectively. Therefore, when Hurston "lies" about certain aspects of her self in her autobiography, as she was known to do in her daily life, one should simply consider her as fictionalizing her life and as refusing to draw a distinct line between lies and truths.

Hurston was acutely aware of the fluidity and intangibility of definitions. "Nothing that God ever made," she states in her autobiography, "is the same thing to more than one person. That is natural. There is no single face in nature, because every eye that looks upon it, sees it from its own angle" (45). Hurston's training as a cultural anthropologist had alerted her to

cultural relativity and to a kind of perspectival truth, which I shall further discuss later in this chapter. Hurston's theory of the multiplicity of nature dependent upon one's viewpoint may be applied to the author herself. Many Zoras exist within Zora herself, but many Zoras exist without her as well since she is seen and read from a multitude of different angles. The different perspectives offered by readers, a close friend, or a white patron, for example, will alter the conception of "Zora" experienced in the reading of her story. Nevertheless, the angles from which others view Hurston do not account solely for her many faces. Hurston had created a number of apparently contradictory personae to present to different groups and individuals. At times, Hurston has been accused of playing the "happy darky role to entertain whites" (Washington 7) and at other times, Hurston presents a serious face, as she does throughout most of *Mules and Men*. Hurston has also been accused of bowing down to the whims of white patrons, yet in an act of clear rebellion, she is the only one to have revealed the identity of her patron, Charlotte Rufus Osgood Mason, who demanded that her protégés not expose her as their benefactor. Even Langston Hughes remained loyal and obediently refused to disclose the identity of his so-called "Godmother" (Hemenway 105). Hurston had been called an abandoner of the race when she defended her position against desegregation late in her life, yet she had also been a valiant defender of Negroes as *people*, worthy of being treated with equality. In each of these cases, Hurston defies categorization, and readers wonder which of the characterizations—the whimsical entertainer or the serious anthropologist, to choose but two ostensible opposites of Hurston's identity—is fiction and which is fact.

The line between fiction and fact, Hurston's work attests, is neither straight nor clearly defined. Hurston's own identity is fluid and her "true nature," if such a notion exists, cannot be

apprehended. For those seeking out the nature of Zora Neale Hurston, the logical or obvious place to begin would be to read her autobiography. (Un)fortunately, that which is obvious does not play an important role in the author's identity. *Dust Tracks* sets up a relatively linear narrative path only to lead its readers down a series of dead-ends, U-turns, and false roads. Hurston does, however, plainly inform her readers early in her autobiography that she is "the word-changing kind" (*Dust Tracks* 19, *DT* hereafter) and that she makes up stories, adding detail to embellish otherwise rather mundane happenings (58-9). Hurston enveloped herself in "lies" or fictions, the most notorious being her claim that she was born in 1901 when in fact she had been born a whole decade earlier in 1891. Hurston created a mythology surrounding her identity, an oral mythology she effortlessly translated into her written autobiography. Although she does not state the year of her birth in *Dust Tracks*, Hurston cites Eatonville—the first incorporated Negro town in the United States—as her birthplace. However, Wall cites in her introduction to *Changing Our Own Words* that Hurston was actually born in Notasulga, Alabama (6). Being the talented storyteller she was, Hurston must have known the symbolic importance of changing her birthplace to such a strong Negro community given her ambivalence to racism and racist oppression. By changing her place and date of birth, Hurston does show "little regard for the ordering of principles of boundary, propriety, and stable identity," as Samira Kawash points out (190). Yet while showing little respect for the integrity of *facts*, Hurston constructs her *fictional* self quite coherently. It makes little symbolic sense for a Negro who devotes an entire chapter of her autobiography to deriding race consciousness and race solidarity to have her main character (herself) be born in such a racially divided state as Alabama. By setting her birth in the favourably depicted all-Negro Eatonville, Hurston may realistically develop a strong Negro woman character who is not

preoccupied by racial discrimination and who consequently holds a conservative stance on race issues.

Hurston narrates the events of her birth, be they “true” or not, in the chapter entitled, “I Get Born.” The chapter opens with, “This is all hear-say” (19), thus casting doubt on the events she will be narrating. She continues with, “but it is pretty well established that I really did get born.” In one short paragraph, Hurston accomplishes much as she casts doubts on the nature of truth and reality. The very fact that Hurston has written her autobiography attests to her existence, yet the circumstances surrounding her birth—the very means by which she came into this existence—remain in doubt. Here Hurston may be poking a little fun at objectivist “truth” which seeks to know and to prove. Hurston can neither know nor objectively prove how she was born or even that she was born, except that she does indeed exist. Also, by alluding to her birth, Hurston implicitly directs her readers to consider the changing nature of the self. She is no longer that infant, nor that little girl, nor even that younger woman she depicts. Not only have her identity and subjectivity changed, but along with them Hurston’s view has shifted. “Now” colours her memory of “then” as she remaps her past. Autobiographies work to fool readers into experiencing each described event as though it were occurring for the first time. In reality, the author has carefully edited out the other events surrounding it (necessarily, since it is impossible to recount *everything* that has ever occurred in one’s life). The editing process may be conscious or not, but readers easily follow each moment as it seamlessly leads into the next. Readers may consider the omission of facts in an autobiography as a simple editorial practice, or as lying, or, if the omissions are important and that which remains has been greatly altered, readers may view them as complicit in creating a fictional narrative. Autobiography is always a form of storytelling

since, as Sidonie Smith points out, “memory leaves only a trace of an earlier experience that we adjust into story” (35). In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston alters some facts here and grafts on others there, thus creating a great work of (autobiographical) fiction: her self.

Hurston’s fictionalization of her self underscores the arbitrary nature of categorical distinctions. Franz Boas, leading anthropologist, professor at Barnard College in New York, and Hurston’s mentor, theorized race to be wholly constructed as opposed to inherent or intrinsic. Social, historical, and geographic factors all play important parts in the production of race. As a student of Boas, Hurston understood race as an idealized abstraction, but one with concrete functions and consequences (McDowell 1993, 234). Hurston reflected her perception of the fluidity of race in her work, in her correspondence, and especially in her autobiography.

Race does not and cannot exist as a unitary category in Hurston’s view. Too many differences between the various and varied individuals of the Negro “race” rise up and proclaim themselves every day, and it is for this very reason that Hurston denounces the notion of coherence and cohesion within the “race.” The important differences between the individuals of the Negro social race such as those in economic situation, education, and geography, do not allow for a tightly-knit community. Hurston’s most notable tirade on the subject of intraracial diversity comes near the end of *Dust Tracks* in the chapter entitled “My People! My People!” The title refers to the one aspect that unites Negroes no matter their geography or culture. The cry of “My people! My people!” bespeaks the separation within the Negro social race itself, a separation based on class distinctions. Only this exclamation of distress, which escapes the lips of Negroes everywhere, ties together the members of this very diverse group. These cries may be heard when Negroes witness one of their “skinfolk” behaving in a manner unacceptable to them.

