A "RACIAL NEED FOR GORGEOUSNESS":

THE SELF-FASHIONING WOMAN OF COLOUR IN THE FICTION OF JESSIE REDMON FAUSET AND NELLA LARSEN

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August, 2023

A thesis submitted to McGill University in partial fulfilment of the requirement of the degree of Master of Arts

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Acknowledgements

Foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Professor Miranda Hickman, without whose shared enthusiasm for organza, chiffon, linen, and dress in general this thesis would never have been threaded together. From you, I learned a new love for the finer details of a work. Thank you for listening to my ideas and carving out a space for fashion studies to thrive.

I would like to thank the librarians at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture for their assistance during my archival research and Karan Rinaldo, collections manager of the photography department at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, for granting me access to James Van Der Zee's photographs. Ms. Rinaldo's analysis of Van Der Zee's photographs highlighted the richness of portraits and greatly enriched this project in its conceptual phase. I would also like to thank the McGill English department for helping fund these archival research trips. This research was supported by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

Lastly, thank you to my family, friends, and colleagues, who contribute to my success in a plethora of ways. Mum, your generosity knowns no bounds; thank you for your endless support in all my endeavours. Breanna, thank you for offering vital guidance on multiple facets of graduate life. Not only are you a great academic mentor, but you also happen to be one of the funniest storytellers I know. Adam, Ana, and Francesco—my favourite philosophers, my walking encyclopaedias—thank you for keeping me sane. Your vibrancy shaped these last two years, and I count your friendship amongst my highest privileges. Finally, Isabelle, I owe you many thanks. I am in constant awe of your devotion to this work and, especially, of you. Your rigour makes my thought just, and makes me end where I began: loving words for all they can allude to.

Abstract

This thesis explores how the novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen use fashion to empower black and biracial women, allowing them to challenge racial, gender, and class constraints during the Harlem Renaissance. While fashion is primarily a visual medium, literary depictions in Harlem Renaissance literature reveal its social, personal, and historical dimensions through the interactions between clothing, the wearer, and society. In their novels, Fauset and Larsen use sartorial self-fashioning to interrupt the constraints of race, gender, and class, creating new paradigms of identity. Specifically, I argue that Fauset and Larsen explore the dialectical tensions between two early twentieth century paradigms of identity: the New Negro and the New Woman. The authors respond to the different emancipatory aims of these discourses and attempt to fashion them to the woman of colour. The first chapter surveys canonical black authors' views on the New Negro and examines how periodical advertisements contributed to the establishment of black beauty standards for women. To establish how gender operated in the cultural milieu leading up to and during the Harlem Renaissance, I compare the works of several male authors, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke specifically, to Anna Julia Cooper's black feminist writings of the turn of the century. The second chapter investigates Fauset's *There is Confusion* (1924) and Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928), exploring how their protagonists use fashion to adhere to *models of femininity* as defined by New Negro and New Woman discourse. Joanna and Helga engage with beauty and fashionable clothing to reconcile self-perception with societal perception; their attempts highlight gendered and racial tensions inherent in the aforementioned discourses. The third chapter analyses how the protagonists in Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) and Larsen's *Passing* (1929) use fashion to pass as white women, attempting to escape racial and sexual oppression while pursuing personal desires. The white-passing protagonists serve as vehicles for moving from rigid *models of femininity* to what I call *styles of femininity*, defined by an acute awareness of oneself and the sociopolitical climate. The chapter examines how clothing becomes a second skin, collapsing the subject-object binary, and enabling the protagonists to challenge prevailing norms and seek New Negro Womanhood. I situate Fauset and Larsen withing a budding genealogy of black feminist writing. These women authors help lay the groundwork for black feminist thought. Overall, this thesis contributes to the interdisciplinary junction of critical fashion studies and literary studies. It argues that sartorial choices in these novels are not mere aesthetic decisions. In my reading, clothing sometimes becomes an actant entrapping women of colour within preestablished visual codes and at others a material self-extension allowing them to negotiate their identities within the constraints of their time.

Résumé

Cette thèse explore la manière dont les romans de Jessie Redmon Fauset et de Nella Larsen utilisent la mode pour donner du pouvoir aux femmes noires et biraciales, leur permettant ainsi de défier les contraintes liées à la race, au sexe et à la classe sociale pendant la Renaissance de Harlem. Si la mode est avant tout un support visuel, les descriptions littéraires de la Renaissance de Harlem révèlent ses dimensions sociales, personnelles et historiques à travers les interactions entre le vêtement, la personne qui le porte et la société. Dans leurs romans, Larsen et Fauset utilisent la mode vestimentaire pour interrompre les contraintes liées à la race, au sexe et à la classe, créant ainsi de nouveaux paradigmes identitaires. Plus précisément, je soutiens que Fauset et Larsen explorent les tensions dialectiques entre deux paradigmes identitaires du début du XXe siècle : le « New Negro » et la « New Woman ». Les auteurs répondent aux différents objectifs d'émancipation de ces discours et tentent de les adapter à la femme noire. Le premier chapitre passe en revue les points de vue des auteurs noirs canoniques sur le Nouveau Nègre et examine comment les publicités périodiques ont contribué à l'établissement de normes de beauté noires pour les femmes. Afin d'établir comment le genre opérait dans le milieu culturel qui a précédé et accompagné la Renaissance de Harlem, je compare les œuvres de plusieurs auteurs masculins, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois et Alain Locke en particulier, aux écrits féministes africaine américaine d'Anna Julia Cooper au tournant du siècle. Le deuxième chapitre étudie *There is Confusion* (1924) de Fauset et *Quicksand* (1928) de Larsen, en explorant la manière dont leurs protagonistes utilisent la mode pour adhérer aux *modèles de féminité* définis par les discours du « New Negro » et de la « New Woman ». Joanna et Helga utilisent la beauté et les vêtements à la mode pour réconcilier la perception de soi avec celle de la société ; leurs tentatives mettent en évidence les tensions raciales et sexospécifiques inhérentes aux discours susmentionnés. Le troisième chapitre analyse la manière dont les protagonistes de *Plum Bun : A Novel Without a Moral* (1929) de Fauset et de *Passing* (1929) de Larsen utilisent la mode pour se faire passer pour des femmes blanches, tentant d'échapper à l'oppression raciale et sexuelle tout en poursuivant leurs désirs personnels. Les protagonistes qui se présentent comme des femmes blanches servent de véhicules pour passer de modèles rigides de féminité à ce que j'appelle des *styles de féminité*, définis par une conscience aiguë de soi et du climat sociopolitique. Le chapitre examine comment le vêtement devient une extension de soi, effondrant le binaire sujet-objet, et permettant aux protagonistes de défier les normes dominantes et de rechercher une nouvelle féminité qui accommode l'individualité de la femme biraciale. Je situe Fauset et Larsen dans une généalogie naissante de l'écriture féministe africaine américaine. Dans l'ensemble, cette thèse contribue à la jonction interdisciplinaire des études critiques de la mode et des études littéraires. Elle soutient que les choix vestimentaires dans ces romans ne sont pas de simples décisions esthétiques. Le vêtement devient un actant qui enferme les femmes de couleur dans des codes visuels préétablis ou une extension matérielle de soi qui leur permet de négocier leur identité en fonction des contraintes de leur époque.

S’il m’était permis de choisir dans le fatras des livres qui seront publiés sent ans après ma mort, savez-vous celui que je prendrais? … Non, ce n’est point un roman que je prendrais dans cette future bibliothèque, ni un livre d’histoire: quand il offre quelque intérêt c’est encore un roman. Je prendrais tout bonnement, mon ami, un journal de modes pour voir comment les femmes s’habilleront un siècle après mon trépas. Et ces chiffons m’en diraient plus sur l’humanité future que tous les philosophes, les romanciers, les prédicateurs, les savants.

– Anatole France.

Introduction

Langston Hughes, in the opening sentence of his autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), argues that black culture's popularity during the Harlem Renaissance was a kind of fashion: "It was a period when the Negro was in vogue."[1] Hughes captures the nuances of the movement. For black people, the Harlem Renaissance was a significant literary, political, and cultural blossoming. For white people, the movement was analogous to the flapper dress—new and enticing in what it could reveal. While white New Yorkers flocked uptown to Harlem's black clubs in the early twentieth century, their interest in black spaces, people, and art, Hughes suggests, stemmed from a desire for visual spectacle. The language of fashion in Hughes' sentence underscores how the Harlem Renaissance was a moment when African Americans sought to control their appearance, both literal and figurative. As Kimberly Lamm explains, "fashionable clothing was an aesthetic medium African Americans deployed to fashion themselves as historical subject with pasts and futures of their own design."[2]

To only focus on the ephemerality of the world of fashion and to rely on such ephemerality as a metaphor representing the brevity of the Harlem Renaissance movement discredits fashion's role in crystalizing a historical shift for African Americans. Zora Neal Hurston writes in "Art and Such" (1938) how "only three generations separate[d] the Negro from the muteness of slavery." "Muteness of slavery" for Hurston refers to the silencing of African Americans in literary arts, but I extend her remarks to the visual realm of fashion. Slaves were

[1] Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940), 228.
[2] Kimberly Lamm, 'Sartorial Self-Fashioning in the Harlem Renaissance', in *African American Literature in Transition, 1920–1930*, ed. Miriam Thaggert and Rachel Farebrother, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 73, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781108992039.006.

denied fashionable clothes and the ability to participate in consumer culture. Therefore, post-emancipation, clothes *à la mode* became a marker of freedom. Fashion is first and foremost a visual medium, yet literary depictions of clothing in literature of the Harlem Renaissance demonstrate how clothes exceed visuality. Literature reveals fashion's social, personal, and historical facets through a more subjective interaction with the tripartite relationship among clothing, wearer, and society. Descriptions of fashionable clothing abound in the Harlem Renaissance canon. The biracial narrator of James Weldon Johnson's T*he Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* (1912/1927) describes himself as wearing suits which white bourgeois men don, except that he uses them as more than a marker of wealth; the suits aid him in racially passing. In *Cane* (1923), Jean Toomer collages multiple literary genres in his vignettes, and Lamm stresses how he "makes impressionistic images of clothing part of a dream world that represents the imaginary density of Black subjectivities."[3] With chapter titles like "Cotton Song" and "Seventh Street," Toomer explores how the legacies of slavery affect the black self. Sasha Jensen roams the streets of Paris anxious about being judged for her "Cossack cap and the imitation astrakhan coat" in *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) by Jean Rhys.[4] Sasha worries that her clothing veils her inner turmoil, her genuine self. Responding to the legacies of the Harlem Renaissance, Gwendolyn Brooks depicts the eponymous protagonist of her novel *Maud Martha* (1953) consuming magazine advertisements which glamorize New York. Imagining herself "rolled up, silky or furry, in the taxi," Maud Martha uses textures and material language to transport herself to a different reality.[5] During and after the Harlem Renaissance, garments, beauty, and fabrics provide an avenue for building identity, expressing the self, and asserting

[3] Lamm, 75.
[4] Jean Rhys. *Good Morning, Midnight*. (1939; New York, N.Y: Penguin Books, 2016), 6.
[5] Gwendolyn Brooks. *Maud Martha*. (1953; Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 190.

subjecthood. Moreover, literary works underscore how the encounter with and reception of stylized objects defines their impact.

In their novels of the Harlem Renaissance, Jessie Redmon Fausset and Nella Larsen explore a particular stylized object: the black or biracial woman who uses sartorial self-fashioning to interrupt the constraints of race, gender, and class during a pivotal era defined by cultural shifts towards the conception of the individual. Sartorial self-fashioning and the language of fashion allow the protagonists in *There is Confusion* (Fauset 1924), *Plum Bun: A Novel without a Moral* (Fauset 1929), *Quicksand* (Larsen 1928), and *Passing* (Larsen 1929) to destabilize racial and sexist discrimination by challenging the cultures of femininity offered to them: the anachronistic True woman, the hypersexual 'savage', the black "race" woman, and the white New Woman. As Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar argue, the heroines of Fauset and Larsen's novels "turn themselves into surveyed spectacles, the object of the gaze of a community whose racism continuously shapes and threatens their survival."[6] Their black and biracial female protagonists objectify themselves in the name of cultivating subjecthood. Their heroines revel in fine clothing. Luxurious fabrics, bright colours, bold textures, give them pleasure. Clothing becomes a lens through which character is revealed, and, more importantly, becomes the vehicle through which the relationship between convention and subversion breaks down. Though deemed frivolous by society, fashionable clothing affords these women a sense of self.

Fauset and Larsen were recognized as valuable literary figures by their peers during the Harlem Renaissance, yet both they and their work suffered from being type cast. It is only fitting, in a thesis exploring the assertion of subjectivity through an assemblage of self and visual,

[6] Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar, 'Ain't I a New Woman? Feminism and the Harlem Renaissance', in *No Man's Land : The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century*, vol. Volume 3, Letters from the front (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 135.

material objects, to analyse portraits of the authors as a means of deciphering their public presentation and reception. I do not wish to establish a link between the authors' personal lives and their novels, as several scholars have done with Larsen's *Quicksand*; I do, however, believe that the following portraits capture how Fauset and Larsen were understood by their peers. Fewer portraits of Fauset exist than of Larsen, and out of Fauset's portraits, none demonstrate an artistic flair like those of Larsen. The most "widely circulated" portrait of Fauset during the Harlem Renaissance, (see figure 1), is a plain photograph.[7] Her hair, in a simple clipped back style, is unadorned; her only jewellery a string of pearls and a pendant of her academic honour society, Phi Beta Kappas. Carolin Wedin, the author of one of the only book-length studies dedicated solely to Fauset, stresses how Fauset's election into Phi Beta Kappa by the Cornell Chapter, Cornell being where she completed her Bachelor of Arts degree, is an unusual achievement given the number of both black members of the society and the number of women, black or white, who were college graduates.[8] The contents of the portrait—the monochrome background, Fauset's simple black garb, and acknowledgment of the viewer through her gentle gaze—adhere to a certain traditionalism. While Fauset's portrait is conservative, the transgressive subtleties of her works were, and at times still are, glossed over. Famously dubbed the "literary midwife" by Langston Hughes, Fauset helped to launch the career of several key Harlem Renaissance figures who came to overshadow her in their literary legacies.[9] Though Fauset's works have not experienced a revival like those of Larsen or Hurston, her genre-bending works deserve scholarly attention. Fauset was known in Harlem's literary circles, and she was lauded for her role as editor of *The Crisis*, from 1919 to 1926. During her tenure as literary editor of *The Crisis* magazine she

[7] Gilbert and Gubar, 'Ain't I a New Woman?'
[8] Carolyn Wedin, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer* (Troy, New York: The Whitson Publishing Company, 1981), 30.
[9] Hughes, *The Big Sea*. (New York: Hill and Wang, 1940)

Figure 1. Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, Photographs and Prints Division, The New York Public Library. "Jessie Fauset, author" New York Public Library Digital Collections. https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/6a35621e-ca56-2971-e040-e00a180678c4

also edited and contributed to *The Brownies' Book,* a book for black children.[10] Fauset's novels receive backlash for their portrayal of nineteenth century bourgeois femininity and marriage plot endings. However, reading her fiction as subscribing to antiquated feminine ideals undermines

[10] Kathryn West, "Jessie Redmon Fauset," in *Encyclopedia of the Harlem Renaissance*, e.d. Cary D. Wintz and Paul Finkelman, (Milton, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2004), 365, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=199782.

Fauset's aesthetic integrity. *There Is Confusion* and *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* break new ground in their "depiction of middle-class African American life."[11] The heroines strive to forge their own careers as women artists yet are repeatedly met with hurdles which are at once sexist and racist. Merging genres like the bildungsroman with the fairytale and the passing narrative, Fauset elucidates the black woman's struggle for the feminist dream.

Compared to Fauset's varied and vast literary production, Larsen published only two complete novels before dropping off the New York literary scene in the 1930s. Yet, her work propelled her into overnight celebrity. In her stardom, she became close friends with Carl Van Vechten, American writer and photographer who was a white patron of the Harlem Renaissance, and he took the portrait featured below (see figure two). Though Larsen is like Fauset also in sober, relatively unadorned dress except for her dark hat which contrasts the pale skin of her face, the mix of patterns in the photograph—the slanted lines of black and white foliage which make up the backdrop and the pale floral pattern of Larsen's blouse—agitates the portrait. Larsen looks beyond the frame as if unbothered by her viewer. Analysing a different portrait of Larsen in the series that Van Vechten took of her, Gubar comments on Larsen's brooding eyes looking "beyond the space enclosed by the photograph, almost seem to forecast the characterizations of Larsen and her heroines as "mixed-up," "illegitimate," "neurotic," and "morbid"."[12] Certain critics claimed that Larsen's divided "sexual, racial, and class allegiances" doomed her novels.[13] Relatively unknown before the publication of her first novel, *Quicksand*, Larsen grew up in Chicago. A child of a mixed-race, her mother was a white Dane and her father was of black or

[11] West, "Jessie Redmon Fauset," 364.
[12] Gilbert and Gubar, 'Ain't I a New Woman?', 126.
[13] Gilbert and Gubar, 126.

Figure 2. Van Vechten, Carl, 1880-1964. Larsen, Nella. Box 96 | Folder 1705. 1932 August 17. https://collections.library.yale.edu/catalog/2001920.

West-Indian mixed-race descent.[14] Her heroines are always light-skinned black or biracial women. Applying an autobiographical lens to her work, however, ignores the social dimensions of her work. Carla Kaplan praises Larsen's writing for its "portrayal of black, female subjectivity

[14] Nella Larsen, *Quicksand: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism.*, ed. Carla Kaplan (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020). x.

and for its depiction of the social and psychological vertigo caused when identity categories break down."[15] The heroines in both *Passing* and *Quicksand* wrestle with their sexual identities, challenge middle-class domesticity and marriage plots, question their relationship to motherhood, and remodel tropes like the tragic mulatta.

While black men during the Harlem Renaissance benefited from Alain Locke's definition of the New Negro and his role within society, black and biracial women could not seek recourse in a canonized non-fiction text that outlined their particular subject position. The writings of black male intelligentsia, such as Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, or Booker T. Washington, participated in defining the black male subject position. Few texts written by women attained the same level of social acclaim. That is not to suggest, however, the complete absence of black feminist writings but rather to highlight how texts specifically outlining black women's sociopolitical subject positions were not widely read. Anna Julia Cooper's writings, specifically her series of essays *A Voice from the South: By a Black Woman of the South* first published in 1892, theorizes black women's particular subject positions.[16] Cooper's text addresses black women's consciousness nearly a decade before Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk* (1901).[17] Her understudied works illustrate what, a century later, scholars would name "triple consciousness." Cooper's works are viewed as some of the first articulations of black feminism, and I position Fauset's and Larsen's fiction as early contributors to this genealogy. Again, there currently lacks

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[15] Nella Larsen, *Passing: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism.*, ed. Carla Kaplan (W. W. Norton & Company, 2007) ix.

[16] I want to thank Professor Camille Owens for introducing Anna Julia Cooper's writings to me and, in turn, greatly enriching this thesis.

[17] Currently, there are no known correspondences between Cooper, Washington, or Du Bois which suggest that the activists were in direct dialogue about their respective ideas before Cooper published *A Voice from the South*. Nonetheless, the activists' writings speak to each other as each meditates on black subjectivity. Cooper and Du Bois did exchange letters from 1923-1932. Anna J. Cooper, *The Portable Anna Julia Cooper*, ed. Shirley Moody-Turner and Henry Louis Gates, Penguin Classics (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2022).

evidence of Cooper engaging in direct communication with Fauset and Larsen, but through the common theme of these women's writings I aim to establish a dialogue of ideas.

Triple consciousness theory (TCT) responds to Du Bois' double consciousness to advocate for how gender factors into questions of existentialism. Du Bois famously argues:

> the Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world,—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others,… One 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.[18]

As Du Bois defines it, "double consciousness" is a double subjective position: the body wars against yet contains through "dogged strength" the irreconcilable twoness of being "an American, a Negro." While Du Bois uses the masculine pronoun because it was the universal referent at the time, a masculine universal referent establishes a gender hierarchy. Nahum N. Welang argues that though Du Bois' adherence to grammar protocols was not intended to supplant the black female perspective, the consequences of employing the masculine pronoun should be emphasized. Du Bois' theory sought to frame the identity of the "Black protestant heterosexual bourgeois male."[19] A black woman experiences a different combination of subjective positions than her male counterpart. Contemporary African American writers, such as Danielle Moodie-Mills and Sara Lomax-Reese, and African Literature and Culture scholars, such as Welang, address the limitations of Du Bois' double consciousness concept by suggesting that black women experience what is imagined as "triple consciousness." Triple consciousness theory

[18] W. E. B. Du Bois, 'Of Our Spiritual Strivings', in *The Souls of Black Folk with 'The Talented Tenth' and 'the Souls of White Folk'* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 7. Emphasis mine.
[19] Nahum N. Welang, *The Affirmative Discomforts of Black Female Authorship: Rethinking Triple Consciousness in Contemporary American Culture* (London: Lexington Books, 2022), 26.

argues that "Black women view themselves through three lenses and not two: Blackness, America, and womanhood."[20] The addition of the lens of womanhood sexualizes and further objectifies the subject. The theory responds to Kimberlé Crenshaw's term, intersectionality. Crenshaw's intersectionality theorizes how multiple factors such as race, class, and gender, overlap to establish oppressed identities; "although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices."[21] Triple consciousness theory specifically seeks draw out intragroup differences between male and female African Americans.