In the 1942 printed edition,²⁶ Hurston emphasizes the differences in class and status between various Negroes.

For instance, well-mannered Negroes groan out like that when they board a train or a bus and find other Negroes on there with their shoes off, stuffing themselves with fried fish, bananas and peanuts, and throwing garbage on the floor. Maybe they are not only eating and drinking. The offenders may be “loud-talking” the place and holding back nothing of their private lives, in a voice that embraces the entire coach. The well-dressed Negro shrinks back in his seat at that, shakes his head and sighs, “My people! My people!” (178)

Here, Hurston apparently exposes the lowliness of some Negroes as well as the admirable qualities of other Negroes. On this train, as in countless other Jim Crow areas to which all Negroes are relegated, no matter their social or economic standing, the well-mannered individual laments the baseness of his brother. The reference to bananas and peanuts in this passage suggests that the “loud-talking” Negro’s greatest sin is that of confirming the stereotypes concerning Negroes. The well-dressed Negroes deplore their brothers’ behaviour not because they wish to see their brothers “uplifted,” not even because they find the behaviour annoying in and of itself. Rather, they condemn it because it reflects badly on themselves. The well-mannered Negroes understand that the outside world (or, the white world) sees them for the colour of their skin and thus relegates them to that class of people who speak loudly and fill the car with the stench of rotting banana peels and their unshod feet. Hurston underlines the internal differences of social races, an undertaking Elizabeth Abel terms “dereferentializing race” (109). The groans of the upper-middle-class Negro underscore the many behavioural, class, and educational differences between Negroes, and the lack of referents to categorize them within the same unit. As Alain Locke, the great “race man” noted, “Negroes have been a race more in name than in

fact, or to be exact, more in sentiment than in experience” (964). Hurston elaborates on the discord within the social race over appropriate manners as well as the resulting wish on the part of some to dissociate completely from their “skinfolk.” Race solidarity, here, is glaringly absent.

One of the excized fragments of the manuscript version of “My People! My People!” concentrates on educational disparities among the various members of the Negro social race. In this first fragment, Hurston sets the scene: two young people, a brown girl from Barnard College and a black boy from Yale, board the subway discussing the concert they have just attended, the state of the race and how “the Race is going to amount to something after all” (236). Soon, two “scabby-looking Negroes” enter and sit next to the college couple, despite the many vacant seats elsewhere. The visual proximity of the two pairs allows for easier and intentional comparison. The two young men discuss their violent tendencies (how they “fix up” their respective woman), and the college couple—now named simply Barnard and Yale in the narrative—shrink in their embarrassment. They know what the white passengers must be thinking: “‘That’s just like a Negro.’ Not just like *some* Negroes, mind you, No, like all” (236). Hurston emphasizes the quieter couple’s education by calling them by their college names while the two young men who entered later remain nameless. When the 1942 printed edition and the manuscript texts are read in conjunction with one another, readers understand the close link Hurston draws between class and education. Through this link, Hurston suggests the permeability between the categories within the social race itself, as Nella Larsen had in her oeuvre. If class is related to education, in the sense that the more education one has, the higher the class to which one will belong, and if education is (relatively) open to all (if only in segregated institutions), then it would seem that one who obtains a higher education may also escape one’s lower class status.

Hurston does not, however, endorse the project of racial uplift. Indeed, she seems implicitly to condemn it. These “uplifters” seem to believe that any embarrassment a Barnard or a Yale might feel at the acts of other Negroes could be completely avoided if only the lowly brother or sister might be “uplifted,” taught how to behave correctly, how to speak in soft tones of appropriate matters, and essentially how to emulate the “white standard of living,” which his or her educated sisters and brothers have done (177-8). If only class and culture might be transcended, the educated Negro could impose “his own viewpoint on the lowlier members of his race,” but all know that such an event shall never take place: the differences are too great (178). Meanwhile, Hurston denies the existence of racial integrity by her exposition of the many differences among Negroes. She seems to suggest that some individuals shall never escape their class and culture, that the lowlier members of the race shall always remain so and that class shall never ultimately be transcended. One may wonder to which school of thought Hurston belongs: that of racial uplift or that of the primitivists. duCille answers that Hurston belongs to neither school *and* to both schools, simultaneously (80). Hurston’s views on “race” were unpredictable and ambivalent. She believed it impossible to define “race” strictly and that it is an unstable category, and she lived and wrote her life as a testament to this belief since she herself evades strict definitions.

Unlike many of her Harlem contemporaries, Hurston refuses to depict Negroes as humiliated or victimized simply because of their race. In Hurston’s most famous work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the main character, Janie, faces many hardships: among other difficulties, she is excluded from her community and she faces serious criminal charges in the death of her third and most beloved husband, Tea Cake. Yet “race” does not give rise to her

problems; rather, factors such as gender and poverty play an integral role in Janie's troubles. Hurston, explains Mary Helen Washington, "was determined to write about black life as it existed apart from racism, injustice, Jim Crow—where black people laughed, celebrated, loved, sorrowed, struggled—unconcerned about white people and completely unaware of being 'a problem'" (1979, 17). The problems Janie faces are those common to all of humanity, regardless of "race." Hurston's biographer, Robert Hemenway, quotes Hurston's words in a sentiment she reiterates throughout her work: "I don't see through the eyes of a Negro, but those of a person" (289). "There is no *The Negro* here," she asserts in her autobiography (192). Hurston refuses to portray a monolithic Negro race in any of her work, and most of all, she refuses to create a narrative which casts *herself* in the role of *the* representative of the struggle against the oppression of Negroes (McKay 279). At least some critics, albeit white critics writing for white audiences, appreciate Hurston's ostensible refusal to re-examine the race problem. "The race consciousness that spoils so much Negro literature" writes Phil Strong in 1942, "is completely absent here" (31). This seeming absence of race consciousness is born of Hurston's own experience in racial matters.²⁷ Her background informs her sometimes controversial views on race.

Many of Hurston's peers as well as critics since the 1940s have criticized the author for not articulating and exposing the race problem. But Hurston wrote out of her own personal experiences, as did Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset. Hurston's training in anthropology gives her a particular insight into cultural relativity and the importance of context in one's beliefs, actions, and identity (Wall 1989, 7). She asserts that her identity is closely linked to her specific circumstances of time and place. She speaks candidly and honestly to her readers on the first

page of her autobiography: "you will have to know something about the time and place where I came from, in order that you may interpret the incidents and directions of my life" (1).