Triple Consciousness Theory was officially coined in the late 2010s, but black female authors adapted Du Bois' double consciousness theory to include gender. Fauset and Larsen amend double consciousness by focusing on the role of appearances. Through their female protagonists' relationship to clothing, Fauset and Larsen explore the possibilities of self-reinvention for the black and biracial woman. Using clothing to cultivate subjectivity stems from understanding of how the clothed body moves through public spaces. J. C. Flügel, an early twentieth-century psychoanalyst, argues that clothes serve three main purposes, decoration, modesty, and protection.[22] Flügel describes protection in a literal sense, from the weather, but Fauset and Larsen depict their protagonists as relying on decoration, the beautifying of bodily

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[20] Welang, 1–2. Welang analyses the work of contemporary artists Roxane Gay, Beyoncé, and Issa Rae to argue that these women use Triple Consciousness Theory (TCT) in a novel manner. He suggests that these artists produce art which is acutely aware of intersectional knowledge systems. Through this awareness, the artists rupture entrenched paradigms of contemporary black identity to explore counternarratives. I argue that Fauset and Larsen illustrate how the black woman navigates the world with triple consciousness at the turn of the twentieth century. The triple consciousness that I am applying is couched in historical understanding and therefore a gendered amendment to Du Bois' double-consciousness. Larsen's and Fauset's particular exploration of Triple Consciousness leans on William James' concept of the "social self." Du Bois' double-consciousness directly responds to James' concept whereas I do not have evidence that either Fauset or Larsen read and applied James to their writing. Nonetheless, Fauset and Larsen explore how gender affects a woman's social selves.

[21] Kimberle Crenshaw, 'Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color', *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1242, https://doi.org/10.2307/1229039.

[22] J.C. Flügel, *The Psychology of Clothes* (1930; Hogarth Press, 1971), 15.

appearance, for *social* protection. The curation of a sartorial second skin permits some of their heroines to interrupt racial judgement by courting the gaze of desire, yet leaves others typecasted and, as Celia Marshik says, at the mercy of their clothes.

Analysing literary depictions of clothing in Fauset's *Plum Bun* and Larsen's *Quicksand*, Elizabeth Way, in "Dressing to Pass During the Harlem Renaissance: Fashion in the novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen" (2020), claims that both authors "mirror the way real black women during the early twentieth century attempted to exercise agency over others' perceptions of them" through their characters' relationships with fashion.[23] Lamm considers how analysing shifts in fashion showcases how visual and material practices intersect with the Harlem Renaissance's goal of curating and promoting the New Negro through art. I argue that Larsen's and Fauset's literary interventions achieve more than realistic reflections. They employ clothing and beauty culture to negotiate between two major emancipatory ideological concepts present within cultural critique at the time: the New Negro and the New Woman. The New Negro asserts his cultural identity, challenges prevailing notions of inferiority, and addresses social discrimination. Though the concept applied to the black community writ large, the New Negro was gendered male. Contrastingly, the New Woman sought to radically redefine feminine subjecthood by rejecting the Victorian concept of the Angel in the House—the homemaker confined to the domestic sphere. She was mobile, an artist figure, and defined her own success. Both ideologies, relatively young during the Harlem Renaissance, participate in curational practices. Larsen's novels underscore the gendered tensions implicit in New Negro discourse, and Fauset's novels reveal the racial constraints in the image of the New Woman, yet both authors participate in the budding endeavour to fabricate a New Negro Woman. For the authors,

[23] Elizabeth Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance: Fashion in the Novels of Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen', *Fashion Theory* 24, no. 4 (6 June 2020): 537, https://doi.org/10.1080/1362704X.2020.1746506.

the New Negro Woman refrains from mindlessly adhering to prevalent ideals of proper womanhood for black and biracial women which promoted wearing modest dress, participating in visible racial uplift, and promoting domesticity. Depicting the crises of style, race, and subjecthood, both authors explore how the self-fashioning woman of colour exposes the ways in which the early-twentieth conception of the New Negro and the New Woman work to deny subjectivity to the woman of colour and subordinate her to both black men and white women, respectively.

My first chapter will survey canonical Harlem Renaissance authors' views on the New Negro and analyse how advertisements in periodicals of the time contributed to the establishment of black beauty standards for women. I will firstly analyse the similarities and differences within the writings of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and Alain Locke, who all respectively theorize the male New Negro, to secondly contrast their claims against Anna Julia Cooper's writings which argues for the black woman's particular subject position. By synthesizing the works of commentators of the early twentieth century, I will establish the aims and cultural milieu of the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset and Larsen respond to the idea of racial or feminist uplift at the cost of a woman of colour's personal identity. Garments worn by black and biracial women, when disconnected from the body, are indistinguishable from garments worn by white women, and such was the case in the 1920s. Black and biracial women were often told, however, that their physical bodies were prettiest when they mirrored white beauty standards, like "soft and manageable" hair.[24] A comparative periodical studies approach, from magazines such as *The Crisis, The Messenger, Vogue,* and *The Ladies' Home Journal,* allows me to consider the implications of how differently magazine advertisements portrayed black women based on their

[24] Jessie Fauset. *There is Confusion.* (1924; New York: Dover Publications, 2020) 62.

target audience. As a resource for fashion, lifestyle, and culture, magazines participated in the construction of beauty standards and the definition of emerging roles for women at the turn of the century.

Working chronologically through the authors' novels to trace the coming into being of the New Negro Woman, my second chapter will investigate Fauset and Larsen's first novels, *There is Confusion* (Fauset 1924) and *Quicksand* (Larsen 1928). The respective heroines, Joanna and Helga, engage with beauty, taste, and fashionable clothing in an attempt to harmonize how they view themselves with how they are perceived, yet they largely fail because they adhere too closely to what I refer to as *models of femininity* defined by New Woman and New Negro discourse. By *models of femininity,* as defined by New Woman and New Negro discourse, I mean to signal how early twentieth century emancipatory discourses respectfully promoted models of womanhood which constrained the black and biracial woman's ability to self-define yet left her largely excluded from either ideology.[25] The protagonists all desire lavish aesthetic experiences but their self-creation is constantly undermined by what Jane Kuenz describes as the "gap between a New Negro ideology of racial uplift and the historical changes in women's roles."[26] By analysing garments and the language of beauty in *There is Confusion* and *Quicksand* I will unpack how Fauset seeks to repudiate white feminist ideals for her black female artist protagonist while Larsen attempts to forge new pathways for her female protagonist beyond the New Negro sociopolitical agenda. Ultimately, *There is Confusion* and *Quicksand* cannot reconcile competing ideologies, but the author's subsequent novels take up the challenge again.

[25] I take inspiration from Ilya Parkin and Elizabeth Sheehan's essay collection *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion* for my term.
[26] Jane Kuenz, 'The Face of America: Performing Race and Nation in Jessie Fauset's There Is Confusion', *The Yale Journal of Criticism* 12, no. 1 (1999): 95, https://doi.org/10.1353/yale.1999.0007.

My third chapter will analyse how the protagonists in *Plum Bun* (Fauset 1929) and *Passing* (Larsen 1929) display *avant la lettre*, what Zora Neal Hurston would theorize in "Characteristics of Negro Expression" (1934) as the "will to adorn." Hurston describes the "will to adorn" as "the second most notable characteristic of Negro expression," and I focus on how Fauset and Larsen depict heroines who ornament their bodies to pass as white women in an attempt to disentangle themselves of sexual and racial oppression to begin acting out their personal desires.[27] The white-passing black or biracial protagonists of these novels are perfect vehicles for moving from rigid *models of femininity* to what I call *styles of femininity* insofar as their outward appearance permits them to slip between black and white communities. My definition of *styles of femininity* relies on Elizabeth Hawes definition of style in *Fashion is Spinach* (1938): style is "the right clothes for your life in your epoch, uncompromisingly, at once."[28] True style requires acute awareness of oneself and the times. Style is the seamless blending of practicality and individuality that compliments the sociopolitical climate. In *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, clothing becomes an extension of self and collapses the subject-object binary. Through their proximity to the body, garments gain a quasi-subject status when worn because appearance is not divorced from the self. As Marshik explains, in this process of signification, an exchange occurs: the wearer's subjecthood partially shifts to the garment as the garment's object-status is thrust upon the wearer.[29] The protagonists knit together *styles of femininity* through clothing in their quest to move past either/or paradigms of identity in search of New Negro

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[27] Zora Neale Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)', in *The New Negro: Readings of Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Gene Andrew and Henry Louis Gates, 2021.
[28] Elizabeth Hawes, *Fashion Is Spinach* (New York: Random House, 1938), 5.
[29] Celia Marshik, *At the Mercy of Their Clothes: Modernism, the Middlebrow, and British Garment Culture* (Columbia University Press, 2016), 14, https://doi.org/10.7312/mars17504.

Womanhood. The sartorial choices of these protagonists are not mere aesthetic decisions; they serve as instruments of agency, enabling them to challenge prevailing norms.

Chapter One – The New Negro and Women's Beauty Culture

Scholars debate the date of the official beginning of the Harlem Renaissance; certain anthologies present 1919 as a defining year, when W.E.B. Du Bois held the first Pan-African congress in Paris, while others point to 1924, when *Opportunity* magazine held a Civic Club Dinner which symbolized the merger of "white publishers and black writers."[30] One thing is certain; by 1925 when Alain Locke publishes his essay collection, *The New Negro*, his introduction describes the New Negro of the 1920s, an antiradical American nationalist.[31] The "New Negro" was an ideological construction. He was more than a simple persona, and one of his central goals was to convert popular stereotypes about black peoples and African Americans from "those based upon absence (of morality, intelligence, and other basic features of humanity) to presence."[32] The Harlem Renaissance and the New Negro, however, were the result of several decades worth of critical discussions about the political role of racial representation. Locke's ahistorical and romanticised New Negro artist figure is positioned against Booker T. Washington's capitalist labourer and W.E.B. Du Bois' university educated political radical. A complete definition of the term New Negro deserves its own study; I will offer a brief overview of a core tenet of the New Negro: black *presence*.

In the decades between Emancipation and the Harlem Renaissance, many social, cultural, economic, and migratory shifts changed the American landscape. Henry Louis Gates and Gene

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[30] Geroge Hutchinson, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007). p. xiii.
[31] Barbara Foley, *Spectres of 1919: Class and Nation in the Making of the New Negro* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010), https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/34/monograph/book/23334.
[32] Emily Bernard, 'The Renaissance and the Vogue', in *The Cambridge Companion to the Harlem Renaissance*, ed. George Hutchinson, 1st ed. (Cambridge University Press, 2007), 29, https://doi.org/10.1017/CCOL052185699X.003.

Andrew Jarrett argue that during the Reconstruction era African Americans strove to symbolically transition from "Old" to "New."[33] The Harlem Renaissance trope of the New Negro sought to firstly contest degrading black stereotypes and secondly position African Americans within U.S. intellectual society, culture, and politics. The need to re-construct or re-present the social and public image of a race stems from the desire to correct and control public opinion and reception. Furthermore, re-presenting sought to claim agency over black subjecthood. Though the image of the New Negro signified "plenitude, regeneration, or a truly reconstructed *presence*" for black intellectuals, the image fought against longstanding racist beliefs which dehumanized African Americans. The topos of the New Negro sought to assert black *presence* to counter the belief of the black as devoid of human characteristics like reason or morality. During the period of time between the Reconstruction and World War II, the New Negro evolved as a concept to defend the racial self. In twenty years prior to the Harlem Renaissance and Locke's artist figure New Negro, the different social climates of the Northern versus the Southern United States affected the manifestation of racial uplift. Booker T. Washington's doctrines and writings came to represent the southern New Negro. Meanwhile, W.E.B. Du Bois' proclamations defined the northern New Negro. Their opposing opinions contributed to the geographical divide.

At the Tuskegee Institute, in September of 1895, Washington delivered what would become one of America's most famous speeches; in it, he outlines his central doctrine: hard labour. Rights and privileges will naturally come to the Negro after he earns a strong economic position in society through work. Economic self-improvement, according to Washington, is quickly achieved through vocational training. Trying to appeal to the masses of his race with his

[33] Gene Andrew Jarrett and Henry Louis Gates, "Introduction," in *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), 1-20. https://muse.jhu.edu/pub/267/edited_volume/book/84088.

speech, Washington relies on the metaphor of a ship lost at sea to deliver his famous phrase "Cast down your buckets where you are." Washington maps an extended ship metaphor onto race relations by explaining "To those of my race who depend on bettering their condition in foreign land or who underestimate the importance of cultivating relations with the Southern white man, who is their next-door neighbour, I would say: "Cast down your bucket where you are"."[34] Metaphorical language is relational; it is an emotional shorthand. An appeal to emotion, however, can camouflage rhetoric. Urging black people to pursue trade jobs, Washington reminds his audience that "the masses of us are to live by the productions of our hands."[35] In the "Atlanta Exposition" speech, the black population is valued so long as the majority subscribe to blue collar jobs and agree to 'work their way up' the social ladder. That is, they are valued so long as they adhere to the racist logos of 'separate but equal'.

Whereas Washington appealed to the masses, Du Bois catered to the elite. Du Bois outlines his bourgeois views in *The Negro Problem* (1903), a collection of essays edited by Washington. "The Talented Tenth," Du Bois' essay included in the collection, asserts "the Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men."[36] To reiterate, the use of the masculine pronoun is to be expected for 1903. However, such language does readily exclude women from the Talented Tenth percent of the race. Du Bois' top-down approach, whereby the top ten percent educate the remaining population, creates a closed system and challenges Washington's claims that African Americans must earn the approval of white society through hard labour, and women remain both linguistically and socially excluded from his system.

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[34] Washington, 19.
[35] Washington, 19.
[36] W.E.B. Du Bois, 'The Talented Tenth', in *The Souls of Black Folk with 'The Talented Tenth' and 'The Souls of White Folk'* (New York, New York: Penguin Books, 2018), 203.

The importance of higher education is a core tenet of Du Bois' and Washington's argument. Du Bois links formal education to moral development: "education is that whole system of human training within and without the schoolhouse walls, which moulds and develops men." [37] It is the simultaneous training of knowledge *and* character of talented men that will generate change within African American communities because a college-bred Negro, according to the statistics Du Bois cites in his essay, takes charge of his environment. Essentially, university training would fill a cultural void caused by slavery. The closed system of college-bred African Americans teaching and training other members of the black community aimed to build a cultural framework for African Americans where they could germinate their thoughts, political ideologies, and social aspirations. Negro people "have no traditions to fall back upon, no long-established customs, no strong family ties, no well-defined social classes" Du Bois argues.[38] University training could equip the New Negro with the necessary knowledge to for him to capitalize on the current social conditions by both preparing him for work and social leadership. The activists' claims that formal and/or moral education would eventually propel the masses was utopic and male centred. Du Bois' proposition that the elite could save the entire race disregards the possibility that the Talented Tenth would merely be perceived as exceptional and therefore not representative of the masses.

Locke moves away from both Washington and Du Bois to capture the New Negro of the Harlem Renaissance. His essay "The New Negro" (1925) responds to several paradigms about how African Americans should advocate for their rights, subjecthood, and citizenship. Foley proposes that Locke uses the concept of the folk as a central conceptual mechanism to "shift the New Negro movement from politics to culture, self-determinationist militancy to quietistic

[37] Du Bois, 215.
[38] Du Bois, 213.

pluralist patriotism."[39] Though Locke differs from both Du Bois and Washington, he adopts more of a Du Boisian approach to defining the New Negro, as evidenced from his drawing on folk origins which echoes Du Bois' use of the term in "The Souls of Black Folk." The notion of folk as a privileged entry point for defining the New Negro aided in establishing the New Negro's Americanism from a less radically political stance.[40] Locke aimed to shift away from capitalist bourgeois frameworks of black leadership to provide the New Negro with greater creative agency over his self-determination. He argues that the black community's artistic endowments, past and prospective, contributed significantly to American life. In 1925, the New Negro is "radical in tone but not in purpose," as evidenced by his contributions to the artistic field rather than directly engaging with the political sphere.[41] By releasing African Americans "from the arid fields of controversy and debate to the productive fields of creative expression, they would, according to Locke, finally be perceived as collaborators and participants of American civilization.[42]

These canonical texts that respectively defined the New Negro of the South, the North, or the Harlem Renaissance present the New Negro as male. Anna Julia Cooper centres women in her writings as she views the elevation of black womanhood as a "vital element in the regeneration and progress of a race."[43] The first half of her collection of essays and speeches, *A Voice from the South*, Cooper boldly implores the (white) American Woman to include black women in their fight for equal rights. Cooper does not shy away from comparing the unfair

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[39] Foley, *Spectres of 1919*, 198.
[40] A Harvard student, Locke's environment led him to meet and befriend Van Wyck Brooks and Horace Kallen; his exposure to William James' pragmatist philosophy and John Dewey's empiricist psychology came to influence his thought. These men's writings moulded the cultural pluralism of several key figures of Locke's generation. Locke's synthesis of ideas in *The New Negro* pulls from multiple sources. See Foley, *Spectres of 1919*, 205.
[41] Alain Locke, "The New Negro," (1925) in *The New Negro, 116*.
[42] Locke, *118*.
[43] Cooper, *The Portable Anna Julia Cooper*, 7.

distribution of white and black women's social liberties. "Some American girls, I noticed recently, in search of novelty and adventure, were taking an extended trip through our country unattended by gentleman friends," she states. Her use of "some," makes clear that the luxuries of movement permitted or taken by white American women do not transfer to the black woman. Cooper elaborates by comparing how train attendants rush to help white women onto the wagons, carry their bags, and show them courtesy, yet the same attendants "deliberately fold their arms and turn round" when a black woman needs assistance.[44] In a poetic declaration, Cooper outlines how black women remain particularly ostracized from society: "The feeling of slighted womanhood is unlike every emotion of the soul."[45] She captures the particularities of black womanhood by outlining how black women are at once at the mercy of men, both white and black, and at the mercy of white womanhood—particularly, white womanhood of the South comprised of the Southern Lady who is "the queen of the drawing room" who keeps black women oppressed despite the growing women's rights movement.[46]

More than call on the white American woman to include and fight for the black woman, Cooper proclaims access to formal education as a key factor in elevating women of colour and by extension, black peoples of America. She introduces the idea of higher, formal education for women by referencing the early nineteenth century book *Shall Women Learn the Alphabet* (1801) by Parisian Silvain Marechal. Marechal believes the education of women should be rendered illegal lest they cease their work in the domestic setting. Cooper mocks the patriarchal idea that the education of women would mean an "end forever to their sewing on buttons and embroidering slippers."[47] Outlining how "religion, science, art, economics, have all needed the

[44] Cooper, 50.
[45] Cooper, 50.
[46] Cooper, 48.
[47] Cooper, 28.

feminine flavor," she affirms that the twentieth century must see "a higher type of civilization attained in the nineteenth" by granting more women access to the same higher education as their male counterparts.[48] Cooper views men and women as complementary parts to a whole. "A nation or a race will degenerate" if both individuals do not share opportunities.[49] When equating women to men, Cooper carves out an individual role for black womanhood within New Negro discourse. The black woman must not serve her fellow black man, but rather, must help the black race in the fight against racism. Black men and women stand as "complements" to each other.[50] Cooper's essays advance a vision of self-determination for the African American woman that writings by black men of the time fail to consider. She highlights how education and social uplift must necessarily undergird the black woman if she is to be seen as an individual in her own right who can participate in improving her community.

A handful of published articles leading up to the Harlem Renaissance also target the New Negro Woman but, unlike Cooper, these fail to vouch for her as an independent subject. In "Rough Sketches: A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman" (1904), written by John H. Adams Jr., an instructor at Morris Brown College in Atlanta, the author recounts seeing a white and a black woman traveling together in a carriage on a central street in Atlanta. He questions if their sharing of a carriage ride is ethical considering that Atlanta is "the worst of Negro-hating cities," and he asks for his companion's, a young nine-year-old black boy, opinion concerning which woman is better looking.[51] After the young boy automatically replies that the coloured woman possesses more beauty, Adams universalizes the boy's answer and tethers black

[48] Cooper, 33.
[49] Cooper, 34.
[50] Cooper, 34.
[51] John H. Adams Jr., 'Rough Sketches: A Study of the Features of the New Negro Woman (1904)', in *The New Negro: Readings of Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*, ed. Gene Andrew and Henry Louis Gates, 1904, 66.

womanhood to the black man's experience of her. He narrates: "[I] caught the gilded thread wire that, from [the young boy's] heart, followed the trail of Negro womanhood into all the ends of the earth… I felt the fast beating of over nine million human hearts, as but the beating of one's woman's heart with all hope seems lost.[52] According to Adams, Negro womanhood bears the burden of racial hopelessness for he equates the one beating heart of a woman to the nine million hearts of African Americans. Furthermore, a gilded string chains Negro womanhood to the hearts of black men which forces womanhood to perpetually respond to black men's desires. The phenomenon of the New Woman does not apply to Negro womanhood as black women are perpetually connected to their African American counterpart. Adams suggests that the black man's role comprises of liberating Negro womanhood from infamy: "Ye gods of the earth! this [sic] woman—mine, whom you have fettered with the chains of caste, …whom you have degraded with the finger of your own lustful body, shall be free."[53] While the black man should strive to free the black woman from the white gaze, he retains ownership of her. Adams universalizes the black man's voice to claim that Negro womanhood will be saved but her freedom is partial at best. Embodying the voice of all black man Adams calls upon the world to look at the black woman as an improved concept—effectively objectifying black women in the name of social recognition. The rough sketch concludes by affirming that the black woman has the physical beauty, the intellectual graces, "the moral stamina, the purity of heart, the loftiness of purpose and the sober consciousness of true womanhood that same as her white or red or olive sisters."[54] Whereas New Negro criticism fought to establish a black male subjecthood, writings

[52] Adams Jr., 66.
[53] Adams Jr., 66.
[54] Adams Jr., 67.

about Negro womanhood address the black woman as deserving of protection from the black man and equal to other women—but she is not described as an independent subject.

Periodicals, whether political or social in nature, afforded both women of colour and white women the literary and visual space somewhat apart from the rigid masculine cast of language found in essay collections and speeches of the era. Magazines are "vectors of pleasure, they encourage the acquisition of knowledge, they may *play an important role in the formation of identity*, they are open to resistant readings, *they easily encompass and incorporate flexible and varying conditions of consumption and production*, and they *form a readily accessible community focus*" claims Tom Holmes when discusses the role of magazines in culture.[55] The early twentieth century saw "the creation and rapid expansion of the field of feminist journalism" in the anglophone world.[56] Several periodicals made up the Harlem Renaissance literary landscape: *Black Opals, Fire!!, Saturday Evening Quill, Palms, Challenge, The Messenger,* and most famous, *The Crisis* and *Opportunity.* Women, like Fauset, not only participated in editing and producing these periodicals during the movement, but they obviously consumed the information and advertisements promoted. Jayne Marek proclaims, "the women and the small magazines often set the tone for the era's progressive aesthetics."[57] Though, the print world was just as fraught with prejudice as the sociopolitical climate of America. Both magazines with women of colour readership and magazines with a white woman audience reflect the anxiety over gender roles, debates about women's position in public life, and the emblematic New Woman.[58] By analysing advertisements in popular, large print magazines, like *Vogue*, I aim to

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[55] Tim Holmes, 'Mapping the Magazine: An Introduction', *Journalism Studies* 8, no. 4 (1 August 2007): 510, https://doi.org/10.1080/14616700701411714. emphasis mine.
[56] Barbara Green, 'The Feminist Periodical Press: Women, Periodical Studies, and Modernity', *Literature Compass* 6, no. 1 (2009): 191, https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2008.00595.x.
[57] Jayne Marek, 'Women Editors and Little Magazines in the Harlem Renaissance', in *Little Magazines & Modernism* (Routledge, 2007), 106.
[58] Marek, 107.

trace the manifestations for and against the New Woman. My analysis of advertisements in *The Crisis* and *The Messenger,* provides a framework of the literary landscape Fauset and Larsen participated in and consumed. Furthermore, comparing these magazine advertisements grants insight into how notions of white and black womanhood responded to each other.

The magazine advertisement was a fruitful terrain for debating the femininity of the New Woman. The New Woman sought to assert of her subjecthood by pushing beyond the domestic sphere and establishing herself in the public eye. She asserted her independence by breaking boundaries. A defining trait of the New Woman was her ability to *move*. The bicycle craze that swept across America and Europe in the 1890s gave women literal and social mobility. Women learning how to cycle had significant impact on the Victorian dress reform, also known as the "rational dress movement." Dress reformers rejected the previous fashions of large crinolines, cumbersome bustles, and tight-laced corsets. Magazines, such as *The Ladies' Home Journal*, advertised the "Bicycle Waist" corset, as seen in Figure 1, which was only the undergarment portion of the "Bicycle Suit."[59] A complete "Bicycle Suit" included bloomers with an adjustable waist. The "bicycle waist' corset advertises that the wearer will get a "sound pair of lungs," meaning that a woman's capacity for drawing a full breath will not be compromised as with regular corsets which constrict the torso. "Graceful as the New Woman," some of the boldest type on the image, signals that the advertisement was countering the widespread disparaging ideas of the New Woman as masculine and disruptive. With this 'graceful' corset, femininity need not be sacrificed for mobility as the garment promises to, in its very construction, account for New Woman's movement. Though the Victorian dress reform failed to establish widespread

[59] Figure 1, "Graceful New Woman" advertisement, in The Ladies' Home Journal, vol. 13, no. 6, May 1896, pg. 31. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015012341619?urlappend=%3Bseq=239%3Bownerid=102452122-238

Figure 1. "Graceful New Woman" advertisement, in The Ladies' Home Journal, vol. 13, no. 6, May 1896, pg. 31. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015012341619?urlappend=%3Bseq=239%3Bownerid=102452122-238

change in women's fashions, social, political, and cultural shifts of the early twentieth century — like the women's suffrage movement and World War I—engendered radical changes in women's dress. World War I impacted the definition of the New Woman insofar as women entered the workforce and began to gain a certain financial independence. In terms of fashion, skirts became shorter as fabric was rationed. The sartorial changes of World War I combined with the first wave feminism of the women's suffrage movement contributed to the 1920s flapper girl aesthetic—a

revolutionary moment in women's fashion. A flapper dress was short; it had a dropped-waist and a straight silhouette. As a garment, it departed both in appearance and construction from women's fashion of the previous centuries. It permitted the most movement, as it freed the legs entirely. Moreover, most women wore no corset underneath, instead opting for a brassiere. Multiple advertisements promoted the flapper dress. In a 1927 December issue of *Vogue*, the magazine broadcasts a list of shops across the United States which hold fashionable flapper dresses for 25$, see Figure 2.

While the advertisements in magazines catering to a white female audience do not necessarily attribute independent subjecthood to women, they do participate via clothing in larger cultural debates about the visual qualities of the independent woman. As S. Rolland Hall states in *The Advertising Handbook* (1921), "commercially, advertising is a form of selling, and yet advertising is used extensively to forward or promote movements in which nothing is for sale."[60] Both the "Bicycle Waist" corset and the flapper dress advertisements disseminate information about the rifts in the definition of white womanhood. As white women established a new social status through political involvement, magazines and businesses responded to the commercial demand for sartorial manifestations of that change.

Black periodicals of the Harlem Renaissance differed from *The Ladies' Home Journal* or *Vogue* insofar as the primary goal of magazines like *The Crisis* and *The Messenger*, both catering to the black community, revolved around developing an authentic voice for black citizens of

[60] S. Rolland Hall, *The Advertising Handbook; a Reference Work Covering the Principles and Practices of Advertising* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company Inc., 1921), 1, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc2.ark:/13960/t6zw1ch4p.

Figure 2, "Advertisement." *Vogue,* Dec 15, 1927, https://proxy.library.mcgill.ca/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/magazines/advertisement/docview/904318239/se-2.

America. *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* allot the majority of their advertisement section to black businesses, black colleges, and black services; their beauty advertisements mostly forgo selling fashion trends to privilege products for racialized skin and hair. Founded in 1910 by W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Crisis* published articles about racial justice. Its tagline, "A Record of the Darker Races," underscores how the magazine is at once a racial progress tool as well as a kind of archival system documenting black life. *The Messenger* was co-founded by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph in 1917. It, too, served as a political and literary platform promoting African American talent. These magazines stray from incorporating advertisements alongside the strictly

literary components. Advertisements are sectioned off to bookend the issue. This sectioning of material hierarchizes information. Colleges for African Americans are promoted after the cover page. Content follows. Beauty advertisements are found in the last pages often after job postings, services, and businesses. Clearly, beauty and women's fashion trends were regarded as perhaps too frivolous to merit prime locations within the magazine. Men's suits occasionally feature throughout both magazines but there is scant content on women's dress.

Beauty advertisements for women in black periodicals addressed racial discrimination by endorsing products which simultaneously responded to and challenged Eurocentric beauty standards. Sheehan, who theorizes about the 'great work of the creation of beauty' during the Harlem Renaissance, unpacks the language of an East India Hair Grower ad in *The Crisis* to underscore how advertisements presented beauty as "not (or not only) something one might naturally possess for others' benefit, but also a commodity, method, and tool."[61] Much like the "Bicycle waist" corset was more than a simple garment—it promised to move with women—black periodicals sold 'beauty' as a method for gaining respectability. Most beauty advertisements pertain to grooming products which speaks to the hair discrimination African Americans faced. Madam C. J. Walker's preparations for skin and hair dominate the beauty advertising scene in *The Crisis* and *The Messenger* before and during the Harlem Renaissance. Promising hair growth, improved complexion, and shiny locks, Walker's superfine preparations are marketed as "towering far above "average" toilet preparations." Multiple advertisements promise smooth, lustrous hair. This higher valuation placed on straight hair is historically embedded; light-skinned black women with straight hair fetched more money as slaves during

[61] Elizabeth M Sheehan, '3. "This Great Work of the Creation of Beauty": W. E. B. Du Bois, Black Internationalism, and Beauty Culture', in *Modernism a La Mode: Fashion and the Ends of Literature* (Cornell University Press, 2018), 120–21.

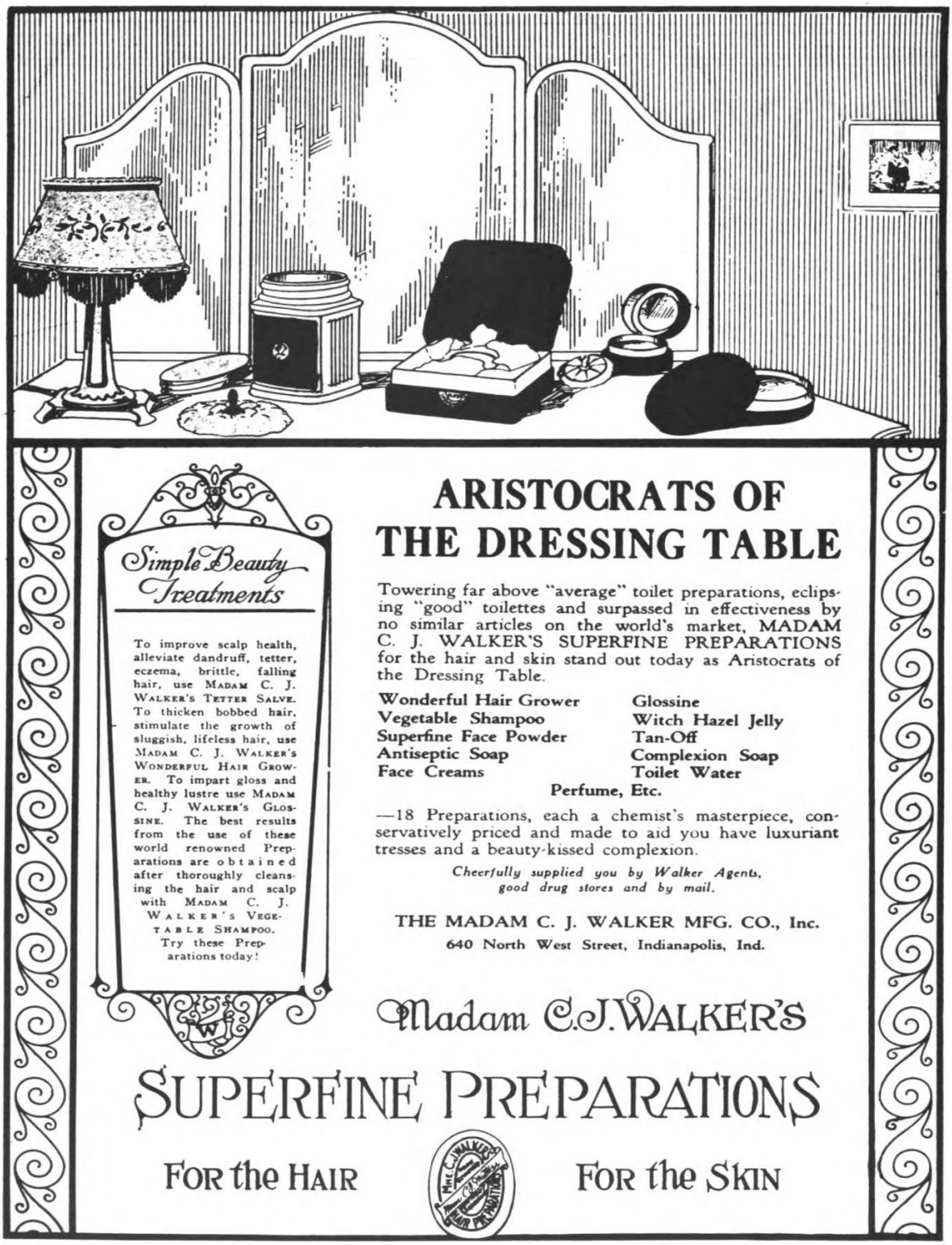

Figure 3. Madam C. J. Walker" in *The Messenger*, vol. 7, no. 2, February 1925, 116.
https://hdl.handle.net/2027/inu.30000117880777?urlappend=%3Bseq=124%3Bownerid=13510798899945108-128

the slave trade than others.[62] The legacy of prizing Eurocentric hair manifested in the 1920s where straight, silky hair afforded greater social mobility. In promoting hair similar to that of white European descendants, African American women responded to the racism embedded within the beauty standards of the day, but selling these products as a brand representative gave young black women the opportunity to enter into the financial middle class. Madam C. J. Walker opened the market for African American hair care products, and a small portion of the beauty industry started catering to black women. For example, certain companies like Crisis-Maid, sold tinted face powders that did not leave black women with an ashy complexion. While a minor adjustment for the cosmetics market, these tinted powders complemented black skin and champion an appreciation for a variety of skin tones.

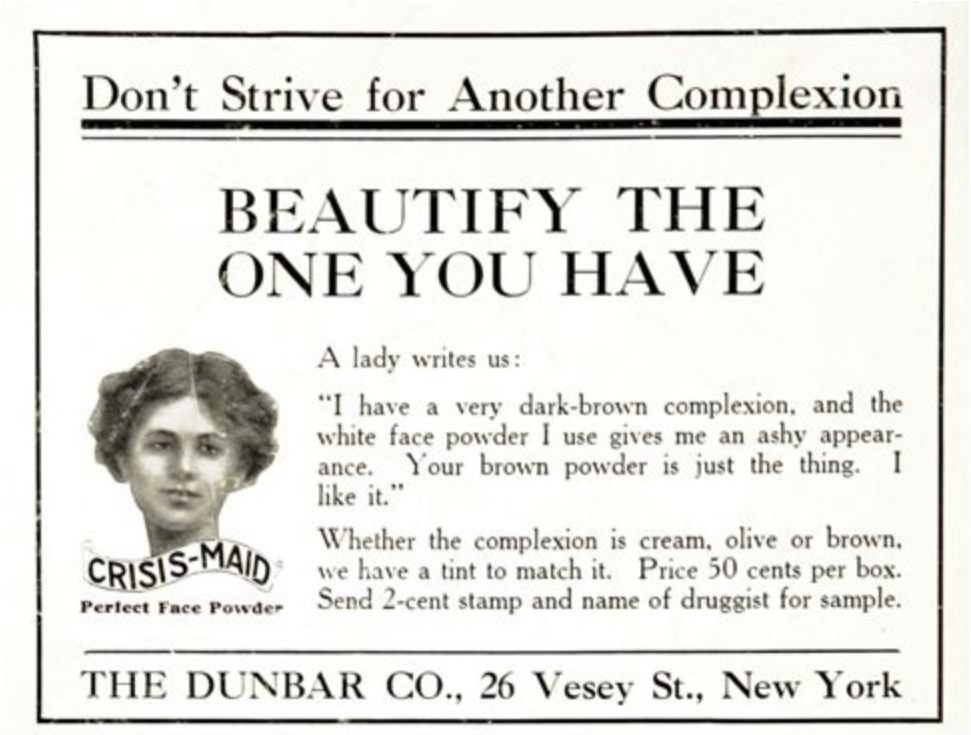

Figure 4. "Don't Strive for Another Complexion," in *The Crisis*, vol. 5, no. 5, March 1913, 260.

[62] Majali, Zukiswa, Jan K. Coetzee, and Asta Rau. "Everyday hair discourses of African Black women." *Qualitative Sociology Review* 13, no. 1 (2017): 158-172.

In essence, while the concept of the New Negro provided a framework for challenging stereotypes and asserting black presence in American society, it predominantly centred on the experiences and aspirations of African American men; the New Negro Woman, meanwhile, faced distinct limitations that were often overlooked by the broader discourse of the Harlem Renaissance and first wave feminism. As these movements progressed, it became increasingly important to address the unique struggles and aspirations of African American women in their pursuit of empowerment, public persona, and subjective identity. Fauset and Larsen's novels participate in a budding black feminist genealogy by exploring how the racialized body fashions itself; their works fill a sartorial gap for black women of the early twentieth century. In the struggle for racial justice, the reporting and promotion of fashion trends for women in black magazines was not prioritized. Nevertheless, how a New Negro Woman presents herself as a whole—her skin, her hair, and her clothes—affects how she chooses to and is permitted to move through the public sphere.

Chapter 2 – *Models of Femininity*: The impossibility of synthesis in *There is Confusion* and *Quicksand*

As Jessie Redmon Fauset and Nella Larsen explore the limiting roles of women in their cultural contexts and the departures from those roles, they use clothing, accessories, beauty standards, and the language of dress, as vehicles for expressing the desire for alternative life paths. Velvets, laces, silks, beads, feathers, and brocades, far from frivolous, participate in the assemblage of identity for the respective heroines of the authors' first novels, Joanna in *There is Confusion* (Fauset, 1924) and Helga in *Quicksand* (Larsen, 1928). Joanna, a black woman, and Helga, a biracial woman, rely on dress to fashion their idealized womanhood. While Fauset questions if the New Woman's artistic freedom can account for the black female artist in a racist society, Larsen satirizes the idea that New Negro discourse considers the black and biracial woman as an individual. Although different in their approaches, Fauset and Larsen both respond to gendered expectations and notions of race circulating within early twentieth century culture; when the authors exploit literary depictions of clothing and costumes, and the general vocabulary of dress to "analyze the grammar of selfhood," they illuminate the acute intersectionality of gender and race.[63]

In the beginning of both novels, the protagonists' illusions are that they can effectively create new *models of femininity* through conscious arrangement of appearance. The opening scene of *There is Confusion* narrates Joanna Marshall's "first consciousness of the close understanding" between herself and her father—at age five she vowed to become "somebody

[63] Gilbert and Gubar, 'Ain't I a New Woman?', 147.

great."[64] A gifted singer and dancer propelled by her artistic ambition to become a famous performer, Joanna dismisses domestic proclivities and does not rush to marry her high school sweetheart, Peter Bye. Marriage to her is synonymous with the end of her career. Though she initially believes racial prejudice to be "an awful nuisance," which a combination of inner drive and a curated exterior can alter, through a series of racist incidents, she comes to view racial prejudice as a legitimate menace.[65] Rejected by multiple managers on account of her race, Joanna finally lands a leading role, by chance, after the white dancer, Miss Ashby, resigns because she refuses to work alongside a black woman. Miss Ashby's departure means Joanna dances every part in "Dance of the Nations" at the District Line theatre in New York—that is, "Black America," "Indian America," and "White America" (with a mask because of her dark skin). An encored Joanna pulls off her mask to reveal her identity to the audience, who respond well to her speech about American nationalist pride, but Fauset presents this 'unmasking' as a turning point for Joanna—her success relies on a self-effacing costume. Her project of advancing her self as female artist cannot coalesce the advancement of black women across America; it is only as a masked performer in large cities, like New York, that she will likely be admitted as a *premiere danseuse*. Fauset asserts that the feminine independence of the New Woman artist cannot extend to the black female body. After Joanna realizes that her acceptance as an artist will forever be conditional, she reorients her goals. Now wanting to become a successful wife and mother, she marries Peter and the two settle into a house on 138th street, New York.