Accordingly, the context Hurston offers in *Dust Tracks* comes into play in the readers' comprehension of her. In the relatively sheltered town of Eatonville, Florida where Hurston spent her childhood, Negroes literally ruled. This entirely Negro town played a politically and psychologically significant role in many lives as "it allowed black people to assume roles in keeping with their image of themselves rather than internalizing the subservient images the dominant society prescribed" (Wall 1995, 142). Here, Hurston was relatively free to create her own role(s) instead of adopting a role prescribed to her by a dominant white supremacist discourse. In Eatonville, Hurston did not ostensibly experience racist oppression first hand, nor was she even aware of herself as being black. In her autobiographical essay, "How It Feels to Be Colored Me," Hurston reveals that until the age of thirteen, when her mother's death forced her to move to the white-dominated city of Jacksonville, she did not realize she was "colored" (1009). She quickly adds that she is "not tragically colored." Hurston's sheltered life in Eatonville developed attitudes in her that were out of the mainstream. At times, Hurston seems surprised by discrimination, and more than one critic has implied or outrightly stated that Hurston is "hopelessly naive," as Wall claims, in the face of such racist attitudes (1995, 147). Although Hurston excuses and sometimes softens racial slurs, her inclusion of them in her writing may suggest her wish to expose them (Raynaud 45-6). Again, Hurston seems to slip in suggestions which run counter to her explicit point. Her roots in Eatonville may make her rather indifferent or at least ambivalent to race problems, but they do not make Hurston blind to them. It seems rather implausible that a woman of Hurston's training and ability was "hopelessly naive."

Location evidently shapes Hurston's identity politics. Hurston, whose identity is deeply rooted in the South, thus surprises her readers who might assume that the South would create a race-conscious Negro. Eatonville, readers learn, was no ordinary Southern town, and it produced no ordinary Southern Negro woman. In fact, Eatonville's location in the South seems merely coincidental or even accidental—an independent and incorporated black town may have existed anywhere in the United States. Yet Hurston's loyalty does not lie merely in her hometown but in the South in general. She claims to have the “map of Dixie” on her tongue (*DT* 104). She explains that *all* Southerners, black or white, are “raised on simile and invective.”²⁸ By making this distinction, Hurston underlines her Southernness and not her Negroeness. Hurston's attachment to the South differs greatly from the experience of the many who migrated north and who wished to leave the South behind. Hurston's motivation to leave the South was not caused by racism or violence done to her. Hurston left because her family had broken up at the death of her mother, and Hurston simply needed to find employment. Opportunities present themselves in the North and Hurston moved.

Hurston gladly returns home when given the opportunity to research in Florida. Annette Trefzer describes the South as “unhomely” to black women, even when discussing Hurston (1997, 1998), whose relationship to the South and to the communities there is a positive and nurturing one. The American South in general has been assumed, rightly or wrongly, to be the site of great racial oppression of Negroes, where black women in particular have suffered unthinkable injustices, especially in the era which Hurston describes in her writing. Yet Eatonville defies such generalizations, and Hurston does not fit the description of a dispossessed Southern woman. Hurston proudly claims the South as her home and speaks of it with warmth

and attachment. She undermines popular notions by depicting the South as a welcoming place for Negroes. Alternatively, she exposes the North as an often ruthless and racist environment. The subway scene cited above in which white people place all Negroes in the same class and Negroes live in disaccord with one another takes place in the heart of New York City. Hurston's own worst experience of racism, depicted in "My Most Humiliating Jim Crow Experience," occurred in New York City, where a doctor hurriedly treated her in a broom closet. Hurston reverses expectations when she depicts a racist North and a warm and welcoming South; she subverts expectations when she returns to the ostensible place of violence and racism—the South—in order to find freedom through the furtherance of her career and to pursue her own self-discovery.

Hurston's oscillation between the North and the South highlights the movement across borders. Black women often employ the theme of the journey in their writings. Carol Boyce Davies posits that this trope in black women's writing in the United States "offers a variety of possible understandings of internal migrations, historical displacement, captivity and agency" (130). Hurston recognizes her travels as both exterior movements and adventures as well as interior searches and growth (Willis 16). At a young age, Hurston had decided to seek out the horizon, to "see what the end of the world was like" (*DT* 27); she recalls this urge in the chapter entitled "The Inside Search." The journeying trope Hurston employs throughout *Dust Tracks*, as evidenced most obviously in the very title of the work, serves as a motif which unifies both the action and the vision of her autobiography. Hurston travels extensively, returning to Eatonville on two occasions, crossing the border into Canada with Fanny Hurst, and visiting various Caribbean islands to collect anthropological data. Hurston also lives in a number of different communities, including a multi-racial and multi-class community of actors and stagehands, the

white Barnard College, and various black communities in the South and in the islands. The numerous literal border crossings suggest the permeability of all borders, external and internal, literal and figurative. These borderlands, where different cultures, classes, geographies, and races meet allow the mixing of all these categories (Davies 16) and thus emphasize the falsity of these very borders.²⁹

As Hurston travels and crosses borders, she weaves together a tale of self-discovery and of collective identity. Hurston's upbringing in a strong Negro community as well as her training in anthropology and her collection of folklore earlier in her career contribute to her deep attachment to folk tales. This attachment translates into a particularly rich writing style, evocative of the elaborate "lies" the Eatonville men recount on the porch of Joe Clark's store. Both the style and the manner reflect Hurston's own folk tradition: she both freely embellishes language and imagery to create autobiographical stories which could be defined as "lies" in the folk sense and in the traditional Western sense. Hurston's use of "lies" in *Dust Tracks* illustrates the desire within African American autobiography to demonstrate one's own freedom in and through oral or written storytelling (Andrews 89). Storytelling in the Negro folk tradition plays an integral role in Hurston's writing of "self" and in all the implications for the relativity of "truth" associated with the writing of self.

Hurston rewrites her experience upon the scroll of African American history. Her life reads like an allegory: her separation from her mother at a young age reenacts the African's violent abduction away from Mother Africa, and the dispersion of the Hurston siblings mirrors the diaspora (Lionnet). Thus, the lack of solidarity among Hurston's own brothers makes her wary of "race solidarity" among race "brothers" and "sisters." Despite her apprehension in race

matters, however, Hurston identifies strongly with the folk of Eatonville. Group identification in women's autobiographies, notes Trefzer, is important because it allows women to "create selves that transcend socially imposed limits on identity construction" (1998, 69). Her strong attachment to Negro folk and her position within the Negro folk community enabled Hurston to write herself more confidently, to deconstruct race and identity boundaries others had built up.³⁰ Indeed, black folk culture is an important source of Hurston's creative power, observes Wall, since she wrote best when she tapped into it (1993, 96). Hemenway notes that Hurston's writing and even her own identity were so wrapped up in folk culture that one of her Harlem Renaissance male peers Ama Bontemps believed "it was impossible to tell where the folk left off and Zora began" (64).