Similar to Joanna, Helga Crane in *Quicksand* believes that the "most delightful manifestations [of race], love of color, joy of rhythmic motion" should not be suppressed.[66]

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[64] Jessie Redmon Fauset, *There Is Confusion* (New York, UNITED STATES: Boni & Liveright, Inc., 1924), 9, https://hdl.handle.net/2027/miun.abr7583.0001.001.
[65] Fauset, 98.
[66] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 21.

Helga, a young, educated, and attractive woman of mixed racial heritage, adores beauty.[67] The story begins with her dissatisfaction as a teacher at Naxos, a prestigious black school in the American South. Feeling alienated by the school's rigid atmosphere and its pandering to white expectations of sober appearance for black people, Helga resigns and moves to Chicago to live with her white uncle, who ultimately rejects her due to her race. She then travels to Harlem, where she immerses herself in the vibrant black cultural scene and briefly finds a sense of community. However, she soon becomes disappointed by the social pretensions and underlying racial hypocrisies—notably the hatred of miscegenation. Seeking a new start, Helga moves to Denmark to live with her white aunt and uncle, who welcome her only to exoticize her through dress, making her feel like a spectacle rather than a family member. Though initially captivated by the beauty and acceptance she experiences, Helga grows increasingly uncomfortable with the fetishization of her racial identity. She rejects a wealthy artist's marriage proposal because of his racist beliefs. Longing for a true sense of belonging, Helga returns to Harlem, where she impulsively becomes a pastor's wife and moves with him to rural Alabama. There, Helga becomes a mother to multiple children, and her initial fervour for religion fades. She finds herself trapped in an oppressive cycle of childbirth and domestic drudgery, which reflects her entrapment by the incongruency between societal expectations of coloured women and her own desires.

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[67] It is important to note, that while Helga is of mixed-race, with a white Danish mother and a black American father, her "yellow skin" visually marks her as a light-skinned black woman, and she is received as such throughout the novel. Unlike Larsen's later character in *Passing*, Clare, who is of mixed race and passes for white, Helga's skin colour prevents her from passing as a white woman. Even Irene, another main character in *Passing*, who is not described as mixed-race, can pass for white when she is not with her family, her dark-skinned husband and children. She claims that people mistake her for "an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy" (11). Larsen is extremely deliberate with her selection of skin tones for her characters, and for this reason, while I recognize that Helga is a biracial woman who is rejected or fetishized by her white family and "reads" as a black woman when in Naxos, Chicago, Copenhagen, and Harlem. I will not be analysing her character through the "tragic mulatta" lens. Although, other scholars have taken up that analysis. Refer to Cherene Sherrard-Johnson. '"A Plea for Color": Nella Larsen's Iconography of the Mulatta'. *American Literature* 76, no. 4 (2004): 833–69.

Through the multiple literary depictions of clothing and, more broadly, the heroines' relationship with beauty standards, Fauset and Larsen meditate on the woman of colour's possessions alongside how she is *an object to be possessed*. They shift the focus of desire. Larsen especially investigates the black woman's psyche via her love of material objects. Helga is most devoted to her appearance. Fauset, however, spends much time portraying Joanna as apart from her black peers—both physically through dress and mentally in her artistic ambitions—only to reorient her protagonist's dedication to performing in the concluding chapters. Yet, Helga and Joanna rely on their love for beautiful clothing and objects to communicate their desire for immaterial things: sexual freedom, mobility, and fame. In her analysis of desire in Larsen's first novel, duCille argues that "clothes function semiotically as sexual and racial signifiers."[68] On the tendency to analyse objects, especially clothing, through semiotics, Daniel Miller disagrees. Claiming that clothing is a pseudo-language which expresses the wearer's identity to the world, he explains, begs the question: what and where is the authentic self? Miller seeks to repudiate the semiotic approach to clothing because "the problem with viewing clothing as the surface that represents, or fails to represent, the inner core of true being is that we are inclined to consider people who take clothes seriously as themselves superficial."[69] Such is the case with both Joanna and Helga; the heroines' black fashioned bodies, their surfaces, are continuously misread by the people around them which results in their feelings of alienation. Joanna and Helga question what and where is the authentic self by attempting to synthesize multiple gazes—their own and the gazes of the black and white community.

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[68] Ann duCille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (Cary, United States: Oxford University Press, 1993), 94, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=272860.
[69] Daniel Miller, *Stuff* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2010), 15.

It is precisely the failure of the pseudo-language of clothing to communicate a desired, idealized identity which drives the plots of *There is Confusion* and *Quicksand*. In their second novels, the authors push beyond the boundaries of clothing as semiotics to inquire how the New Negro Woman can begin to hone her particular subjectivist position by ornamenting her body to warp the gaze. In the subsequent novels I will analyse, the boundary between surface and interior breaks down because of the protagonists' deliberate ornamentation. In the novels analysed in this chapter, the protagonists' sartorial strategies never manage to control reception. Therefore, I agree with duCille's claim concerning the function of clothing. Joanna and Helga never gain purchase on how their appearances are seen. Rather, their clothes speak for them and, at times, provoke unwelcome perception. Responding to her argument and building upon it to include Fauset's *There is Confusion*, I argue that through Joanna and Helga's respective relationships to outward appearances "function semiotically as sexual and racial signifiers" that repeatedly leave the heroines at the mercy of established *models of femininity*, as depicted via literary depictions of fashion and the language of dress. I define *models of femininity* in response to Ilya Parkins and Elizabeth Sheehan's definition of femininity in *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion*. Femininity for Parkins and Sheehan

> can be understood as ideological in the purest sense; the meanings and practices associated with it are so pervasive that they gain the status of social truth and, more importantly, are seen as residing in the biology of female-bodied people…. Femininity is an embodied orientation as much as it is a discursive construct; it is sustained as a social category.[70]

Parkins and Sheehan underscore how femininity is at once metaphysical yet also embodied. Fashion showcases this tension. How Joanna and Helga dress or are dressed leaves them trapped

[70] Ilya Parkins, Elizabeth M. Sheehan, and Rita Felski, *Cultures of Femininity in Modern Fashion* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2012), 3-4, https://muse-jhu-edu.proxy3.library.mcgill.ca/pub/217/monograph/book/23421.

by New Negro and New Woman discourse, and, more importantly, the visual politics of those roles—the dress codes of these femininities.

The novels' interest in the evolution of the relationship between fashion and questing female protagonists mirrors the tension between their overarching genres: the romance and the female *bildungsroman*.[71] A tenet of feminist reworkings of the *bildungsroman* genre by women writers consists of rejecting the conventional ending of marriage in which the union is a metaphor for the "social contract" between individual and world; Fauset and Larsen, however, marry off their respective protagonists.[72] Their use of the *coupling convention*, to apply Ann duCille's term, solidifies the link between the romance and feminine *bildung*. Fauset and Larsen make unconventional use of the conventional romance to explore, as duCille claims, "not only the so-called more compelling questions of race, racism, and racial identity but complex questions of sexuality and female subjectivity as well."[73] Especially for Fauset, several scholars, like McDowell, Miller, duCille, and Kuenz, stress the romance or sentimental genre present in her novels. While Fauset and Larsen make use of the romance plot, reading their novels as a blend of romance and *female* bildungsroman nuances the respective conclusions. Fauset and Larsen They challenge the idea that an African American woman's efforts for racial uplift must be circumscribed to the home, to nurturing the collective rather than her own individuality.

The arc of the female *bildungsroman* differs from the classical coming-of-age journey which features a male protagonist because the latter is "based on the assumption of the male self

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[71] Concerning *There is Confusion*, I argue that Joanna's narrative falls within the female *bildungsroman* and romance genres, while the narratives of Philip Marshall and Peter Bye follow the traditional *bildungsroman*. The fourth narrative, that of Maggie Ellersley, is also a female *bildungsroman*, but for the purposes of this chapter and its goal to read *There is Confusion* alongside *Quicksand*, I will focus mainly on Joanna's storyline.
[72] Maroula Joannou, 'The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century', in *A History of the Bildungsroman*, ed. Sarah Graham (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 200, https://doi.org/10.1017/9781316479926.009.
[73] duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 4.

as the universal self."[74] A novel depicting a young woman's coming-of-age must contemplate the ways in which its protagonist *is permitted to* venture forth. As Maroula Joannou explains in "The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century," the rites of passage of womanhood do not correspond to the rites of passage a male protagonist undertakes in a story of adventure. Joannou rejects Joseph Cambell's formula for the hero of male adventure, "*separation – initiation – return*," since a woman's quest for her identity is hyper focused on an interior transformation. Whereas male protagonists participate in a physical journey in a 'voyage out', female protagonists undertake a psychological journey through a 'voyage in'.[75] The protagonists of *There is Confusion* and *Quicksand* certainly travel, but the narratives revolve around both their perception of self and their understanding of how others perceive them across these various spaces. Their movement, and sometimes only their desire for movement, is constantly infringed upon by racist ideologies. Rather than chiding Fauset or Larsen for their portrayal of feminist dilemmas—McDowell famously describes Fauset's depiction of feminist issues in *There is Confusion* as "patent ambivalence"—I argue that in teasing out the relations between the romance and female *bildung* the authors permit their protagonists to understand potential realities rather than passively capitulating to societal expectations.

Fashion is central to each heroine's pursuit of authentic self-definition. I read Joanna and Helga as endeavouring to materialize their ideal selves through dress. To clarify, by dress, I mean literal clothing, but also the broader field of fashion concerning accessories, hair, and make-up; multiple objects participate in the subject formation of these protagonists. Analysing clothing in

[74] Joannou, 'The Female Bildungsroman in the Twentieth Century', 202.
[75] Joannou accredits the groundbreaking collection of essays by Elizabeth Abel, Marrianne Hirsch, and Elizabeth Langland titled *The Voyage In: fictions of Female Development* (1983) for emphasizing how the differences between the life experiences of women and men affect a woman's journey of self-discovery. These scholars argue that a woman's journey of self-discovery is mainly comprised of an interior journey.

British modernist middle-brow literature, Celia Marshik investigates how the fancy-dress costume "proffers access to idealized subjectivities assembled through the cooperation of persons and things."[76] The OED defines fancy-dress loosely: "a costume arranged to a wearer's fancy."[77] Marshik refines this definition by clarifying that the fancy-dress costume was not worn as a genuine disguise. In the early twentieth century, fancy-dress was "intended to catch the eye and to encourage audiences to view the self differently without, generally, obscuring identity."[78] Normally worn by members of the middle and upper classes, the fancy-dress costume emerged as "the supreme sartorial form for projecting an idealized self"[79] because the wearer could temporarily infuse their appearance "with historical, artistic, or creative properties" of their choosing.[80] Marshik reads across a range of canonical modernist middlebrow British texts to argue for the dynamism of clothing; I adapt her definition of fancy-dress to Fauset and Larsen's first novels. In the protagonists' mutual desire to be seen as *more than*—more than a wife, a mother, a working-class woman, an exotic performer, and certainly, more than their skin colour—Helga and Joanna navigate quotidian fashion in the spirit of fancy-dress. That is, unlike the protagonists of *Passing* and *Plum Bun*, they do not seek to deny their black heritage, but they certainly strive to alter how both black and white society views them. In *Quicksand* and *There is confusion*, Fauset and Larsen contrast their heroines' own understanding of fashion as akin to fancy dress with how society fails to see beyond the surface of these women's appearance. Helga and Joanna rely on fancy-dress to complicate how they are perceived but are nonetheless exoticized and objectified. Reading the heroines' sartorial-curation as fancy-dress illuminates the

[76] Marshik, *At the Mercy of Their Clothes*, 103.
[77] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "fancy dress (*n.*)," July 2023, https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/9891990697.
[78] Marshik, *At the Mercy of Their Clothes*, 103–4.
[79] Marshik, 105.
[80] Marshik, 103.

ways in which Fauset and Larsen toy with the tension between self and surface. Fancy-dress for these heroines becomes a silent actant that can "create opportunities, and make itself available to multiple interpretations."[81] As an actant, fancy dress "holds out and withholds the possibility that one can be what one wears."[82] Either outcome is possible if one dresses or fails to dress the part. Helga and Joanna turn to sartorial self-fashioning in a quest to challenge the confining roles ascribed to them within New Negro and New Woman discourse. They attempt to find a public sphere where they can assert a form of independent female subjectivity.

An Obsession with Distinction: Joanna Marshall in *There is Confusion*

"The novel that the Negro intelligentsia have been clamouring for has arrived with Jessie Fauset's first novel, 'There is Confusion,'" announced Alain Locke in 1924.[83] Published by Horace Liveright at the firm of Boni and Liveright in the United States, publisher of Pound, Eliot, H.D., and Faulkner, the novel received quite favourable reviews.[84] Commenting on Fauset's later reception, Jane Kuenz refutes several contemporary scholars' claims that Fauset's work subscribes to a "white" aesthetic as William Stanley Braithwaite invoked when he, in 1934, called Fauset the "potential Jane Austen of Negro literature."[85] Summarizing the complaints against Fauset, Kuenz identifies two central tenets: Fauset's novels are accused of lacking black content because of their perceived focus on the black middle-class and their supposed genre[s], "melodramatic family romances."[86] Robert Bone infamously reduces Fauset's final novel, *The Chinaberry Tree* (1932), to a story "about the first colored woman in New Jersey to wear

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[81] Marshik, 26.
[82] Marshik, 103.
[83] W. E. B. Du Bois and Alain Locke, "The Younger Literary Movement," *The Crisis* 27 (1924): 162.
[84] Wedin, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*, 70–71.
[85] William Stanly Braithwaite, "The Novels of Jessie Fauset," *Opportunity*, 12:1 (1934) 28.
[86] Kuenz, 'The Face of America', 90. Kuenz notes how the compared analysis of Fauset and Larsen's work oft discredits Fauset in favor of Larsen's representation of the New Negro woman. My comparison serves to highlight how both authors explore New Negro Womanhood. While Fauset's first novel certainly pales in comparison to Larsen's Quicksand, Fauset's overall literary finesse deserve as much, if not more, praise than that of Larsen.

lounging pajamas." Such critiques fail to properly analyse the range of both content and form across Fauset's novels—and the revolutionary nature of lounging pyjamas for women. Moreover, these claims implicitly argue for what Fauset tried ardently to move beyond: the idea that there exists a "kind of racial authenticity that can be or should be evidenced in choices regarding aesthetic form and content."[87] The hyper fixation on Fauset's interaction with racial discourse of the Harlem Renaissance overshadows her illumination of the intersectionality of race and gender. Fauset does not subscribe to a white aesthetic. Rather, she straddles the Harlem Renaissance and feminist canons of the early twentieth century. In doing so, she highlights the black woman's particular feminist struggles.

Fauset's works deserve greater scholarly attention even if one need not look far to recognize the weaknesses in the execution of her first book, as Carolin Wedin notes. **"***There is Confusion* bursts at the seams with characters, which although is not a fault in and of itself, Fauset fails to properly develop all the characters as full people in their respective social ranges. Regardless, there remain important explorations within the book's content and form. Most notable is "the influence of history, of heredity, or environment and the possibility of free will; life as a corrective for obsessions, … the limiting roles of women and departures from those roles."[88] The attention devoted to people's clothing, especially those of female characters, in *There is Confusion* contrasts with the abstract summary. Adjectives coagulate around descriptions of appearances. Wedin argues how the "preciseness in external description is only infrequently used to reveal the inner workings of Fauset's characters," to with which I must disagree.[89] Consider, when young Peter Bye first sees Joanna in grade school:

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[87] Kuenz, 90.
[88] Wedin, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*, 141.
[89] Wedin, 143.

> And though at the time Joanna was rather plain, she already had an air. Everything about her was of an exquisite perfection. Her hair was brushed till it shown, her skin glowed not only with health but obviously with cleanliness, her shoes were brown and shiny with perfectly level heels. She wore that first week a very fine soft sage-green middy suit with a wide buff tie. The nails which finished off the rather square-tipped fingers of her small square hands, were even and rounded and shining. Peter had seen little girls with this perfection and assurance on Chestnut Street in Philadelphia and on Fifth Avenue in New York, but they had been white.[90]

The narrator weaves between describing Peter's first impressions and Joanna's appearance with the remarks outlining Joanna's psychology through her exterior. Carefully groomed with her only accessory being the shine of both her body—hair, skin and fingernails—and her garments—shoes—Joanna uses clothing, her matching set and tie, to express her investment in fulfilling her promise to become "somebody great."[91] Though the only coloured girl in the room, it is her curated appearance rather than her natural beauty which makes her stand out. Her attire is calculated. Peter, starstruck, responds to her by linking her "perfection and assurance" to that of urban white girls. That is not to say that he mistakes her for white, as audience members at Joanna's dance show will later do in the novel, but his associating of Joanna's overall air to the appearance of white women signals a disjunction between self and surface. The moment reveals how Joanna's commitment to forging a new identity for black women through fancy dress leaves her vulnerable to being misread.

Joanna's attempt to fashion a surface which reflects her inner desire for artistic greatness yet remains harmonious with her racialized body leaves her vulnerable to ostracization by the black community and rejection from her white audiences. Joanna, previously described as someone who possesses a "variety of honesty which [makes] her hesitate and even dislike to do or adopt anything artificial, no matter how much it would improve her [plain] general

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[90] Fauset, *There Is Confusion*, 31.
[91] Fauset, 9.

appearance," her dress code for success signals her understanding that appearances matter.[92] By having Joanna refuse to straighten her hair, Fauset highlights the incongruencies in New Negro women's beauty standards which promote Eurocentric ideals. Joanna's idea of a 'race woman' embraces natural hair, and why should 'race women' cater to Eurocentric ideals? Even as a young girl, Joanna vows to become a "great" artist to combat racist prejudice which in fact aligns her with the New Negro cause. Lacking knowledge of "great" black female artist role models, she adopts the sartorial codes of white women.[93] In the spirit of fancy dress, she tries to refashion the visual expectations of 'race women' but a 'race woman', as Helga in *Quicksand* is incessantly reminded, prizes modesty, sober neutral colours, cleanliness, and, recalling Madam C.J. Walker's hair products, 'aristocratic' hair.[94] Joanna contrasts with Maggie and Sylvia, other prominent characters in the novel, who partake in beauty regimes, dream of marriage, devote themselves to rearing children and supporting their husbands. Joanna delays marrying Peter by demanding that the two first find success in their respective fields, her as a performer and him as a surgeon. In wanting to control her outward perception and reception, however, Joanna embodies a defining trait of the New Woman *model of femininity*. Unlike the True Woman, defined by "four cardinal values—piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity," the New Woman embraced public presence.[95]

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[92] Fauset, 15.
[93] Published in 1924, *There is Confusion* came out before Josephine Baker introduced her famous banana skirt into her Parisian shows. She debuted the outfit in 1926. Baker, however, was certainly a rising start when Fauset published her first novel. She had already appeared in the Broadway shows *Shuffle Along* (1922) and *The Chocolate Dandies* (1924). Considering the timeline of the novel, Joanna could have encountered Baker at the early start of both their careers. There are no explicit references to Baker in *There is Confusion*, and Joanna certainly does not hypersexualize herself through her singing and dancing as Baker choose to do.
[94] Refer to the Madam C. J. Walker advertisement in chapter 1, p. 33.
[95] Barbara Welter, 'The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860', *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2 (1966): 152, https://doi.org/10.2307/2711179.

As much as Joanna's refusal to adhere to established sartorial and beauty codes for women of colour in the opening chapters aligns her with the rebellious feminist attitude of New Womanhood, her later relationship to clothing signals her shift towards nurturing the collective through racial uplift. Fauset has Joanna exclaim "I can't be like those wonderful women, Harriet and Sojourner, but at least I won't be ordinary."[96] Once an established but not yet famous performer wearing beautiful gowns designed by her sister, Joanna envisions her dresses as altering respectability politics in New Negro discourse: "Through me [Sylvia] certainly is teaching these coloured people how to dress. We will not wear these conventional colors—grays, taupe, beige…. colored people need color, life, vividness."[97] I read Fauset as trying to establish a New Negro Woman's role within racial uplift discourse that does not confine her to reinventing "the masculinity of black men"—Gilbert and Gubar claim that Fauset's novels implore black women to renounce the feminism of the New Woman, whereas I claim her novels offer more nuance.[98] Marriage and a career ultimately cannot be reconciled in *There is Confusion*; nonetheless, Fauset introduces possibilities for "women that lie outside of traditional home and hearth" in her later novels. [99]

Before Joanna chooses to become a 'race' woman devoted to her husband and children, she experiences fame. Racial discrimination and "gender conventions" undermine Joanna's professional plans several times overs.[100] The cutting words of a white agent who claims America refuses to accept a colored dancer in the role of *premiere danseuse* are but a moment in a series of incidents which chip away at Joanna's resolve. He suggests she perform in blackface

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[96] Fauset, *There Is Confusion*, 11.
[97] Fauset, 132.
[98] Gilbert and Gubar, 'Ain't I a New Woman?', 135.
[99] Deborah E. McDowell, 'The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset', *Afro - Americans in New York Life and History (1977-1989)* 5, no. 2 (31 July 1981): 6.
[100] duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 75.

burlesque. She persists, convinced that black people's excellence in the arts will further the collective goal of dislodging the New Negro from racist perception. Initially hired only to perform black America in "The Dance of the Nations" she comes to dance the part of 'Indian' and white America when the original dancer quits because she refuses to dance alongside a black woman. To racially pass as an 'Indian' woman, Joanna sports a wig and grease paint, but for white America, the only solution is covering her face with a mask. Fauset does not offer any further details of Joanna's costume for the performance; the mask is self-effacing. The absence of a description of Joanna's clothes or body contrasts with the previous scene of Joanna preparing her audition for the role of black America: when wearing a "flame-colored dressing gown" she casts off a "soft dull green" dress in favor of a "crepe silk dress of straight and simple lines. The bodice as flaming as the dressing gown was long, like a Russian blouse. Its end terminated by hemstitching into a black shallow-plaited skirt."[101] At the audition, her "slender flaming body" turns, twinkles, and impresses the board members; she is "everywhere at once" in her flame-coloured gown.[102]

On stage, however, Fauset offers no description of the performance nor Joanna's costume beyond the mask as white America. The mask consumes her; the stage cannot be a setting of feminist nor racial liberation for Joanna. No clothing nor mask can alter the prejudiced gazes of the white audience members and critics. Joanna's relationship to her white mask foreshadows Frantz Fanon's claims in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), "I came into the world imbued with the will to find a meaning in things, my spirit filled with the desire to attain to the source of the

[101] Fauset, *There Is Confusion*, 168–69.
[102] Fauset, 229.

world, and then I found that *I was an object in the midst of other objects*."[103] Joanna's mask permits her to perform and objectifies her. She becomes just another object, an entertainer. We are told that critics speculate on the "amount of white blood" she has in her veins when she plays black America, and when she unmasks herself as white America, she must refrain from asserting her femininity. Instead, she tells the crowd: "I hardly need to tell you that there is no one in the audience more American than I am. My great-grandfather fought in the Revolution, my uncle fought in the Civil War and brother is 'other there' now."[104] At the peak of her artistic success—being encored at the District Line Theatre in Greenwich Village—Joanna "establishes her native credentials and right to perform on stage in the actions of a series of male relatives" because they possess more credibility than her.[105]

In *There is Confusion*, the stage and its costumes, once Joanna's vision of greatness and distinction, reveals the impossibility of synthesis among multiple *models of femininity* for the black woman. Joanna's inability to advance her independent fame and her race at the same time is not necessarily reflective of all black women performers' experiences. In *Babylon Girls*, Jayna Brown the artistic efforts of black women dancers affirmed "modern black subjecthood" while navigating a "complex geopolitics of racialization, female sexuality, and bodily pleasure."[106] Ada Overton Walker, a black performer who experienced much success at the turn of the century, was seen like the fictional Joanna as a sort of "native informer" for both black and native women in performances.[107] Nonetheless, in *There is Confusion*, Joanna as subject is visible only through

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[103] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, vol. New ed, Get Political (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 82, https://proxy.library.mcgill.ca/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=247433&scope=site.
[104] Fauset, *There Is Confusion*, 232.
[105] Kuenz, 'The Face of America', 97.
[106] Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, UNITED STATES: Duke University Press, 2008), 157, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=1170459.
[107] Brown, 182.

the performance of racialized conventions, like the New Negro discourse which positions her as merely an extension of the black men in her life. While some performers experienced acclaim, Fauset's Joanna reminds readers of the precarious subject position of these black women.

A second crucial moment, brought about by Joanna's newfound fame, where she sees a mirror of herself walking on Lenox Avenue, illuminates how the individuality and artistry of the stage does not serve visionary racial consciousness. Walking in Harlem, Joanna is recognized by young girls. Immediately after,

> a dark colored girl wearing Russian boots and a hat with three feathers sticking up straight, Indian fashion, [comes] along. Lenox Avenue stared, pointed, laughed, and enjoyed itself, Joanna's admirer with the rest.
>
> This, this was fame—to be shared with any girl who chose to stick feathers, Indian fashion, in her hat. An empty thing—different, so different from what she had expected it to be.[108]

What should be a climactic moment, Joanna's fame leading to her being recognized and imitated publicly, becomes instead a pivotal moment. Joanna is observed by and she in turn observes a girl who apes her "Dance of the Nations" costume. Rather, it is implied that Joanna observes the girl because she stands on the personified "Lenox Avenue," a stand in for Harlem, who stares, points, and laugh with this woman. Joanna's desire to become "somebody great" have led to this precise exchange. Public prominence, though once conceived of as a noble cause by Joanna, loses its luster when she is reduced to a costume. This costume which defines her fame reduces her to an assemblage of cultures, none of which are her own. Unlike a successful fancy dress costume that projects an idealized self, the dress of "Dance of the Nations" positions Joanna as an entertainer. The comparison of Joanna to her admirer is without threat of sexual promiscuity. The young woman is not a 'streetwalker' nor blues cabaret singer. The heroine's wish of

[108] Fauset, *There Is Confusion*, 274.

influencing black people's fashion actualized, she comes to recognize that she might be more satisfied with pursuing private endeavours like homemaking.

Reading *There is Confusion* as strictly a romance plot undermines Joanna's agency in her decision to view singing and dancing as "the big handsome extra wrap to cover her more ordinary dress" of being a homemaker.[109] What Kuenz suggests is a too abrupt reversal of desire in Joanna, Nina Miller argues is a "narrative "rescue"" of Joanna from the perils of the stage through her marriage to Peter. Marriage "need[s] to be seen not (or not merely) as a contrived evasion of the issues, but as a seriously proffered solution to racial and personal problems the text has raised," Miller states.[110] Fauset's integration of the *female* bildungsroman with the romance plot not only illuminates the inner lives of her characters but also critiques the broader societal constraints they navigate. Joanna choses to reorient her life after realizing that fame is "different, so different from what she had expected it to be." To read Joanna's reorientation of goals as a mere submission to patriarchal structures discredits Fauset's careful depiction of the scene. She underscores the tensions between desire and reality. Her work, thus, deserves greater scholarly attention for its innovative approach to narrative form and its insightful commentary on the black female experience during the Harlem Renaissance. Fauset does not argue that the independent artistic lifestyle of New Womanhood is limited to white women, so much as she questions the satisfaction New Woman feminism can provide women of colour. She draws out the intersectionality between the two discourses, but it is clear that Joanna cannot possess fame and marriage at once.

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[109] Fauset, 274.
[110] Nina Miller, 'Femininity, Publicity, and the Class Division of Cultural Labor: Jessie Redmon Fauset's There Is Confusion', *African American Review* 30, no. 2 (1996): 212, https://doi.org/10.2307/3042355.

Through characters like Joanna, Fauset delves into the tension between personal ambition and societal expectations, especially regarding race and gender. In the transformative moment when Joanna encounters a girl mimicking her costume on Lenox Avenue, she confronts the emptiness of her public persona. This realization prompts a shift towards valuing private fulfilment over public acclaim. Joanna's eventual choice to marry Peter and embrace a role within family life represents a nuanced reconciliation of her ambitions and the collective needs of her community. Joanna's journey from aspiring artist to a figure of racial uplift underscores Fauset's broader commentary on the complexities faced by black women striving for both personal and communal advancement. While Joanna does not pursue grander fame, she does achieve her childhood dreams. It is precisely upon fulfilling her dreams that she actively chooses new ambitions.

"A plea for color": Helga Crane in *Quicksand*

Helga Crane and Joanna Marshall share a defining trait: they try to fashion themselves against intersecting racist and sexist structures which are generative of identity. Larsen's breakout novel, published in March of 1928 by Alfred A. Knopf, propelled her into celebrity. She became known, like Fauset, as a major fiction writer of the Harlem Renaissance. Du Bois singled out *Quicksand* as "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of [Charles] Chesnutt."[111] Critics are quick to draw links between *Quicksand* and Larsen's own life. The resemblances are indeed undeniable. Both Larsen and the fictional Helga share similarities in parental lineage, time spent teaching in the American South, and travels to Copenhagen. I am not interested in relying on Larsen's biography to analyse her first novel. The extent that Helga Crane is an assemblage of fiction and lived experience contributes little to the recognition that

[111] W.E.B. Du Bois, "Two Novels," *The Crisis* (June 1928): 202, 211.

she is, above all, a daring, radical exploration of the mulatta psyche. Concerned with authenticity, ideology, and social conventions, Larsen condemns Helga to the racial uplift housewife *model of femininity* to satirize the minor role ascribed to women of colour.

Emblematic of how Helga will be objectified, the opening scene of the novel exhibits Helga as if she were a still life painting. When first presented by the narrator, she appears as an assemblage of her carefully curated personal environment. Helga is a deliberate dresser. Her love of colour, *objects d'art*, and textiles dominate the novel's lyrical opening. What seems to be an innate love for beauty, quickly overpowers her:

> Helga Crane sat alone in her room, which at that hour, eight in the evening, was in soft gloom. Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on the bright covers of the books which she had taken down from their long shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. It was a comfortable room, furnished with rare and intensely personal taste….
> An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade. … In a vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was—to use a hackneyed word—attractive.[112]

The narrator's use of the past tense modal verb "would have" destabilizes the harmony of the literary portrait. The verb tense's expression of a hypothetical leaves open the possibility that an observer, the reader perhaps, could be wrong in assuming that Helga is "well fitted to that framing of light and shade." Rather, as Rafael Walker puts it, in the large room, Helga "seems scarcely distinguishable from the many orientalised objects that she is supposed to possess;"[113] she is dwarfed by the room itself, but moreover, Walker theorizes how the passive construction of the sentence which describes Helga's "intensely personal taste" privileges the "objects above

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[112] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 7.
[113] Rafael Walker, 'Nella Larsen Reconsidered: The Trouble with Desire in Quicksand and Passing', *MELUS* 41, no. 1 (1 March 2016): 169, https://doi.org/10.1093/melus/mlv083.

the subject"—the harmony is an illusion.[114] Kaplan notes that Helga's understanding of her Orientalist bent as "rare" and unique suggests Helga's perception of herself is perhaps unreliable.[115] Orientalist influences manifested in early twentieth century art, literature, and fashion of the upper-class.[116] By proclaiming that her selection of "oriental silks" and "blue Chinese carpet" is the result of innate and individuated taste, Helga fails to acknowledge how taste can also be thought of as "determined by group and cultural preferences."[117] Larsen equipes Helga with a sharp eye and ability to dress her body to receive favourable attention, but, here, Helga's preference for luxurious clothing alienate her from the environment outside her room, Naxos, a southern school for African Americans.

Helga revels in her heightened individualism, which she displays outwardly in both in her style of dress and her chosen decor, but her "vivid green and gold negligee," among other clothes, exhibit her sexual and racial alterity. In *Quicksand*, the subjectivity Helga so desperately seeks is continuously eclipsed by her either her choice of clothing or the clothes chosen for her. duCille notes that as a teacher at Naxos, Helga is immediately set apart from "a Naxos Negro's knowledge of place [that] is confirmed by conservatism, food taste, and moderation in all things, including proper attire."[118] Attended by African Americans dreaming of upward social mobility, Naxos closely resembles Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute.[119] Larsen's fictional school

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[114] Walker, 169.
[115] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 7. n. 2.
[116] For example, Orientalist influences can be found in several fashion designers of the era. Most notable, Paul Poiret's clothing collections of the early twentieth century display many Orientalist influences. Poiret is credited with introducing the 'Harem pants' to Western culture. He also designed fancy dress costumes for the elite. One of his most famous fancy-dress costumes is a Harem pant ensemble which he designed for his 1002nd Night party in 1911. For more on Poiret, see Harold Koda and Andrew Bolton, *Poiret* (Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2007).
[117] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 7. n. 2.
[118] duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 95.
[119] Several scholars have noted how Naxos spelled backwards is "saxon," a thinly veiled critique at how the Tuskegee institute pandered to white expectations for people of colour. Naxos is also the name of the Greek island where Theseus abandoned Ariadne, the location where she later died.

echoes Washington's claims to "cast down your buckets" and accept the status quo.[120] The imitation clear, Larsen's disdain for the school's teachings bares her disagreement towards Washington's arguments for passivity, participation even, towards racism. Having Helga refute Naxos' educational model designed to perpetuate rather than challenge racial subordination is but one manner in which Larsen establishes her heroine's search for alternative models of womanhood as a modern biracial woman. Helga, sitting amongst the beautiful objects in her room vocalizes her distaste towards Naxos' "intolerant dislike of difference" through the language of dress.[121] She bemoans how Naxos ruthlessly cuts "all to a pattern, the white man's pattern" like a machine, and so, she relies on nonconformist clothing to help build her ideal self.[122] "But in transgressing the stern image of respectability by which black women attempt to change white America's images of them," Ann. E. Holster argues, "Helga risks falling victim to the stereotype in her own mind as well as in the minds of others."[123]

Helga's rejection of black middle-class respectability politics which southern Naxos actively promotes, propels her to flee for a northern city, but before her departure, Larsen allocates many pages to describing how Helga's fashioned body isolates her in the setting. Though blaming Naxos' location in the south and its neo-liberal middle-class racial conservatism for its condemnation of Helga, Larsen meditates on Naxos to later mirror the same rejection towards Helga in Copenhagen. Geographical location does not matter; Helga's nonconformity "only works to objectify her, complicating her quest for self-definition" Walker claims.[124] Elizabeth Way argues how Larsen indicates her understanding that "respectability politics are not

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[120] Washington, 'Atlanta Exposition Address, 1895', 18.
[121] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 11.
[122] Larsen, 10.
[123] Ann E. Hostetler, 'The Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's Quicksand', *PMLA* 105, no. 1 (January 1990): 45, n.1, https://doi.org/10.2307/462341.
[124] Walker, 'Nella Larsen Reconsidered', 170.

effective in changing mainstream America's perceptions of black people" by portraying both black and white society pigeonholing Helga.[125] By critiquing the lack of effectiveness of respectability politics, Larsen spares Helga the accusation of immodesty. Of her own volition, Helga does not dress in an immodest manner. She embraces colour, texture, and style, but what appears to others as inappropriate is merely a penchant for finer clothing.

Larsen acknowledges fashion and sartorial curation as a mode of agency even as she recognizes that the wearer can never fully control how she is perceived. When a coworker comes to wake Helga, "the fragile stockings and underthings and the startling green and gold negligee dripping about on chairs and stool, [meet] the encounter of the amazed eyes" of the former.[126] Described in a liquid form, Helga's clothing is both personified and transmutable. Her clothes overpower her to the point where they become silent actants in her life who greet people for her. They come to stand in for her personality and objectify her without her control. The coworker, upon learning that Helga plans on quitting, expresses her sadness: "I do wish you'd stay… We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives."[127] Though Helga expresses a "racial need for gorgeousness," she wishes to escape Naxos precisely to avoid being a passive decoration.[128] She views the women who wear dull attire as decorous additions to the lives of men; Helga, engaged to another teacher at Naxos, James Vayle, ponders her fiancé's loathing towards her inability to "win [the] liking and approval" of the people of Naxos.[129] He wishes she would acculturate—and by acculturate, he believes that Helga should subscribe to New Negro discourse which subordinates women of colour to black men. Instead, Larsen has Helga define herself as an

[125] Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance', 559.
[126] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 14.
[127] Larsen, 19.
[128] Larsen, 21.
[129] Larsen, 13.

active consumer. “As a woman [Helga] is at a complex process of exchange” Hazel Carby notes.[130] She views herself as a consumer but fails to see how her relationship to clothing positions her as a consumable object. This lack of harmony between Helga and her clothing leads to her downfall. The ability to form a relationship between self and exterior, to exercise a certain control over perception, is what Larsen’s later character, Clare Kendry in *Passing,* masters.

Larsen gestures beyond New Negro, and New Woman, discourse to highlight how a supposedly more civilized society like Denmark leaves Helga vulnerable to being pigeonholed into another *model of femininity*: the ‘primitive’ woman. Leaving Naxos, Helga heads for Chicago hoping to connect with her white uncle, but his wife, upon seeing Helga, conjures away any relation the two might have. Unable to rely on her family in Chicago, she finds work which brings her to Harlem. Disenchanted with the Harlem scene and especially ‘race women’ like Ann Grey who hate “white people with a deep and open hatred,” but “[ape] their clothes,” Helga eventually leaves America for her white family in Denmark.[131] Having broken off her engagement and rejected the confines of New Negro womanhood, she hopes to luxuriate in New Woman aristocrat independence in Denmark. While Larsen unabashedly dispels the “contradictions in the ideology of the Harlem Renaissance” through character like Miss Grey, she also portrays white society’s fetishization of the woman of colour.[132] This fetishization relies on gender and therefore, excludes Helga from the New Woman project which sought to argue for the inauthenticity of the feminine.

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[130] Hazel V. Carby, ‘The Quicksands of Represenation: Rethinking Black Cultural Politics’, in *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York, UNITED STATES: Oxford University Press, 1988), 172, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=272562.
[131] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 45.
[132] Gilbert and Gubar, ‘Ain’t I a New Woman?’, 147.

Shortly upon her arrival, Helga questions her relationship to Herr and Fru Dahl because she feels like "a black objet d'art, perpetually displayed for white consumption."[133] Fru Dahl counsels Helga on what to wear for an afternoon in town; she endorses love of colour, texture, and glamour and even pushes her niece to wear *outré* clothing. The two settle on vague alterations to a green velvet dress Helga is to wear to a dinner party later and head out. Upon return, Helga remarks:

> Marie had indeed "cut down" the prized green velvet, until, as Helga put it, it was "practically nothing but a skirt." She was thankful for the barbaric bracelets, for the dangling earrings, for the beads about her neck. She was even thankful for the rouge on her burning cheeks and for the very powder on her back. No other woman in the stately pale-blue room was so greatly exposed… but she wasn't one of them. She didn't count at all.[134]

The Dahl's outfit Helga in a *fancy dress* costume as a materialization of the exotic primitive woman. Her biracial body is as much an accessory as the "barbaric" jewellery. Though she is thankful for the barbaric accessories, her being forced to rely on them for modesty only depicts her as a "savage woman" unaware of social norms of dress. Though Helga repeatedly expressed her love of striking clothing, this *fancy dress* costume was chosen for her. She becomes the Dahl's foreign performer playing a part in advancing their social fortune via her exoticness. Whereas in Naxos, Helga rebels against respectability politics by flaunting her racial and sexual alterity through dress, in Copenhagen, her relatives purchase her clothing to control her image. Larsen contrasts Naxos and Copenhagen through the motif of portraiture. First presented as a tableau vivant by the narrator in the opening scene, Axel Olsen, a famous Danish artist, paints her portrait in Copenhagen. The portrait, the first instance where Helga observes how others see

[133] duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 95.
[134] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 61.

her, permits Helga to grasp how the white Danish society weaponizes her appearance to transform her into "some disgusting sensual creature with her features."[135]

As an exotic performer, Helga bears resemblance to Josephine Baker. Helga and Baker differ greatly in how they command their appearance with Baker later using her nakedness and banana skirt to propel her into global fame. *Quicksand* mentions Baker offhandedly as "a favorite Negro dancer who had just secured a foothold on the stage of a current white musical comedy."[136] Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport argue that Larsen anticipates the "cultish sensation and upper-class fascination Baker would attract in Copenhagen" where she also performed after gaining success in Paris.[137] Olsen's portrait wrongly assumes Helga to be a "sexualized Josephine Baker-figure beneath the surface."[138] She reads the portrait appropriately as a white fantasy of blackness. Refusing both Olsen's marriage proposal and his ensuing sexual proposition, Helga leaves Danish society for Harlem persisting in her quest to fashion her own identity without bending to racist and sexist ideologies—a fashion of one's own.