Although Hurston did not depict herself as standing as the representative Negro (as if any such being could exist), she did identify strongly with her community, so strongly in fact that it becomes difficult to disentangle the individual identity from the group identity. *Dust Tracks* may be an autobiography but it is also a collective memory (Lionnet 118). The community plays a paramount role in the shaping of Zora the individual; their story is part of her story, and her story is part of theirs. Hurston's *Dust Tracks* fits in quite well within the African American tradition of autobiography which highlights the "collective nature of the endeavour" of autobiography (McKay 264). The authorial and authoritative "I" becomes a community voice (Trefzer 1998, 72).³¹ Hurston writes herself within her community and her community within her self, but she does not, through this process, erase her self. She insists on her own individuality in a pluralistic society. Nellie Y. McKay identifies the two almost contradictory aspects of *Dust Tracks* wherein Hurston defends her position as an individual while, as an ethnographic interpreter, she

contextualizes her identity by connecting herself to “social archaeology” (266). Hurston’s ambivalent identity (embracing the folksy Eatonville girl, the highly educated anthropologist, and the creative writer) results in a plurality of voices (Raynaud 38) and in the impossibility of inscribing her within any strict definitions.

Hurston seems to contradict herself within the 1942 printed edition of *Dust Tracks*, but when we add the excized manuscript fragments to the mix, the attempt to define Hurston appears futile. The Zora of the 1942 text seems mild, conservative, and even naive. The Zora of the excized passages has been called bitter and combative (Raynaud 52), “self-assured, irreverent, and politically astute” (Hemenway 287), as well as well-informed (McKay 275). The chapter entitled “Seeing the World as It Is” had been completely cut from the 1942 printed edition. In it, Hurston exposes the uglier and more painful side of existence. She admits to having been in Sorrow’s Kitchen where she has “licked out all the pots” (247). She uses the same image in “Looking Things Over,” a heavily revised version of “Seeing the World as It Is,” but in the 1942 printed edition, she tempers it with a bright image directly following it: “Then I have stood on the peaky mountain wrappen [sic] in rainbows, with a harp and a sword in my hands” (227). In “Seeing the World,” a more insightful and philosophical version, Hurston centres on the darkness and difficulties. She adds to the image of Sorrow’s Kitchen more dreary reflections:

The winters have been and my soul-stuff has lain mute like a plain while the herds of happenings thundered across my breast. In these times there were deep chasms in me which had forgotten their memory of sun. (247)³²

Notwithstanding the gorgeous imagery, Hurston allows herself and her readers to dwell upon these areas of pain and sorrow. And even when she turns to brighter days, she does not exalt in

them as she does in the printed edition:

But the time has his beneficent moods. He has commanded some servant-moments to transport me to high towers of elevation so that I might look out on the breadth of things. This is a privilege granted to a servant of many hours, but a master of few, from the master of a trillion billion hours and the servant of none. (247-8)

This passage reads almost like a psalm or an acquiescent prayer of thanksgiving for those moments of beauty and grandeur. The humility of the language strikes the reader, especially when one contrasts it with Hurston's self-assured and even cocky persona in the 1942 printed edition. The very serious tone also differs remarkably from the 1942 edition; here, Hurston leaves behind the role of playful entertainer to reflect upon the serious and often difficult nature of existence.

"Seeing the World" exposes the hardships individuals must face. In the expunged chapter, Hurston foregrounds class and race prejudice and calls them the "scourges of humanity" (248), yet she notes that "*individuals* were responsible for that, and not races. All clumps of people turn out to be individuals on close inspection [emphasis added]" (248). She holds up her views on individuality above race, but she simultaneously recognizes and deplores the reality of race prejudice and its effects—an observation markedly absent from the 1942 printed edition. Hurston goes on to expose the atrocities which other races have suffered, such as those the Jews faced in the early Christian period. She reminds her readers of the hypocrisy of violence done in the name of Christ, the Prince of Peace. She writes of how the Dahomans of Africa rounded up other Africans and sold them to Western slaveholders. Whites have done violence to whites, blacks have done violence to blacks. There has been interracial violence; there has been intraracial

violence. She assures her readers that “actual justice is somewhere away off” (257). This bleak portrait of the world “as it is” was completely cut from the 1942 printed edition. Its reinstatement in HarperCollins’ 1996 edition speaks to Hurston’s keen perception of race relations and of human relationships more generally. In the light of the Los Angeles race riots, or more recently the Cincinnati riots in the spring of 2001, Hurston’s prophecy that “actual justice is somewhere away off” is particularly haunting.

Dust Tracks was crucially altered during the editing process; these revisions mark the many voices within the narrative: Hurston’s own, the editors’, and perhaps even those of the readership. Claudine Raynaud suggests a “duality of voices (the subject’s and the scribe’s)” (56). I would suggest a third voice, that of the reader, or at least Hurston’s anticipation of the readers’ reaction and thoughts.

Hurston’s experience with the many white patrons in her life prepared her for the necessity of self-censorship in all her work, including her autobiography.³³ Françoise Lionnet offers “the unsaid of her autobiography” as evidence of Hurston’s self-censorship (95). Hurston’s understanding of the reality of the publishing industry and her anticipation of her readers’ expectations shaped *Dust Tracks*. Publishers, Hurston knew, consider the readability of the text as well as the readers’ response—they do not necessarily expect integrity or even “truth.” Hurston told an interviewer from the *New York Amsterdam News* in 1944, “[r]ather than get across all of the things which you want to say you must compromise and work within the limitations [of those people] who have the final authority in deciding whether or not a book shall be printed” (in Hemenway 286-7). Hurston’s understanding of the need for self-censorship or self-editing had begun long before she sat down to write *Dust Tracks*. One of her many letters to

Langston Hughes, the great Harlem Renaissance poet and Hurston's good friend at the time, reveals her consciousness of the need for editing. The letter, dated October 15, 1929, discusses Hurston's submission of her folk manuscript, which would later become *Mules and Men*, to her (and Hughes') patron and "Godmother," Charlotte Mason. "Godmother" writes Hurston, "says the dirty words must be toned down. Of course I knew that, but first I wanted to collect them as they are" (in Hemenway 129). In the tradition of the objectivist Boas, Hurston collected folklore as scientifically as possible; that is, she recorded it without changing or editing it. Yet she *knew* she would have to change it. This awareness of the editorial process probably spilled over into the writing of her autobiography. A decade older and wiser, Hurston may not have attempted to add passages she knew the editors would cut, and when asked to revise the "Seeing the World as It Is" chapter, Hurston evidently acquiesced and produced a more palatable (in 1942) "Looking Things Over." A veteran of editorial procedures, Hurston may have censored herself to an extent while writing, even before the manuscript had reached the editors, and the excized passages may not necessarily be Hurston's pure, "authorial voice," as Raynaud suggests (55). Barbara Johnson dubs Hurston's self-censorship as the resignation "to the pleasures of submission" (1990, 217). I would call it an astute recognition of the terms of publication.

Hurston learned from a very early age the importance and the advantages of pleasing those individuals in positions of power, which often meant pleasing white people. "A white man of many acres and things" who knew the Hurston family well, helped deliver baby Zora (*DT* 20-1). He arrived one day bringing food to Zora's heavily pregnant mother, Lucy, knowing that her husband was away. The man arrived to find a weak Lucy Hurston and a screaming, healthy baby girl. He used his Barlow Knife to cut Zora's umbilical cord, and "he did the best he could about

other things" (21). A white man had "grannied" her—"granny" being the local term for mid-wife—and he thus took a special interest in young Zora.³⁴ This man, who remains nameless in the autobiography, was the "one person who pleased [her] always" (30). When she was very young, he would tease her and praise her for not crying. When she was a little older, he would take her fishing under the pretense that he hated baiting his own hook. Once the pair arrived at the lake, however, the man would bait his own hooks. Zora liked spending time with the man because he spoke to her as if she were "as grown as he" (30). He gave her the nickname "Snidlits, explaining that Zora was a hell of a name to give a child," and he offered her this piece of advice: "don't be a nigger" (30). Hurston knew, even at that tender age, that he was not referring to the colour of her skin: "He was talking about class rather than race" (32).

Young Zora's first white patrons came to know the girl when they visited her school. A Negro school was an oddity to most white people, and the Eatonville school was thus visited as a tourist attraction by some white people; "while they were always sympathetic and kind," notes Hurston, "curiosity must have been present, also" (*DT* 34). On one particular day, the visitors, two white women, noticed Zora when the girl's turn came to read aloud. The girl had read and reread the Greco-Roman myths a number of times, and she knew her material well. She impressed the visitors with her ability, and they invited her to call upon them the following afternoon. Lucy Hurston scrubbed her daughter with the harsh Octagon Soap then dressed her in a heavily starched checked gingham dress. Zora hated the scrubbing and the uncomfortable dress (she much preferred to play outdoors with the boys, tumbling around and dealing out blows as hard as those she received). But she had been invited by the kind women, and she would go. The pair offered her candy and gifts, and they would later send her a large box filled with clothes and

books. Those books she received, including a book of Norse Tales, inspired Zora. Her life, she realized, was no Valhalla. She wished to be “away from drabness” and to stretch her limbs “in some mighty struggle” (41). Her sense of adventure was further awakened as was perhaps her wish to create her own version of the idyllic Valhalla.

When young Zora went looking for adventure, she found it, but she also found hardships. Living from day to day in New York City, at times having to borrow from friends and family or having to work two or three different jobs at once, Hurston must have been relieved to find a patron in the big city. Hemenway surmises that Alain Locke introduced Hurston to Mason some time in 1927. Mason’s money allowed Hurston to return to Eatonville to collect more folklore. The pact Hurston signed provided the means for her to begin her career as a folklorist (109). The “Faustian compact,” as Wall terms it (1995, 155), kept Hurston and her work under strict control by the patron. The legal language in Hurston’s contract with Mason, indicates Hemenway, was complex and difficult, and it demonstrates the “almost perverse control” Mason had over Hurston (110). One clause forbade Hurston to publish while under Mason’s patronage (a time span of over three years), and all the folk data she collected became Mason’s property; consequently, Hurston could not publish her folk material without submitting it to her patron’s scrupulous pen. Hurston was not naive concerning the control Mason had over her and her work. In a letter to Locke dated December 16, 1928, Hurston writes that their plans to venture into Negro theatre should not be further explored “until the gods decree that they shall materialize” (in Hemenway 116). The divinity which holds such power here refers to Mason. But Hurston, passionate about her work, was “fiercely determined to have a career, no matter what or who had to be sacrificed,” notes Washington (14), even if the “who” to be sacrificed was her self. Mason’s tight control of

Hurston's life and work for three years was a difficult means to a worthwhile end.

Mason's interest in Negro folklore may seem a rather curious hobby for an elderly and very wealthy white woman. When she was younger, Mason had lived among the Plains Indians while she financed a woman named Natalie Curtis in her research. Curtis would produce a volume of songs and legends about the indigenous people of the American Plains, entitled *The Indians' Book* (1907). Curtis later became interested in black folk songs, which may have led to Mason's interest in the New Negro (Hemenway 104-5). Mason was undoubtedly a primitivist; that is, the more "wild" and "primitive" side of Negroes interested her. Many white patrons of the Harlem Renaissance ascribed to the notion that "real" Negroes were those who tapped in to their African roots and those who fit the stereotype in which they had come to believe. Mason thought of Zora as a "child of nature" and Hurston did little to dispel this belief (Hemenway 106). She did indeed perform this role for Mason; she played the "true" Negro, one who would have nothing to do with tea-parties.³⁵ But does she buy into this version of "the Negro"? It may seem that Hurston has sold herself out to Mason (and to the white population in general) by playing the stereotypical Negro,³⁶ but as I have noted earlier, she states in her autobiography quite emphatically that there is no *The Negro* in America (192). Readers are left to wonder which version of Hurston they should believe—the one who played up the stereotype or the one who emphasized the falsity of stereotypes since they lead to false generalizations and categorizations. Washington notes that Hurston was accused of pumping whites for money while compromising her own dignity and her own identity (10). Perhaps the realities of immanent poverty (Hurston did, after all, die poor in a welfare home) thrust Hurston into the position of having to fictionalize her self and create many Zoras, and thus keeping her self to herself.

By fictionalizing her self, Hurston finds her own voice. Both Cheryl A. Wall and Michael Awkward note that self-discovery depends upon the learning to manipulate language (1993; 1989), a task Hurston not only takes seriously but does very successfully, as evidenced by her evocative imagery and her agile skirting around many details of her personal life. Despite the “lies,” or perhaps because of them, Hurston spoke with what Wall calls an “authentic black female voice” (1993, 76). Hurston journeys toward a self down roads of difficulty and of pain, as well as those of joy while still eluding her readers and without giving her self away to her various patrons.