Her return marks a distinct shift in her relationship to personal appearance; having been subjected to differing forms of docility by both black and white society, Larsen's heroine eventually adopts the role of a 'race' woman by becoming a wife to Reverend Pleasant Green. Her final move to Alabama as a pastor's wife will prove to be the ultimate quicksand. Constantly self-fashioning as self-authorship or being fashioned as an object, Helga abandons her love of glamour for religious wifely devotion. In doing so, she adopts the "ill-fitting and doubly ironic role of *matron*."[139] It is now she who represents convention. She gives up green and gold

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[135] Larsen, 77.
[136] Larsen, 47–48.
[137] Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport, 'Helga Crane's Copenhagen: Denmark, Colonialism, and Transnational Identity in Nella Larsen's "Quicksand"', *Comparative Literature* 60, no. 3 (2008): 237.
[138] Lunde and Stenport, 237.
[139] duCille, *The Coupling Convention*.

negligees but not beautification; counselling the rural women of Alabama that "sunbonnets, no matter how gay, and aprons, no matter how frilly, [are] not quite the proper things for Sunday church wear," Helga mimics the women of Naxos who judged her clothing harshly.[140] Her body, repeatedly swollen with childbearing, can no longer be adorned with velvets and silks. A fact she abhors. After the birth of her fourth child, Helga dons a "nightgown of filmy *crepe*, a relic of prematrimonial days."[141] duCille argues how it is "not childbirth or motherhood, or even patriarchy, that overcomes Helga as much as it is the irreconcilable social, psychosexual, and racial contradictions that become her quicksand" because she remains unable to fashion an identity against established *models of femininity* as defined by competing ideologies.[142]

Through Helga's relationships to her environment in Naxos, Harlem, and Copenhagen, Larsen critiques both the New Negro and New Woman discourses, highlighting how these frameworks often fail to accommodate the intersectionality and diversity of women of colour. Helga capitulates to wifehood and motherhood after her multiple attempts at independence leave her vulnerable to degrading labels, like 'primitive' or Jezebel. Despite her efforts to use fashion as a form of self-expression and resistance, Helga's identity is persistently shaped and constrained by racist and sexist external forces. Even a small disentanglement remains impossible in *Quicksand*. Helga's journey is not just a personal quest for identity but also a broader critique of the societal structures that dictate *models of femininity* and the visual politics associated with them.

Conclusion

[140] Larsen, *Quicksand*, 98–99.
[141] Larsen, 106.
[142] duCille, *The Coupling Convention*, 96.

Fauset and Larsen respectively present their protagonists as radical figures. Fauset's Joanna eventually conforms to the *coupling convention* and indeed, finds satisfaction. By leaning into the tenets of the female *bildungsroman*, Fauset depicts her heroine's 'voyage in' which reshapes her desires. Joanna embraces New Negro discourse and adopts a role as a 'race woman'. While Fauset redirects her heroine, she does make a point to stress how the married Joanna "almost never [dances] except in the ordinary way."[143] Miller views this confession as a "tang of masochism" which "raises the spectre of Fauset's own discomfort with the marital "happiness' she has bestowed upon her heroine."[144] Considering that Larsen takes up the female artist figure again in her second novel, I am inclined to agree with Miller's statement. Fauset penned a highly realistic ending for Joanna which affords agency and happiness to the heroine. Even the admission that Joanna abandons theatrical dancing aligns with her new life. I read Fauset's quip as a lament about how the *models of femininity* available to women of colour curtail their life paths.

While Fauset relies on the female *bildungsroman* to assert Joanna's agency in her choice to marry, Larsen slips into the conventional romance genre at the end of *Quicksand* to comment on how Helga exhausts all the options available to her, "to no good outcome."[145] Helga's multiple voyages, in and out, leaves her exhausted and desperate. She finds no satisfaction in marriage like Joanna. Despite her efforts to assert her individuality through fashion, Helga's choices in clothing become emblematic of her lack of agency. In Naxos, her nonconformist attire alienates her from the conservative norms of respectability politics. In Copenhagen, her luxurious clothing is manipulated by others to fetishize and exoticize her, reducing her to an

[143] Fauset, *There Is Confusion*, 291.
[144] Miller, 'Femininity, Publicity, and the Class Division of Cultural Labor', 217.
[145] Carla Kaplan, 'Introduction: A "Queer Dark Creature"', in *Quicksand: Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Contexts, Criticism* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2020). xxix.

object for display. Finally, in her role as Reverend Green's wife, Helga's abandonment of her once-celebrated glamour for racial circumscribed modesty marks her complete submission to a *model of femininity* she once resisted. The distinction between the two novels illuminates the tragic and celebratory elements of the female *bildungsroman*. Fauset portrays the reorientation of one's goals to find happiness within sociopolitical structures as a valid and agentic choice. Larsen, whose two novels end with tragic elements, critiques the genre's limited range of possibilities for women. The 'voyage in' still leads to marriage. Larsen's ideological analysis of the bildungsroman genre examines "the patterns of inclusion and exclusion fostered by a given category."[146] Helga's tragic ending emphasizes her liminal positionality.

Throughout the respective plots, I argue that fashion and the language of dress are material metaphors for Helga and Joanna's shift in desires, identity, and self-perception. The respective endings of the novels conscript the bodies of their black and biracial protagonists to the service of racial uplift as defined by leaders of the black middle class, like Du Bois or Washington. This conscription, in turn, comments on the limited *models of femininity* available to black and biracial women. Neither Helga nor Joanna's fancy dress alters the binds of existing racial and sexual ideologies. Ultimately, reversals of desire characterize both *There is Confusion* and *Quicksand.* For Helga these reversals become the sites of failed synthesis between self and surface. For Joanna, the moment of realization that she cannot curate an idealized self through clothing provokes her to redirect her desires. Fauset remains conservative in her exploration of alternative models of New Negro womanhood in her first novel whereas Larsen quickly establishes herself as a daring novelist who braves voicing female complaint. Their second

[146] Susan Fraiman, '1. Is There a Female Bildungsroman', in *1. Is There a Female Bildungsroman* (Columbia University Press, 2019), 2, https://doi.org/10.7312/frai94490-002.

novels, *Plum Bun* (Fauset) and *Passing* (Larsen), published the same year, crack open genres, literary topoi, and cultural stereotypes in a bold search for the New Negro Woman's subjectivity.

Chapter 3 – *Styles of Femininity*: Sartorial Ornamentation in *Plum Bun* and *Passing*

Society at the turn of the century wrestled with the concepts of ornamentation and excess. The shifts in various fields of aesthetics were reflected in clothing. Alfred Loos, architect and author of *Ornament and Crime* (1913), argued that "artificial ornamentation (i.e., not derived from the material itself) belonged to the past."[147] He promoted simplicity. Commenting on women's fashion, Loos refutes the Christian argument that "it was modesty that made woman adopt the fig leaf" as the desire for modesty is a product of refined society. Rather, "woman clothed herself, and thus made herself a mystery to man, in order to fill his heart with a longing to solve the mystery" Loos proclaims.[148] Clothing, he suggests, is a woman's ticket to subjecthood because through marriage a woman "receives her social status from the man" and she secures a marriage by appealing to sensuality. Loos recognizes women's subordinate status to men and claims that practical, unadorned fashion can revolutionize how women achieve equal status to men by permitting women to become recognized for more than their appearances—through work, women could gain their economic and intellectual independence. Writing in the early twentieth century, Loos witnessed women's fight to wear trousers for cycling; he views the right to leave one's legs free as the "first step towards society sanctioning gainful employment for women." Granting the ability to work means: "a woman's value will not rise and fall with fluctuations in

[147] Adolf Loos and Adolf Opel, *Ornament and Crime: Selected Essays* (Riverside, California: Ariadne Press, 1998), 3.
[148] Loos and Opel, 107.

sensuality. Silks and satins, ribbons and bows, frills and furbelows will lose their effectiveness. They will disappear. And rightly so. There is no place for them in our culture."[149]

While his claim about how society should uplift women rather than keep them as decorative, beautiful objects is first, ethically sound and secondly, necessary, Loos fails to consider how conscious ornamentation creates a surface, a second skin, between a woman and onlookers.

Ornaments can be in a relationship of continuity and counterpoint with the object they decorate. When ornaments are chosen by an aesthetic subject so that they are in a relationship of continuity with the aesthetic object, the ornament becomes the object's second skin. Fauset and Larsen consider how the light-skinned biracial woman is at once aesthetic subject and object**.** Their novels ponder how the act of ornamentation permits an objectified woman to begin reclaiming her status as a moral, volitional subject. When a woman and her clothes move as one, meaning that a woman's clothes become an extension of her physical form, the clothes become an ornamental surface between her and the outside world. She gains agency from dressing herself well—an act of careful curation and ornamentation—because her clothing retains the formal qualities of her physique, and therefore, sartorial self-fashioning allows her to move through space by presenting a surface.[150] She remains in an objectified state, but the extrinsic addition of her clothing that is harmonious with her physical form complicates what others are gazing at to make a value judgment. More importantly, in creating an extension of her form, a woman's clothing allows her to present a curated image—a surface. If we consider the female body as an aesthetic object, it cannot be divorced from its surroundings like visual art because

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[149] Loos and Opel, 111.

[150] My stress on 'formal qualities' stems from a Kantian perspective. In *Critique of Judgment*, Kant outlines the characteristics of different aesthetic categories—aesthetic judgments, that is, judgments of taste, are rooted in form over content. Form is the true marker of the beautiful for Kant. When he discusses ornament in *CJ*, he presents it as a formal extension of the aesthetic object. Therefore, ornament in Kant must also possess a beautiful form. I apply Kant's theorization of ornament to the role of clothing on woman-as-object; clothing becomes a formal material extension of self and therefore acts as a barrier between her and the outside world.

the body straddles both objecthood and subjecthood at all times. Moreover, the female body is always in conversation with beauty standards. When a woman chooses what part of her body to accentuate, that choice exerts some control over the type of attention she will receive.

Ornamentation creates a synthetic second skin. For the white-passing woman of colour, a second skin allows her, as Anne Anlin Cheng theorizes, to "escape the burdens of epidermal inscription."[151] Cheng turns to Josephine Baker to analyse the 'modern surface'. Baker, known for her almost naked performances on the Parisian stage, is a key black modernist figure of the mid-1920s onwards. Her most famous costume remains her banana skirt. Baker at once symbolizes the "racist and sexist history of objectification and of desire that make up the phenomenon of European Primitivism or, conversely, the idealization of black female agency."[152] Cheng cleverly describes Baker as wearing her nakedness "like a sheath."[153] Representing the crises of race, style, and subjecthood, Baker as a phenomenon emerges alongside Modernist explorations of surface, self-fashioning, and display. Race, according to Cheng, is "both more and less than biology or ideology"; the act of a material self-extension for the white-passing woman of colour holds the essentialist and constructionist paradigms of race in tension with each other. The "racist interpellation "See the Negro!" is thrown into crisis when we attend to *the contours of what is seen*" because the act of self-fashioning inhibits a straightforward interpretation of the subject.[154] By blurring the binary between essence and surface, a second skin complicates the power the viewing subject possesses over the object viewed.

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[151] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker and the Modern Surface* (Oxford, United States: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2011), 13, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mcgill/detail.action?docID=618600.
[152] Cheng, 2–3.
[153] Cheng, 1.
[154] Cheng, 13. Emphasis mine.

Angela Murry in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*[155] and Clare Kendry in *Passing* are black, white-passing women who ornament their bodies with clothing in an effort at self-determination. They exhibit what Fauset's and Larsen's contemporary Zora Neale Hurston calls, the "will to adorn." Such a will, Hurston details, is the "second most notable characteristic of Negro expression." Adorning, language or the self, is more than a defining characteristic. Hurston outlines the motivation undergirding the urge to adorn: "Perhaps his idea of ornament does not attempt to meet conventional standards, but it satisfies the soul of its creator."[156] In the act of adornment, the black man or woman becomes a creator—an agentic person who exercises agency through creativity. Though speaking about literal verbal expression, Hurston maintains that the "wearing of jewelry and the making of sculpture" are inspired by the same urge.[157] The glamourized racialized body, Cheng theorizes, "is thus the place where we can address the intimacy, rather than opposition, between agency and objectification."[158] Cheng observes how the "conjunction among celebrity, glamour, and race" reveals the closeness between agency and objectification because celebrity documents a "reorganization of the visuality that informs racial difference," but I will unpack how sartorial self-fashion participates in the protagonists' revisioning of self.[159]

Responding to Hurston's claims about the satisfaction adornment offers its creator, I seek to analyze how Fauset and Larsen's second novels portray heroines who cultivate subjectivity by objectifying themselves with fashionable dress. This act of commodifying one's exterior to attain

[155] I will refer to the novel by its shortened title: *Plum Bun*.
[156] Hurston, 'Characteristics of Negro Expression (1934)', 356.
[157] Hurston, 357.
[158] Anne Anlin Cheng, 'Shine: On Race, Glamour, and the Modern', *PMLA* 126, no. 4 (2011): 1023.
[159] Cheng, 1023.

or preserve subjectivity may seem anti-feminist, but Cheng verbalizes exactly how this seemingly counterintuitive act is possible:

> Glamour's shellacked beauty reminds us that the presentation of self as object for consumption coexists with the rendering of that self as indigestible.…. Glamour's imperviousness thus draws on a crisis of personhood that is inherently political and maybe even strangely liberating for a woman and a minority—liberating not in the simple sense of acquiring a compensatory or impenetrable beauty…but in the sense of temporary relief from the burden of personhood and visibility. It may seem counterintuitive or even dangerous to talk about the raced and sexualized body's *longing to be thinglike or to disappear into things*, but it is the overcorporealized body that may find the most freedom in fantasies of corporeal dematerialization or, alternatively, of material self-extension.[160]

By qualifying glamour's beauty as "shellacked," Cheng reminds her readers of the manufactured artificiality of glamour. It acts like a resin, coating the person. A glamorized beauty therefore relies on a certain generic aesthetic effect; it valorizes surface over essence. Angela and Clare style their bodies as objects for consumption which are simultaneously "indigestible," in Cheng's terms, because they remain enigmatic. This double bind—being commodified yet elusive—has dual consequences: the women are momentarily liberated from, as Cheng notes, "the burden of personhood and visibility" yet are left vulnerable because of the volatile space they position themselves in. By volatile space, I mean to signal what Marshik details as the ontological exchange between clothes and wearer. The closeness of garments of the body allows clothing to "permeate who we are"; when worn, especially when strategically selected, clothing behaves "as a quasi-subject and positions human subjects as quasi-object."[161] Similar to Marshik, who analyzes several British modernist authors to argue how they were "concerned about what might happen if modernity's founding principle of the subject/object binary were to collapse," I argue

[160] Cheng, 1032. emphasis mine.
[161] Marshik, *At the Mercy of Their Clothes*, 9.

that Fauset and Larsen explore this said collapse between subject/object in relation to Harlem Renaissance racial and gendered ideology. With their second novels, Fauset and Larsen move their writing beyond the political sphere. That is not to say their novels are not engaging with political discourse. Rather, I agree with Wedin when she states that "Fauset's work was a *literature of search* more than a literature of protest" and I extend that claim to include Larsen's *Passing*.[162] The authors observe how racialized bodies are objectified and the ways in which subversion, no matter how small, becomes possible.

Fauset and Larsen explore the collapse of the subject/object binary through ornamentation, and, in doing so, toy with several other binaries. As Teresa C. Zackodnik argues in *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*:

> rather than enacting an either/or of communal versus individualist politics and practice, of identity as fixed or fluid and understood through essentialist or constructionist paradigms, Fauset's and Larsen's novels instead expose the tensions, ambiguities, and interactions of such oppositions as they compete in a debate over black identity.[163]

Essentially, Fauset and Larsen present identity as a both/and phenomenon. To debate over black identity and probe of the collapse of binaries, both Fauset and Larsen employ the mulatta figure—the result of miscegenation, the mulatta is "a highly ambivalent figure who enables a double-voiced address and black-feminist use of parodic performance or "passing"."[164] She is portrayed as the ultimate dichotomy and is recurrently found in nineteenth century "tragic mulatto" novels.[165] The tragic mulatto is a figure of white creation, but Fauset and Larsen reclaim the character to revision the passing narrative. Specifically, they revision the

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[162] Wedin, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*, 19.emphasis mine.
[163] Teresa C. Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race* (University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 158, https://muse.jhu.edu/book/86330.
[164] Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*. xxii.
[165] Mar Gallego, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance : Identity Politics and Textual Strategies* (Piscataway, NJ: Munster: Lit Verlag, 2003), 5.

characteristic tragic ending. Rather than depict heroines who cannot overcome their wavering between multiethnic and multicultural allegiances, the authors portray racially passing protagonists who respectively achieve unconventional forms of liberation.

In *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, clothing is an aesthetic medium the heroines use to fashion themselves into glamorous aesthetic objects. Interactions with clothing—getting dressed or noticing other dressed bodies—are crucial moments of intersecting *styles of femininity*. As previously mentioned, my definition of styles of femininity relies on Elizabeth Hawes' definition of style from *Fashion is Spinach* (1938). Style is "the right clothes *for your life in your epoch*, uncompromisingly, at once," Hawes tells us.[166] Keeping Hawes' definition in mind, my term *styles of femininity*, seeks to signal how Angela and Clare turn to beautifying their bodies through clothing to embody multiple *modes of femininity* at once. When embodying multiple *modes*, Angela and Clare move into *styling* their appearance—a creative act in which they find satisfaction. They dare "to break with normal pleasurable expectations in order to conceive a new language of desire."[167] I turn to Laura Mulvey's theorization of the gaze to frame how in the act of ornamentation Angela and Clare market themselves as visual pleasures. By objectifying themselves as visual pleasures, they circumvent the social expectations thrust upon women in New Negro and New Woman discourse. These heroines seek out display to first negotiate between the competing tensions between the two discourses and second move past those *modes of femininity* and fashion their identities. Mulvey focuses on the visual qualities of cinema, but through clothing, Angela and Clare seek to capitalize on the same aesthetic effect film provokes in the viewer: scopophilia. Defined as a love of looking, more specifically the "pleasure in using

[166] Elizabeth Hawes. *Fashion Is Spinach*. (New York: Random House, 1938) 5, emphasis mine.
[167] Laura Mulvey, 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema', in *Visual and Other Pleasures*, ed. Laura Mulvey (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 1989), 16, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-19798-9_3.

another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight," scopophilia denies the object looked at a voice or subjectivity.[168] However, by intentionally curating their appearance to appeal to scopophilia, these protagonists stress how they are at once aesthetic subjects. In their second novels, Fauset and Larsen embark on a bold search for possibilities of self-determination for their female characters where they navigate objecthood and subjecthood.

Ornament as Auratic: Angela in *Plum Bun*

Plum Bun follows Angela Murray, a light-skinned African American woman who decides to pass as white in New York city as Angèle Mory in order to pursue her dreams of becoming an artist. Born into a middle-class black family in Philadelphia, Angela unlike her sister Virgia who aspires to replicate their parents' lives, has "no high purpose in life."[169] As a little girl, she experiences the most pleasure when racially passing as white in "the midst of modishly gowned women in a stylish tea-room" with her mixed-race mother, Mattie.[170] Way claims "Fauset invokes the idealized fashion city as a nineteenth-century "ladies' paradise"" on Angela and Mattie's excursions.[171] These experiences lead Angela to observe that "the good things of life are unevenly distributed"; "colour or rather the lack of it seemed to the child the one absolute prerequisite to the life of which she was always dreaming" the narrator explains.[172] The motif of movement, literal and metaphysical, dominates the novel. Angela's movement from a black identity to a white identity provokes a series of larger movements. After the death of both her parents, she leaves her family home in Philadelphia to live in a small studio in central Manhattan and strives to become a celebrated artist. After making liberal white woman friends, she embarks

[168] Mulvey, 18.
[169] Jessie Redmon Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929; Boston: Beacon Press, 1990), 13.
[170] Fauset, 15.
[171] Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance', 549.
[172] Fauset, 12, 13.

on a strategic pre-marital affair with a wealthy white man, Roger Fielding. She eventually rejects Roger, after realizing that she would forever have to deny her black ancestry if she married him. She chooses to move to Europe to pursue her artistic career.

Though easily defined as a morally individualist character, Angela's desire for material possessions and freedom is fuelled by a want for social change. Fauset positions Virginia as Angela's main foil to highlight the positives in Angela's rebellious nature. Virginia, her sister, holds steadfast to domestic ideals: "When she grew up she meant to marry a man exactly like her father and she would conduct her home exactly as did her mother."[173] Innocent, pious Virginia stagnates culturally. Rather than aspiring to surpass her parents' lives, Virigina merely wants to replicate them exactly; the incestuous undertones in her wish to marry her father represents a choice to thwart social evolution.[174] In contrast, Angela wishes for an aristocratic leisurely life. Fauset presents Angela as interrogating antiquated Victorian ideals of womanhood, the modern New Woman, and New Negro womanhood to carve out a *style of femininity* which suits her. Elizabeth Way outlines how through young Angela's racial passing adventures, Fauset invokes the "idealized fashion city as a nineteenth-century "ladies' paradise"."[175] Angela dismisses "this whole race business" unlike her black Philadelphian acquaintances who often discuss race issues when together. She longs for freedom, away from the "curse" of blackness.[176] Kathleen Pfieffer argues that Fauset raises a pair of philosophical questions in *Plum Bun*, "Does absolute freedom aid or obstruct the development of meaningful identity? Do the values of a clearly defined community inform or limit individuality?"[177] One of Angela's steadfast traits throughout her

[173] Fauset, 22.
[174] Kathleen Pfeiffer, 'The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset's Plum Bun', *Legacy* 18, no. 1 (2001): 84.
[175] Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance', 549.
[176] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 53.
[177] Pfeiffer, 'The Limits of Identity in Jessie Fauset's Plum Bun', 79.

quest for self-determination is her attention to dress. Through dress she refashions the values of multiple defined communities of womanhood because she understands that how people perceive her informs how she is then received. She comes to associate fashion with whiteness and "her attention to fashion is emblematic of the control she wishes to exert over her life and circumstances."[178]

A series of rejections teach Angela that knowledge of her black ancestry overshadows her personality or talent; she denounces the project of racial uplift believing it to be too tiring, futile even. Angela "(mis)perceives her "black" body as a limiting force and therefore passes in an attempt to erase difference and achieve selfhood."[179] I agree with McLendon that Angela locates her ability to achieve her desired selfhood in her physical appearance; Clare in *Passing* also associates realized selfhood with whiteness. Fauset sets up Angela to subscribe to the idea that in white America, any association to black ancestry is a mark of inferiority, but also provides her sister, Virginia, an equally well-dressed and beautiful character as a "counterpoint and an example to Angela who is committed to refuting her blackness."[180] When Angela reveals that she wishes to move away and racially pass as white, Fauset offers a portrait of Virginia:

> Virginia had… thrown an old rose kimono around her ... She was slender, yet rounded; her cheeks were flushed with sleep and excitement. Her eyes shone. As she sat in the brilliant wrap, cross-legged at the foot of her sister's narrow bed, she made the latter think of a strikingly dainty, colourful robin.[181]

Linked to the natural image of a bird and wearing brilliant colours, Virginia is presented as the rural "folk" beauty prized in Harlem Renaissance writings and the likes of which Fauset was

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[178] Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance', 551.
[179] Jacquelyn Y. McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1995), 9–10.
[180] Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance', 552.
[181] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 78.

accused of ignoring; the "folk" was the Harlem Renaissance's figure of authentic blackness.[182] Fauset complicates the idea of "authentic blackness" by engaging in "a discussion over authentic and artificial constructions of femininity within the scope of the black bourgeoisie."[183]

Angela sees immense beauty in her sister's appearance. She does not shun Virginia's racial pride nor her Lockean New Negro aesthetic, but she rejects Virginia's desire to lead a quiet, traditional life devoted to a black man. Angela's desire for the leisurely coquette lifestyle led by the white women of the hotel tea rooms she frequented as a child requires that she pass for white. In Philadelphia, where people know her family, no amount of beautiful clothing will deter the knowledge of her black ancestry. However, Fauset shows an admiration for the "folk" aesthetic in Angela that will eventually complement her admiration for the white women she idolizes in hotel lobbies. By "folk" aesthetic I mean to signal Locke's call to embrace African heritage and folk song and blues. Locke promoted more creativity in the New Negro's quest for self-determination; Virigina models this creativity by dressing herself in bold colours and yet still desiring to replicate the middle-class life of her parents. While Virginia could be accused of halting the project of racial uplift by settling for mimicry, I read her as quietly challenging New Negro discourse by indulging in bright clothing which pushes back against feminine roles defined by the black male intelligentsia. Angela's vision of material happiness propels her to New York but, there, she will adapt Virginia's "folk" aesthetic to her *style of femininity*.

Angela's complicated relationship to her black body surfaces via the clothing she selects while in New York. The novel is divided into five sections ("Home," "Market," "Plum Bun," "Home Again," and "Market is Done"); "Market" opens with Angela arriving in New York and

[182] For more on how the "folk" is a figure of authentic blackness refer to Martin J. Favor. *Authentic Blackness: The Folk in the New Negro Renaissance*. (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press), 1999.
[183] Way, 'Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance', 552.

the language of economy signals how Angela will market herself. Her break from the routine of racist discrimination through the practical act of passing is an attempt to broaden her experiences and center them around beauty, pleasure, and power.[184] The white women she befriends in her drawing classes [,] also prize pleasure. More precisely, as exemplary New Women, they prize sexual freedom. Paulette Lister, for example, keeps her lovers' razors on the sink ledge in her bathroom—she makes no effort to hide her sexual promiscuity. Martha Burden counsels Angela about securing a marriage proposal from a man: courtship is a strategic game. First, a woman must always appear to be less interested in the man than he is in her. Second, she must make him desire her. Third, she cannot "give."[185] Via Paullette and Martha's frankness about sex, love, and marriage, Fauset displaces the alleged "sexual promiscuity of black women onto the bodies of these white women."[186] That is not to suggest that Fauset shames Paullette or Martha. Throughout the novel, Fauset divorces shame from the topic of female sexuality for both black and white women. Once Angela's views on marriage shift from a union rooted in love, to a woman's ticket to greater social mobility, she embraces the sexual politics and want for mobility of the white New Woman. She closely follows Martha's advice and views love as a game; her ultimate desires are beauty, wealth, and power which she intends to receive through marriage to the affluent Roger.

Angela intends to 'play the dating game' by ornamenting her body to spur desire in Roger; in order to better analyze Angela's self-objectification through the ornamentation of her body with clothing, I turn to Walter Benjamin's writings on aura. In Benjamin's seminal essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," he argues that aura, especially in the

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[184] Gregory Phipps, '"The Deliberate Introduction of Beauty and Pleasure": Femininity and Black Feminist Pragmatism in Jessie Redmon Fauset's "Plum Bun"', *African American Review* 49, no. 3 (2016): 227.
[185] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 145.
[186] McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, 37.

sociopolitical climate of the 1930s, is too dangerous because it imposes a state of attention which blinds the perceiver to just social arrangements. He believes an "absent-minded" attention would permit liberation from fascist spectacle—breaking the spell of enchantment. Like Loos, Benjamin outlines the negative qualities of aura. Writing against the fascist regime, Benjamin was not concerned with how aura could advance the feminist search for subjectivity. While multiple theories about the notion of aura exist, there is no single definitive answer to the question: what is aura? Miriam Bratu Hansen briefly outlines various understandings of aura based on Benjamin's writings and reactions to his writings.[187] In an unpublished 'protocol' of one of his hashish experiments from 1930, Benjamin discusses **"**ornamental aura**"** as a marker of what he calls **"**genuine**"** aura. Hansen translates the essay as such: "First, genuine aura appears in all things, not just in certain kinds of things, as people imagine.… [T]he distinctive feature of genuine aura is ornament, an ornamental halo [Umzirkung], in which the object or being is enclosed as in a case.[188] Hansen makes a crucial choice in her translation with the first sentence. The German sentence "Erstens erscheint die echte Aura an allen Dingen" can also be translated to: first, genuine aura appears *on* all things. If the sentence were translated to "on all things" Benjamin would not contradict himself within this description of aura because, according to Hansen's translation, he claims that genuine aura "appears *in* all things," but he subsequently proclaims that a distinctive feature of aura is its "ornamental halo." Furthermore, Benjamin describes the object or being as "enclosed" within this ornamental aura. Therefore, we can

[187] Aura has a relation to the past which Hansen signals when she argues that clothes index the body and participate in an aura-tic exchange: "the aura of objects such as clothing or furniture stands in a metonymic relation to the person who uses them or has been using them." This type of aura is the "aura of the habitual" and requires repetitive practice (341). However aura, Hansen clearly stipulates, is not an inherent property of person or objects. In sum, aura "implies a phenomenal structure that enables the manifestation of the gaze, inevitably refracted and disjunctive, and shapes its potential meanings" (342). Aura affects the gaze—ornament shares this quality with aura. For more, read: Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Benjamin's Aura', *Critical Inquiry* 34, no. 2 (2008): 340, https://doi.org/10.1086/529060.

[188] Benjamin in Hansen, 358.

assume that aura, especially ornamental aura, manifests, in part, as a sort of decoration on an object or being. Nonetheless, ornamental aura has a complicated relationship to its object as it remains unclear if according to Bejamin it emanates from within or resides on the surface of the aesthetic object.

Fauset's Angela deliberately curates her appearance to produce an "ornamental halo" around her body by ornamenting it with carefully selected garments. Angela intends to cultivate the entrancing powers of ornamental aura because she desires to climb the echelons of white society. She uses clothing to animate her physical attributes in order to convince Roger to marry her. Her fixation on Roger comes not out of love but rather an understanding that she can gain purchase on certain social luxuries through his social standing. Before their date, she lingers over her appearance:

> There was never very much colour in her cheeks, but her skin was warm and white; there was vitality beneath her pallor; her hair was, too, long and thick and yet so fine that is gave her little head the effect of being surrounded by a nimbus of light…Her dress was flame-colour—Paulette had induced her to buy it,—of a plain, rather heavy beautiful glowing silk….She had a string of good artificial pearls and two heavy silver bracelets. Thus she gave the effect of a flame herself; intense and opaque at the heart where her dress gleamed and shone, transparent and fragile where her white warm neck and face rose into her tenuous shadow of hair.[189]

Angela reveals that she views her body and appearance as an object available for attracting Roger's attention. Her dress being plain, it is her hair, skin, and the length of her limbs which become ornaments to her attire; the haptic nearness of her internalized objectification manifests in how her body, equal to her artificial pearl necklace and silver earrings, becomes accessory. Yet, the respective glow of her attributes morphs with the "flame-colour" dress so that Angela herself emanates warmth, power. Though her halo-like glow radiates from Angela's body, Fauset

[189] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 122.

provides a final image of Angela's flame-colored gown engulfing her. She is enclosed in the dress—at once subject and object.

Aura's ornamental aura entices the viewer because of its paradoxically bridging yet distancing qualities. That is, an ornamental aura entices the viewer, drawing them towards the aesthetic object, yet also acts as a veil between object and viewer. Angela projects herself as an independent white New Woman courting a man when really, she is a white passing black woman who cares not about courting as much as securing power. Furthermore, the repetition of adjectives related to light recall Virginia's "folk" aesthetic. Her ornamentation as a white New Woman is a "hybridization of black female experience and white American notions of femininity."[190] This scene depicts Angela's first true *styling of femininity* where she deliberately selects various aesthetics to ornament her body. It achieves her desired effect; Roger, at once delighted and puzzled, views his date as enigmatic. She thinks to herself, "Here I am having everything that girl ought to have just because I had sense enough to suit my actions to my appearance."[191] Ornamental aura aids the marginalized woman in circumscribing racist and sexist beliefs to, perhaps, gain credible social power, like marriage to an affluent bachelor.

Even though Fauset initially presents racial passing and ornamental aura as Angela's ticket to the life she desires, the author exposes how these acts will inevitably restrict the young woman. Angela's *style of femininity* fashioned for Roger will forever have to hide her blackness. After engaging in a pre-marital affair with Roger, Angela decides that she would rather be alone than marry without love. She rejects their affair and his later proposal for marriage. Fauset does not condemn her heroine's actions; Angela's "brief episode with Roger had left no trace on her

[190] Zackodnik, *The Mulatta and the Politics of Race*, 165.
[191] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 123.

moral character."[192] Instead, the episode provokes a gradual reordering of desires. Having experienced the sexual liberations of New Womanhood, Angela affirms her desire to marry for love. Still, a quiet life in Philadelphia feels unfulfilling. With her "sum total of knowledge of life…increased," Fauset's heroine continues navigating life as a white-passing black woman in New York, but slowly changes her circle of friends to more progressive individuals. After winning an art competition and acquiring a European internship, Angela vows to "speak of her strain of Negro blood" while over there so as to not encounter the same problems of self-effacement related to passing.

Reinvention of self in another country does not satisfy Fauset, however, because she has Angela confront racist prejudice in America before she permits her to fashion a new, less objectifying identity elsewhere. A visibly black woman from Angela's drawing class also wins the competition. Due to her visible race, however, Miss Powell is denied the opportunity to embark on the European art internship she has won. Even if she possesses talent and always looks presentable, her blackness eclipses all other qualities. Wanting to comfort her, Angela finds Miss Powell with several white reporters covering her case:

> Angela thought she had never seen the girl one half so attractive and exotic. She was wearing a thin silk dress, plainly made of a flaming red from which the satin blackness of her neck rose, a straight column topped by her squarish, somewhat massive head…. her high cheek bones showed a touch of red. To anyone whose ideals of beauty were not already set and sharply limited, she must have made a breathtaking appeal.[193]

The blend of Miss Powell and her fiery gown provokes a rise in sentiment in Angela. Miss Powell looks like a perfect picture. In this scene, Miss Powell mirrors Angela's first date outfit almost exactly. Fauset recycles the image of Angela's flame-coloured plain silk dress. The dress

[192] Fauset, *Plum Bun*.
[193] Fauset, 36.

links the two women visually. They already share much in common; their main difference being that Angela can ornament her body to guide whereas Miss Powell cannot. Angela being moved by Miss Powell's beauty—a similar authentic "folk" beauty like that of Virginia's—communicates Fauset's disapproval of racial passing. As a self-effacing act, it caters to racist ideology. Fauset, nevertheless, McLendon states, approves Angela's "quest for self-definition and so affirms the right of humans, of blacks in general and women in particular, to try for life's prizes."[194] I agree with McLendon's argument concerning Fauset's disapproval of racial passing as Angela renounces the act. Moved by Miss Powell's beauty and boldness, Angela declares "I'm coloured too" to the newspaper reporters which causes her to lose her own European art internship.[195] Unlike Clare Kendry's impenetrable sartorial ornamentation in *Passing*, Angela's material self-extension is more porous; the beauty of other women affects her search for identity by spurring her actions. Again, Miss Powell shares many similarities with Angela: she studies at the same art studio, possesses as much talent, and knows how to dress her body fabulously. Fauset refrains from chastising her heroine's denial of racial heritage and self-objectification. Prior to abjuring passing, Angela resolved herself to "lead a double life, move among two sets of acquaintances," but the splitting choice would force her to remain in an either/or identity paradigm.[196]

Fauset overturns many of Angela's choices at the end of the novel in the name of defining a New Negro Woman identity. Angela leaves New York to pursue art in France. Though few pages are allotted to Angela's life abroad, her removal from America speaks volumes. Angela's transformation from a young woman who sees whiteness as a prerequisite for achieving her

[194] McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, 39.
[195] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 347.
[196] Fauset, 252.

dreams to someone who eventually embraces her black heritage but resides outside of America signifies a profound critique of the racial, feminist, and social dynamics of her time. By objectifying her body through ornamentation, Angela initially believes she can attain the beauty, pleasure, and power she associates with whiteness. The novel's exploration of fashion and physical appearance as mediums of social mobility underscores the tension between external perceptions and internal identity. Ultimately, Fauset's portrayal of Angela's series of realizations advocates for a broader, more inclusive definition of black feminine selfhood. Whether America offers women of colour the terrain to first explore, and second express their *styles of femininity* remains doubtful.

Scopic Levels of Ornament: Clare in *Passing*

Larsen, like Fauset, pens characters who ornament their bodies while racially passing in her second novel. She actually authors one of the most elusive female characters of the Harlem Renaissance: Clare Kendry. Clare's defining traits are her sense of style and tinkling laugh, but neither the characters in the story nor the reader are ever allowed past Clare's ornamentation. Larsen also employs the foil character in *Passing* to highlight the intersecting tensions women of colour respond to and against in their search for self-determination. Two main characters structure the plot, Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry. Though both light-skinned enough to pass for white, only Clare establishes herself within white society by marrying a racist white man who remains unaware of her black ancestry. Irene lives in Harlem, embracing her racial identity as a black woman but occasionally passes for convenience. Clare and Irene are each other's foil. I say this because while Irene is often portrayed as the main protagonist on account of her, at times, narrating events, she serves as Clare's psychological double. Clare's inner thoughts never surface. She is, however, constantly physically described—blazoned even. Whereas Irene's

physique seldom receives attention. Fractured as they are in their presentation—Irene being the only one who narrates her inner thoughts and emotions and Clare only ever displaying her impeccably dressed physique—their narrative roles complement each other. Larsen deploys the mulatta figure as an "organizing metaphor" in *Passing.*[197] The woman's' paths cross unexpectedly, rekindling a friendship fraught with tension as Clare increasingly seeks to reconnect with the black community despite the dangers posed by her hidden ancestry. While Jacquelyn McLendon argues that this organizing metaphor allows Larsen to explore the "concept of doubleness as it inheres in the experience of African-Americans, I read Larsen as employing it to move beyond the stereotype of doubleness and into a mode of triple-consciousness—the feminine version of Du Bois' double-consciousness.[198] Larsen's use of the foil signals her desire to move past mere doubleness because Clare's surface, how she ornaments her body, becomes a third entity between her and Irene. The pair's relationship is a constant negotiation between who they are and how they appear.

Larsen presents Irene as obsessing over appearances, her own and that of other people's only to undermine the latter's ability to read beyond clothing. An opening scene in the novel details Irene's memory of running into Clare in Chicago: sitting in the breezy rooftop tearoom, a drastically different setting to the "sizzling" street below, Irene fixates on the "sweetly scented woman in a fluttering dress of green chiffon whose mingled pattern of narcissuses, jonquils, and hyacinths was a reminder of pleasantly chill spring days."[199] Both the mixed print of the woman's dress, which marks her as a visual spectacle, and the qualities of chiffon, a gossamer fabric known for its sheer and floating nature, capture Irene's interest. In a blazon-like manner,

[197] McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, 154.
[198] McLendon, 153.
[199] Larsen, *Passing*, 9.

Irene collapses woman and clothing into one eroticized object: “an attractive looking woman, was Irene’s opinion, with those dark, almost black, eyes and that wide mouth like a scarlet flower against the ivory of her skin. Nice clothes too, just right for the weather, thin and cool without being mussy…”[200] Irene is at once enraptured by the stranger. Though Irene fragments the woman in her description, through similar adjectives of freshness, the woman and the clothes she wears are associated with the physically soothing Drayton tearoom.

The woman is later revealed to be a racially passing Clare; though while her identity remains unbeknown to the reader and Irene, the woman, her dress, and the tearoom become linked through adjectives which relate to sheerness. Sheer fabric is dynamic; as all thin fabrics, it molds to the wearer, but because of its gossamer visual qualities, sheerness displays the matter which lies behind it. Tina Post’s theorization of *sheerness*, the second scopic saturation on her proposed opacity gradient scale of five, articulates how the visual qualities of sheerness communicate both “continuity (in that there is something coherent enough to be thought of as a whole) and vulnerability.” [201] Post claims that sheerness communicates continuity and vulnerability. In the Drayton scene, the continuity of the sheer fabric becomes a material self-extension of Clare’s body and successfully masks her identity by absorbing Irene’s gaze.[202] The sheer organza of the green chiffon dress *looks like* a surface even if the very fabric construction permits the viewer to see through the layers. Sheerness asserts presence without being aggressive. The sheer object’s versatility stems from its ability to be “shaped, draped, worn, or projected onto.”[203] It hides Clare in plain sight. Especially when worn, sheerness embodies the

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[200] Larsen, 9.
[201] Tina Post, ‘The Opacity Gradient’, in *Deadpan* (New York University Press, 2023), https://doi.org/10.18574/nyu/9781479811229.001.0001.124.
[202] Post responds to Édourard Glissant’s ideas of transparency and opacity to propose a gradient scale of obscurity which challenges the simple binary of hypervisibility and invisibility associated to black bodies.
[203] Post. *Deadpan*, 117.

dream of a second skin because it mediates between objectivity and subjectivity. The performative nature of the second skin objectifies the wearer which allows her to safeguard her subjectivity. Clare presents herself as an aesthetic object to be gazed at but in the very carefully constructed nature of her sartorial self-fashioning she asserts herself as aesthetic subject unbeknownst to her viewer.