In Harlem, Hurston had “impressed all by being herself” (Hemenway 11) yet within this authenticity Hurston found a spot in which to hide many details of her past and of her very identity. Hurston was so very private that few people, if any, knew aspects her self as simple and as fundamental as her real age or birthplace (Washington 7). She divulges her family history and some of her adventures in her many jobs as a young woman. She even touches on some of her forays into the South and the Caribbean. But through all of these revealed moments, there are many important details of Hurston’s life that readers never learn. She nimbly jumps from one scene of her early womanhood to another without setting decipherable time frames. In this way, she shrouds the events in a nebulous and timeless cloak under which she may hide her true age. Hemenway speculates that Hurston may have married at a young age and later become divorced and subsequently have concealed the relationship, but he has no way of knowing or confirming his suspicion. In *Dust Tracks*, Hurston names one of her husbands only by his initials—she never reveals his full name. Hurston does not provide any titillating details or hints in her autobiography to hook her readers. *Dust Tracks* is therefore not a “tell-all” brand of

autobiography, and it is obvious that Hurston wrote it reluctantly as the tone is dispassionate—especially the tone of the 1942 printed edition. Hurston may have constructed a fiction of her life as a means to have her own voice heard despite having been forced to compose an autobiography she did not wish to write. She may have done so because she had wanted to write fiction. She may have “lied” because she was by nature an intensely private person. She may simply have needed to pay the rent. In any case, readers learn quickly, through the internal contradictions of the text, that Hurston was herself an enigmatic woman whose identity could not be known. She forgot those things she did not wish to remember, and remembered those details when and *how* she wished to recall them. The dream is indeed the truth. Ultimately, Hurston’s “self,” whoever that was, lies hidden beneath layers of contradictions within her writing, and within her own being.

CONCLUSION

As the curtain fell on the last scenes of the Harlem Renaissance in the early Depression years, many left the stage as well as the theatre from which the movement had been watched. The legacy of the Harlem Renaissance, however, lives on. Fauset's understanding of the close ties between race, class, and gender and her ironic tone opened the gates for the Negro writers who would come after her and write about themselves and about their communities, sometimes ostensibly openly, sometimes subversively. Larsen was one of the many to follow in Fauset's footsteps and to question the nature of the lines which parcel categories. Then Hurston happened upon the literary scene, and she not only questioned the nature of these lines, but she transgressed them without apologies. They all generated identities with the meagre possibilities offered to them, and from their creations, they offered their literary daughters and sons a bounty of possibilities from which to choose. They unbound identities from their categorical confines and showed that one individual could draw upon a number of identities and personae—even contradictory ones—simultaneously.

My first exploration of the term and concept of "persona" was in high school, in a creative writing class. Each student received a sheet simply entitled *Personae*. The short article explained how authors choose a persona for their narrator and also how each individual develops her own personae every day. Each persona or mask an individual chooses to show to each person in her surroundings differs—sometimes widely—from the others. This intrigued me. From a very young age I had realized that I do not act the same way with my parents as I did with my best friend, for instance. But now I understood that I was not merely *acting* differently in each case, I *was* different. Earlier in my education in elementary school, my teacher had asked the class to list the various roles each one of us played. The list turned out to be much longer than expected.

Mine began with daughter, then proceeded to friend, cousin, niece, student, pet-owner, and so forth. Later in my life, I would mentally add woman, citizen, teacher, consumer, and many, many more. The accumulation of the number of roles I play to different people with the understanding of personae provided me with a new appreciation for the complexity of the human identity. The possibilities seemed endless. Identity-formation is a complicated and compelling concept. If I can have within my psyche a large number of personae, which *one* is the real me? Is there a “real” me? Wherein lies my identity/ies?

Harlem Renaissance women authors, as I have outlined in this project, were quite creative in their development of their female characters’ identities. The complexity of the female characters struck me almost immediately when I read first Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, then Larsen’s *Passing*. When I explored the components of their respective (and collective) identities and the various tools they employed to create themselves, I began to appreciate them for who they were, for their complexities, and for their contradictions.

The options available to Negro women in the early twentieth century were rather limited. Options for careers, for jobs, for freedoms, even for identities were scarce compared to those for white men, for instance. Negro women thus needed to be creative and often subversive in their creation of themselves. Yet no matter the breadth of their imaginations, these women still had to work within the confines of their assigned gender, race, and class positions. The choices available to these women were narrow because of their respective positions in their society, time, and place. If a person was black, she could endeavour to achieve many goals and strive to gain access to areas and places heretofore denied her. Nevertheless, she still remained black with all the attached implications. This is not a handicap but rather a reality. In the same way, I will

always be a woman and because of my physicality and of the society in which I live, I will thus never be able to take a stroll alone safely at 2 a.m. in a city park. In fact, until my partner, who is not a large man, had told me a story of his solitary midnight walk through the city, the idea of such an act had never even occurred to me as a possibility. To a certain extent, my identity is confined to and by my physical body. That is not to say that I will not walk in Take Back the Night marches or that I will not strive to teach my sons, nephews, and male students to respect all women. One need not accept one's situation, yet this very rebellion against it proves the power of position.

All the women characters I explored in this study had to work within the confines of being Negro women. Their choices were thus limited not only by of the colour of their skin and their designated race but by the society and communities in which they lived. Had these women lived in Ethiopia or France, for instance, their experiences would have differed significantly. Had these women lived a century later, or a millennium earlier, their lives would not have been the same. The systemic factors into which one is born and in which one is raised and develops are larger than any one individual. The Negro women of the Harlem Renaissance, as well as their foremothers and their daughters, all worked hard to change their roles and to expand the number of positions from which they might speak, learn, and construct themselves. Their daughters—that is, the women both black and white who have come after the women of the Harlem Renaissance—owe women like Fauset, Larsen, and Hurston a debt of gratitude. They have taught us from their experience. They have shown us that many of the most self-evident “categories” to which we have been thus far rigidly confined are arbitrary, artificial, and ultimately destructive. They have thus enlightened us to the possibility of breaking free of these fetters, and that in fact,

new and hardly-dreamed-of worlds exist beyond the deep yet mirage-like lines drawn between the categories which keep us “in our place.” The understanding these women have offered us of those systems which have enshrined our roles as sacrosanct allows the onlooker to perceive better the fallacy of their strictures as well as the possibility that we may escape given a little imagination. I do not pretend that my situation as a white woman in North America at the dawn of the twenty-first century is as difficult or as taxing as that of Negro women in the 1920s. But I do recognize the need for continuing the work of the emancipation of women, of African Americans, of indigenous peoples, of differently-abled people, of the many, many others who struggle against stigma designed to limit and to exclude.

A better understanding of the positions of the various female characters studied in the preceding chapters (and of those different from ourselves, in general) opens the door to compassion, acceptance, and love. Misunderstandings of individuals and of situations, on the other hand, lead to hatred and fear. Racist attitudes, for instance, come from misconception about what others live, about their personal and communal experiences, and about their positions within these systems. Violence more generally is also born of such misapprehensions of others, of their identities, and of their humanity. Until the genesis of my research on African Americans, on black feminist thought, and on early twentieth-century black women writers, I did not fully appreciate the experience of black women in the United States and the deep roots of their history in that country. I do not completely grasp it now, but I do have a much fuller apprehension and a better appreciation of it. I now count Fauset, Larsen, and Hurston among the foremothers of women’s and feminist literature. The Western Canon must be further exploded (much to Dr. Bloom’s dismay) in order to admit those authors who have experiences with which we might not

immediately identify. These women authors' depiction of identity are clear forerunners in literary and critical movements we know today. Whether it be black feminist thought, feminism more generally, or even postmodernism or poststructuralism, these women showed a firm grasp on emerging issues. We, and here I speak to white adherents to the Western Canon, must clearly identify these women as part of our heritage and not merely relegate them to a "special interest" category to be studied by "others." By claiming them we should not, however, take them from their African American daughters; rather, we must share them and proudly include them in our own tradition. I thus find it appropriate to close with a poem by another black female artist and contemporary writer who was greatly influenced by Zora Neale Hurston—Alice Walker. This piece speaks to the topic of these women's legacy much better than I.

WOMEN

They were women then
 My mama's generation
 Husky of voice—Stout of
 Step
 With fists as well as
 Hands
 How they battered down
 Doors
 And ironed
 Starched white
 Shirts
 How they led
 Armies
 Headragged Generals
 Across mined
 Fields
 Booby-trapped
 Ditches
 To discover books
 Desks

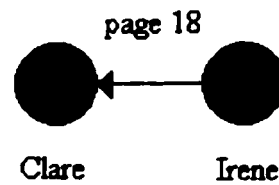
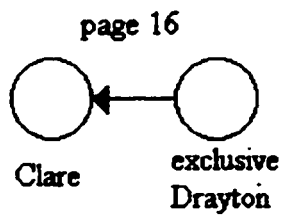
A place for us
How they knew what we
Must know
Without knowing a page
Of it
Themselves.

As our foreparents, Fauset, Larsen, and Hurston broke ground and toiled to offer us a rich heritage upon which to draw, ideologically and literarily, for a long time to come.

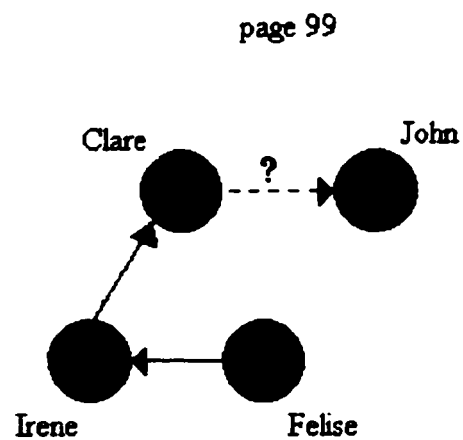
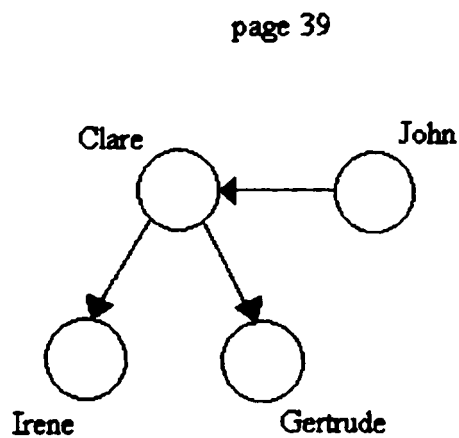
APPENDIX

Colour by Association/ Proximity

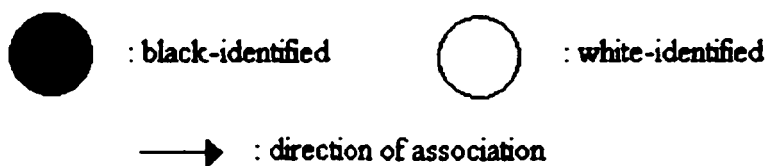
Irene's perception:



John Bellew's perception:



Legend:



NOTES

1. Throughout this thesis, I use the term “race” in various manners. The category of “race” has been revealed as arbitrary at best (Cashmore). In this study, I use the term to refer to a socially defined category, such as the Negro or African American race. Because the term is socially defined, it is fluid and difficult to fix; therefore, I use quotation marks to offset it, emphasizing each time its arbitrary nature. At some points in the argument, I use the term in its historic context, in which cases I simply it without quotation marks. However, it is impossible to avoid completely the term “race” because of its historical and social importance.

As Cashmore notes, the “significance of racial labels . . . is purely a function of the specific context attached to racial terms at a particular time and place” (267). (Other authors, such as AnnLouise Keating, also underline the importance of historicizing racial terms.) Thus, broadly speaking, I use “Negro” or “Negro race” to refer to the social group of Americans of African or Afro-Caribbean descent living approximately between the late nineteenth century and the mid twentieth century. “African American” is a contemporary term used for Americans who identify themselves as being of African or Afro-Caribbean descent. Physical markers, such as skin colour, do not necessarily play a part in defining these “races.”

2. Critics have shied away from Fauset’s work—especially her short stories—the consequence of which is that there is “relatively meagre scholarship on Fauset” (Berg 178). As Mary Knopf points out in her introduction to the anthology *The Sleeper Wakes*, Fauset had done much work (in writing fiction and in editing) but she received little recognition for it. Fauset is mentioned by many but studied by few. Those authors who mention her in the context of the Harlem Renaissance but who do not linger on her work itself include Hutchinson, Johnson, Lomax, Russ, Singh, and Turner. Others, such as Bell and Kellner, discuss Du Bois’s influence on the Harlem

Renaissance—for better or for worse—but do not even mention Fauset.

3. See, for instance, Zulena and Liza in endnote 17.

4. Interestingly, although Laurentine's birth and identity would be objectionable in and of themselves—she is the issue of a Negro mother and a white father—neither she nor her mother, Aunt Sal, are held accountable. Aunt Sal had been a slave, a probable victim of rape by her white master. She did not choose her plight. Sins may be transferred from mother to daughter or even from aunt to niece but virtues cannot be thus attributed. That is, Laurentine may be deemed undesirable because of her aunt's sins but she cannot be redeemed because of her own mother's apparent virtue.

5. Davis does not delineate her data; she does not provide the geographic limits of the “passers” estimated here, nor does she cite the studies she mentions.

6. For further reading on the race question present in *Passing* see Butler, Condé, Davis 1997, duCille, Kawash, and Wald.

7. All page references to *Passing* are to the Penguin edition.

8. It could be argued that one would not be expected to anticipate the presence of a Negro in an exclusive restaurant, that Irene should not be blamed for assuming Clare to be white. However, Irene, a Negro, has gained entry into the establishment, and it would either be arrogant or plainly foolish for her not to expect other Negroes to be present.

9. Kawash points out that the term “passing” itself “contains the trace of its origins in movement” (139).

10. See diagram 1 in the Appendix.

11. John Bellew's own history suggests the possibility of upward mobility. When Clare met him, John had “turned up from South America with untold gold” (27) (most probably pillaged from

the indigenous people of the area): his high social standing was bought, confirming the fluidity of class markers in the 1920s which Davis describes (Davis 1997, xi). Unlike Clare, however, Bellew's social mobility is not attached to another individual. As a man, he had to buy and forge his own passage into another social category.

12. It is the narrator who refuses to call Clare by her married name. The characters within the narrative call her either simply "Clare" or "Mrs Bellew". On one occasion Clare refers to herself as "Mrs John Bellew," but never is she called "Clare Bellew."

13. Even the term "bisexual" cannot adequately describe Clare Kendry; rather "omnisexual"—interested in all sexualities—suits her best.

14. Irene could not pass permanently even if she chose to do so: her husband and one of her sons are dark. See diagrams in the Appendix.

15. The unexpectedness of her two worlds colliding may also account for Irene's inability to recognize Clare on the rooftop of the Drayton.

16. See diagram 1 in the Appendix.

17. Irene does not, however, participate in the more "hands on" aspects of domesticity, such as cooking and cleaning; these tasks she leaves to the ebony-faced Liza and to the "mahogany-coloured creature" Zulena, whose dark bodies illustrate the close relationship between colour, class, and gender. Liza and Zulena's dark bodies do not allow for passing. The possibility for social mobility, therefore, is limited and confined to the Negro community within which opportunities for women are somewhat limited. Their gender and class are thus closely bound to their dark colour.

18. Here I invoke Michel Foucault and his theory concerning the close tie between knowledge

and power.

19. For further exploration of this discussion, see Butler, Larson, McLendon.

20. This discourse presupposes that the “white race” is superior to all races. According to Cornell West, white supremacy assaults black intelligence, ability, beauty, and character, and such assaults “required persistent black efforts to hold self-doubts, self-contempt, and even self-hatred at bay” (17). Therefore, I use “white supremacist” here to invoke the sense of white superiority as a psychologically violent worldview and not to refer to, or to confuse with, the physically violent white supremacist acts of the Ku Klux Klan, for example.

21. See, among others, Howard, Johnson 1990, McLendon.

22. I use the term here in its most comprehensive meaning: autobiography stands as any individual’s self-invention and related life story, be it written or oral.

23. It is also interesting that Haviland should use the term “hysterical”—which refers, etymologically, to the womb—to describe a woman’s work. Hélène Cixous would celebrate the epithet and include it in her *écriture féminine*.

24. I use the exclusive pronoun here since, Shari Benstock notes, Gusdorf’s definition of autobiography excludes the experience of women, as it does “ethnic minorities, those who are not Christian and heterosexual, [and] those who do not live within northern America and western European culture” (4-5).

25. Sidonie Smith outlines three strategies that women use in autobiography, all of which involve “lies,” and explains how these lies are closely linked to “truth.” Smith defines these “lies” as “‘I’-lies” whereby the fiction of identity comes to the fore—a notion with which Hurston played quite skilfully, notes Smith (47).

26. The “1942 printed edition” refers to the first edition of *Dust Tracks*, printed in 1942 by J.B.

Lippincott. The original version was heavily edited, and relatively large segments of the manuscript were excized from it. Those cut chapters and fragments have been included in the 1996 HarperCollins edition. I shall refer to the restored segments as the “manuscript” version.

27. This seeming paradox will be explored subsequently in this chapter.

28. It is interesting to note that less than a decade earlier, in 1934, in an essay entitled, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston had listed metaphor and simile as the *Negro*’s greatest contribution to the English language. White folks may use this form of adornment in language but the Negro, she claims, had inserted it into the language.

29. These observations could also be made in Larsen’s and in Fauset’s works where their characters cross borders, journey, and thus transgress the false lines drawn by the establishment.

30. As noted earlier, Eatonville in particular, in its uniqueness, encouraged such subversion of stereotypes since the town did not fit the cliché of a Southern community.

31. Trefzer seems to condemn the displacement of the “I” into the communal voice, but here I wish to underline the importance of this transmutation in the close bond between individual and community.

32. The language and imagery in this deleted passage is reminiscent of Negro folk imagery and metaphoric language. Claudine Raynaud astutely notes that the “manuscript reveals an effort to force Hurston’s language away from [this] quality of oral speech into the polished, acceptable form of written language” (39). But she also suggests that the excized passages do not emphasize folklore, a suggestion I wish to dispute. Hurston may not emphasize folklore explicitly, but her use of metaphor clearly echoes the beautiful language of Negro folk.

33. Although the artists of the Harlem Renaissance were black, their work was often funded by

wealthy white patrons. The politics and effects of such a situation are important but unfortunately too vast to explore in this study. I note it here simply to draw attention to the practice and to underline its predominance in the era. The influence of white patrons and spectators should not be underestimated, yet one should not assume that the Negro artists were completely without recourse: often narrow paths lead to great creativity.

34. Hurston introduces the man by stating that “[h]elp came from where she never would have thought to look for it” (20). The reversal of expectations here echoes those throughout *Dust Tracks* where a Southern town is the most welcoming to Negroes and Hurston’s most humiliating Jim Crow experience occurs in the supposedly most liberal of all cities, New York.

35. In a letter to Mason dated October 15, 1931, Hurston wrote, “I am on fire about my people. I need not concern myself with the few individuals who have quite the race via the tea table” (Hemenway 238). In this short statement, Hurston perpetuates the myth that those of the Negro race do not act like white people and attend tea-parties. She also implicitly condemns those Negroes who do (and those authors who depict Negroes who host and attend such gatherings), such as Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen. In her eyes, it seems, these women have abandoned their race and taken refuge in another.

36. This accusation of selling out by playing the role of the archetypal Negro would be an ironic one since she accuses those who *do not* fit the mould of selling out, as it were.

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