Clare's elegant attire enables her to blend seamlessly into white society, concealing her black heritage and maintaining her social standing. However, this opulence also makes her highly visible and subject to scrutiny. Considering this, even the moments when Clare does not don sheer fabric, like organza, she operates in the mode of *sheerness*. Post further asserts, "The gradient scale of opacity suggests a fluidity in the presentation of self, where individuals navigate between different levels of transparency to manage their social interactions."[204] I argue that Clare relies on sheerness for all of her interactions after her decision to pass racially. Clare's sartorial choices exemplify this fluidity, as her attire serves as both a shield and a spotlight—an ornament on her body. Operating in a mode of *sheerness* ironically helps her maintain an opaque façade in white society, ensuring her safety and acceptance. It also, however, leaves her vulnerable as the fluid refracting qualities of sheerness generate attention that risks exposing her to the contradictions inherent in her identity.

As Irene's foil, Clare threatens to disrupt the former's carefully curated life as a wife to a respected doctor and mother to two growing boys. In the same Drayton scene, once the two women share a table after recognizing each other, Irene thinks about her curiosity towards passing. Though she affirms herself as a "race woman" who denies passing for white "except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that," she belies her interest

[204] Post, 81.

in the act of passing, and her dissatisfaction with her life, through her fascination with Clare, who cares "nothing for the race."[205] Mary Mabel Youman argues that Larsen contrasts Irene with Clare to show that "Blacks can and do lose the spiritual values of Blackness though they remain in a black world."[206] While Clare performs whiteness to leave the black community, Irene stays in Harlem but merely performs as "race woman" when she really views herself as an "American."[207] The absence of 'African' before 'American' signals Irene's complicated relationship to her ancestry. Irene outright questions the ethics behind passing but remains intrigued by the act. In contrast, Larsen does not question the ethics of passing. As Cheryl A. Wall states, "rather than emphasize the pathos of the "passing" situation, Larsen stresses its attractive veneer."[208] Moreover, Clare continuously disrupts Irene's moments of getting dressed. Whether literally dropping in unannounced into her dressing room or interrupting Irene's toilette metaphorically via a letter, Clare's "attractive veneer" confront Irene as she selects her clothing. These interruptions communicate more than the physical qualities of garments; Clare's presence reminds Irene of the plethora of ways identities can be fashioned.

Clare refutes the responsibilities which New Negro and New Woman ideals project onto women and, instead, chases display. Clare maintains her objectified status in both the white and black community; one of Irene's friends, Felice, proclaims "I want her for a party. Isn't she stunning today?" speaking of Clare.[209] But maintaining this objectified ornamented state permits Clare to re-enter the black community in Harlem without offending the people in the community. As an aesthetic object, she is perceived as non-threatening; she is a fascinating, pretty sight.

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[205] Larsen, *Passing*.
[206] Mary Mabel Youman. "Nella Larsen's Passing: A Study in Irony," College Language Association Journal 18 (1974): 235.
[207] Larsen, *Passing*, 76.
[208] Cheryl A. Wall, 'Passing for What? Aspects of Identity in Nella Larsen's Novels', *Black American Literature Forum* 20, no. 1/2 (1986): 97–111, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904554.
[209] Larsen, *Passing*, 65.

Irene, however, notices the power Clare wields even she dismisses her friend: "[Clare's] intelligent enough in a purely feminine way… Intelligent enough to wear a tight bodice and keep bowing swains whispering compliments and retrieving dropped fans. Rather a pretty picture," Irene tells her husband. [210] Yet, Irene feels "dowdy and commonplace" in her "new rose-coloured chiffon frock ending at the knees, and her cropped curls" compared to Clare, "exquisite, golden, fragrant, flaunting, in a stately gown of shining black taffeta, whose long, full skirt lay in graceful folds about her slim golden feet."[211] Though Irene also wears chiffon, she does not embody the mode of *sheerness* that Clare, shiny, refracting, and enticing does.

Irene's over-the-top language presents Clare as a scheming court woman; the former's comments imply that she believes women's role in society has shifted enough that they need not cultivate beauty to maintain men's attention. The 1920s, however, were still a time when women had to mold themselves to men's desires, and this is especially true for women of colour. Though several political and artistic movements sought to change women's social standing—the suffragettes and New Woman discourse, Loos' denouncing of women's need to beautify—the sociopolitical climate had not changed so drastically as to allow all women to forge their own lives without the security of marriage. Larsen's Clare roots her search for identity in a white woman's world because the pleasures outweigh the dangers. As a woman of colour who grew up with no money, Clare knows that a wealthy, successful husband offers her a security that she cannot acquire on her own. Therefore, she fabricates a presentable second skin through clothing to navigate her desires. Furthermore, Fauset indicates Clare's understanding that the right kind of attention leads to social mobility through her choice of dress. The "long, full skirt" made of black taffeta contrasts with the beaded chiffon or crepe fabric used for the styles of the day, the short

[210] Larsen, 61.
[211] Larsen, 53.

flapper dress and turns Clare into a spectacle which many gaze upon. Clare's clothed body provokes a scopophilic gaze from men and women, white and black communities. In reality, Clare capitalizes on the aesthetic pleasure people experience from *looking at* her.

Enraptured by the aesthetic pleasure Clare provides, people, like her racist husband John Bellew or Irene and her black Harlem community, become hooked on Clare. When discussing how aesthetic objects "entice or enlist us," Rita Felski analyses the stickiness of attachment.[212] She outlines how the critical language of the last half century echoes and endorses the modernist vision of detachment. The modernist vision parallels the Harlem Renaissance's aim of disentangling the image of the New Negro from the Old Negro. Larsen's Clare, however, flits between detachment and attachment. Her ornamentation though clothing participates in detaching her from her poor abusive upbringing while simultaneously garnering attachment from the socially mobile wealthy white community and, later, the bourgeois black community. Through the character of Clare, Larsen outlines how adherence to aesthetic theories that stake "their claims on a selective vision" cannot accommodate the marginal.[213] As Felski notes, "perhaps true naifs are those critics who imagine themselves free of attachments."[214]

Clare herself is deeply attached to her clothing and several of her dresses communicate for her. In the climactic scene, Clare's choice of a sensational red gown is a critical element. The red gown amplifies her visibility to an extreme, making her the focal point of the gathering and heightening the tension around her ambiguous identity. The gown's vibrant colour and boldness read as Clare's ultimate assertion of her presence, a deliberate choice to step out of the shadows of passing and into the spotlight, regardless of the consequences. The *dénouement,* when her

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[212] Rita Felski, *Hooked: Art and Attachment* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), 1, https://doi.org/10.7208/9780226729770.
[213] Felski, 2.
[214] Felski, 3.

husband bursts into the party and accuses her of hiding her black identity, provokes a flurry of words and movements which result in Clare, "a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold," falling out the sixth-floor window to her death.[215] Next to her were both Irene and Clare's husband. The ambiguity of Clare's fall—whether accidental, suicidal, or murderous—resonates with Post's idea of the gradient scale of opacity. The red gown makes Clare hyper-visible, but the circumstances of her death remain opaque. This juxtaposition reflects Clare's life-long struggle to navigate the fluid boundaries of her racial identity. In the moment of her death, her visibility is at its peak, yet the truth of her demise is shrouded in mystery, encapsulating the complex interplay of concealment and exposure. Claudia Tate dives into an analysis of Clare's final moments to argue that "the novel's conclusion provides no definitive answer about Clare's death, leaving it open to interpretation and highlighting the complexities of her character."[216] Tate makes bold claims denouncing how other scholars are too quick to ascribe an accidental or murderous label to Clare's death. Though several cues indicate Irene's possible active role, like her refusal to *let* herself remember, Clare's death remains unsolved by the end of the novel. The option of suicide is seldom explored by scholars. While Larsen leaves Clare's death open to interpretation, the red dress recalls another significant moment in Clare's narrative where she suddenly jumped into action. I do not wish to proclaim Clare's death as a suicide, but I do believe the option deserves sustained attention because of the signalling of the red dress.

In the opening scene of the novel, when Irene recalls a memory of Clare, another red "frock" punctures the page.[217] Spurred into memory by a letter sent from Clare:

> … for a swift moment Irene Redfield seemed to see a pale small girl sitting on a ragged blue sofa, sewing pieces of bright red cloth together, while her drunken father, a tall,

[215] Larsen, *Passing*, 79.
[216] Claudia Tate, 'Nella Larsen's Passing: A Problem of Interpretation', *Black American Literature Forum* 14, no. 4 (1980): 145, https://doi.org/10.2307/2904405.
[217] Larsen, *Passing*, 5.

> powerfully built man, raged threateningly up and down the shabby room, bellowing curses and making spasmodic lunges at her which were not the less frightening because they were, for the most part, ineffectual. Sometimes he did manage to reach her. But only the fact that the child had edged herself and her poor sewing over to the farthermost corner of the sofa suggested that she was in any way perturbed by this menace to herself and her work.[218]

Clare is depicted sewing a "pathetic little red frock" while evading her alcoholic father's rage.[219] This scene is laden with imagery that speaks to Clare's constrained existence. The red frock symbolizes her entrapment, as she is confined within the domestic sphere, performing traditional female labour under the constant threat of her father's violence.[220] The act of sewing, which requires patience and precision, contrasts sharply with the chaos and fear imposed by her father's alcoholism, highlighting Clare's lack of agency and her need to navigate her oppressive environment carefully. Despite this, sewing the dress is also an act of survival. Clare's focus on this task amid her father's rage suggests her ability to subvert her circumstances, if only temporarily. In the same burst of memory, Irene recalls Clare's reaction the day her father died. Still at first, a young Clare gives "way to a torrent of weeping" before giving everyone present "a sharp look of flashing scorn" and vanishing "through the door."[221]

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[218] Larsen, 5.
[219] Larsen, 6.
[220] On the recurring motif of the "flame" coloured dress across *Plum Bun* and *Passing*, I want to outline the two main conclusions. A handful of scholars, Jean Marie Lutes, Elizabeth Way and Theresa C. Zackodnik, analysed the recurring motif in one or both of the novels. When focusing on Fauset, Way and Zackodnik argue that she associates the "flame" with an essential blackness because the sisters Angela and Virginia are connected though different descriptions of the "flame" (Way, "Dressing to Pass;" Zackodnik, The Mulatta and the Politics of Race). Viriginia's skin is once described as "flamed" (Fauset *Plum Bun*, 165). while Angela dons a "flame" coloured silk dress, as mentioned above. I agree with Jean Marie Lutes' argument that these red dresses dramatize the risk of exploring sexual freedom as a woman of colour by linking the protagonists to the "iconography of the scarlet woman," which references Nathanial Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter* (Jean Marie Lutes, 'Making Up Race: Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and the African American Cosmetics Industry', *Arizona Quarterly: A Journal of American Literature, Culture, and Theory* 58, no. 1 (2002): 79, https://doi.org/10.1353/arq.2002.0002.). As Fauset and Larsen are exploring the psychology of women who do not conform to social norms, I am inclined to agree with Lutes' association of the Angela and Clare to Hester Prynne.
[221] Larsen, *Passing*, 6.

The similarities between the first and last depictions of Clare underscore her impenetrable ornamentation of self through clothing. In the first scene, Fauset signals Clare's future use of clothing to escape oppressive settings, escape her very heritage. The repetition of a red dress motif attributes a certain agency to Clare in the tense revelation of her identity. To say Clare achieves liberation in death would be too definite; Larsen does not offer enough textual evidence to support such a claim. Yet I am not willing to pronounce Clare as the ultimate tragic figure merely because she dies. Irene, riddled with confusion, guilt, and shock, condemned to carry on with her unsatisfying performative life, ultimately reads as more tragic than Clare. Like Helga at the end of *Quicksand*, the suggestion is that though Irene lives, she is a tragic figure. Helena Michie suggests that Irene, unlike Clare, will "rise again in life;" she must first "travel through a darkness" to reach a "simpler and more comprehensive notion of race and community."[222] I am inclined to disagree because Irene's character arch demonstrates no willingness to approach the topic of race in a more "comprehensive" manner. Clare, however, was never afforded the possibility to reveal her inner thoughts—to communicate how she conceives of race and community. Evidently, a character who refuses to subscribe to prefabricated notions cannot survive the narrative. Killing Clare permits Larsen to maintain the integrity of her character's topmost desire: to remain pretty and unknowable to her viewers. Larsen seems to suggest that Clare's radical nature could not have survived in Harlem; a self-fashioning New Negro Woman would pose too great a threat to the notions of "race and community."

Conclusion

In their second novels, the use of ornamentation and the foil character within the passing narrative allows Fauset and Larsen thoroughly to explore the contention of identity itself as

[222] Helena Michie, *Sororophobia: Differences Among Women in Literature and Culture* (Oxford University Press, 1992), 154.

fiction. “Fauset and Larsen wrote novels that challenge an anterior literary corpus by parodying the formulaic tragic-mulatto tale and exploring the metaphorical cogency of passing and the mulatto as images of wider or at least different matters that simplistic dualism” McLendon explains.[223] The literary depiction of black women as “intuitively, naturally fashionable and beautiful is a direct repudiation of ingrained stereotypes held in American society that black women were coarse, unrefined, and unattractive.”[224] Angela and Clare, in their respective narratives, transform their bodies into canvases, adorning themselves in ways that reflect their desires and ambitions. This act of ornamentation becomes a method for them to exert control over how they are perceived by the world around them. For Angela, clothing becomes a way to assert her individuality and to claim a space for herself in a world that sees her through the narrow lens of race and gender. Her careful selection of attire is a deliberate act of self-definition, a way to project an image that objectifies her so that she may form her subjectivity away from prying, prejudiced eyes. Clare Kendry’s choice of clothing is also strategic, designed to maintain the illusion of her whiteness while simultaneously asserting her presence in spaces where she would otherwise be marginalized. Clare's adornment is both a shield and a weapon; it protects her from the scrutiny of those who might question her racial identity while also allowing her to manipulate the perceptions of others to her advantage.

The heroines' use of ornamentation serves as a counterpoint to Alfred Loos's argument against artificial adornment. While Loos advocates for simplicity and practical fashion as a means for women to achieve equality, Fauset and Larsen show that adornment affords autonomy. By consciously curating their appearances, Angela and Clare resist the reductive categorization of their identities and carve out spaces for themselves within a society that seeks to constrain

[223] McLendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen*, 7.
[224] Way, ‘Dressing to Pass during the Harlem Renaissance’, 558.

them. This sartorial self-fashioning allows the heroines to control the narrative of their bodies, presenting a carefully constructed image that complicates the simplistic judgments of those who view them. In doing so, Angela and Clare assert their subjectivity, even as they navigate the objectification imposed upon them by societal standards. The novels suggest that the act of self-adornment is not merely about vanity or superficiality, but rather about the creation of a "second skin" that mediates the gaze of the other. Their strategic objectification maps out, as Cheng outlines, "a vertiginous rather than stable relationship between subject and object."[225] By mediating the viewer's access to themselves as objects, Angela and Clare exhibit their keen awareness of their intersectional positionality. Through their heroines, Fauset and Larsen explore how ornamentation exposes the complex interplay between visibility and invisibility, agency and objectification, and ultimately, the ongoing struggle for self-determination in the face of societal constraints.

[225] Cheng, *Second Skin*, 56.

Coda

How a character responds to clothes, their own or those of others, reveals the stakes of a novel. Throughout this thesis, I have demonstrated how Fauset and Larsen fill their works with literary depictions of clothing and accessories to carve out moments of independence for their heroines. I aim to contribute to the legitimization of fashion studies as a serious and valuable academic discipline. Too often cast aside as superfluous—feminine—fashion rarely serves as the principal framework for literary analysis. Fashion is not merely a reflection of society's habits and tastes but can also be construed, as Marshik suggests, as an active agent in shaping social dynamics. Being primarily a visual medium, fashion as a framework is used more frequently in film studies, periodical studies, or art history. Written depictions of fashion tease out its relationship to the wearer through characters' perceptions. Within the narrative structure of these four novels, fashion plays a crucial role in influencing characters, advancing plotlines, and defining genres. More importantly, fashion purchases different levels of freedom for Joanna, Helga, Angela, and Clare. More than simple frocks, the world of fashion offers these women the ability to self-define.

Furthermore, Fauset and Larsen are early interveners within black feminism and contribute to a genealogy of black women who sought to dislodge the New Negro from its gendered underpinnings. While the male intelligentsia of the Harlem Renaissance discuss racial uplift for the entire black community, they focus on the black man's role within black communities and white society. It is the black man's purpose and function which will come to secure his position within American life. The New Negro must be the hero of his own story. The concept of the heroic figure was harder to apply to women of colour. She did not possess the

luxury of choice concerning her career, her relationship to public life, or her relationship to domestic life. Fauset clearly outlines the bleak prospects for the New Negro Woman in *Plum Bun*. As Angela Murray's mother, Mattie, remembers she had three options as a poor young woman trying to earn money: domestic service, ladies' maid, or seamstress.[226] None of the choices available to a black woman could earn her enough money to properly propel her out of poverty. Even being a seamstress—a career where a white woman could garner wealthy patrons— provided little funds for black women as they catered to other black women who could not pay competitive prices.[227] A generation older, Mattie's daughters find work as teachers; Angela and Virginia, however, can exclusively teach black children. Only when Angela passes for a white woman does she find work as a fashion illustrator. Fauset and Larsen contribute significantly to writing about the New Negro Woman because they address her confining social position.

Fauset and Larsen arm their heroines with an acute knowledge of the value and power of beauty as they traverse various obstacles in their quests for self-determination; how their heroines use fashion highlights the particular tensions structuring the consciousness of women of colour. The act of curating one's appearance, for black and biracial women of this early twentieth-century moment, becomes a means of grappling with the constraints of race, gender, and class during a pivotal era which explored cultural shifts in subjecthood. Moments when characters decide what to wear in novels or the author's choice of clothing for a character are not neutral. Their reliance on clothing to interrogate crucial intersections between New Negro and

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[226] Fauset, *Plum Bun*, 27.

[227] Notable exceptions to this fact are Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe, two African American women who were vital contributors to American fashion. Keckly worked in Civil-War-ear Washington, DC while Lowe worked in New York City during the mid-twentieth century. They respectively dressed elite white women like Mary Todd Lincoln and Jacqueline Kennedy. For further information, consult Elizabeth Way, 'Elizabeth Keckly and Ann Lowe: Recovering an African American Fashion Legacy That Clothed the American Elite', *Fashion Theory* 19, no. 1 (February 2015): 115–41, https://doi.org/10.2752/175174115X14113933306905.

New Woman thought of the early twentieth century underscores the pivotal role of clothing in women's lives. These developing identitarian paradigms sought emancipation from unjust societal structures yet failed to account for the particular subject position of the woman of colour. And so, Fauset and Larsen illustrate how women of colour, othered by society, turn to the material, physical qualities of clothing in search of self-determination.

Joanna and Helga use fashion as a means to shape their identities independently of the New Negro and New Woman *models of femininity*. However, they are ultimately unable to escape the limitations of these societal frameworks. On account of their race, Joanna and Helga cannot achieve the gendered liberations of the New Woman figure and because of their gender, they are excluded from the public life of the masculine New Negro. Fauset and Larsen's use of the romance and female *bildungsroman* genres as frameworks, however, differentiate their respective protagonists' relationship to discourses of the New Negro and the New Woman. By adhering to the conventions of these genres, the *coupling convention* as duCille calls it, Fauset portrays Joanna's 'voyage in' as a reshaping of her desires that aligns her with sociopolitical expectations. Joanna, meanwhile, embraces the role of a 'race woman,' and despite the limitations, Fauset ascribes a sense of agency and contentment to her protagonist, presenting her conformity as a valid and fulfilling choice. In contrast, Larsen uses the two genres to critique the notion of a woman finding satisfaction in marriage. Helga's story in Larsen's work is marked by a series of failed attempts to assert her individuality. Her wardrobe, initially a symbol of nonconformity, ultimately becomes a mean for others to fetishize and control her after her relatives alter her clothing. Helga's multiple voyages leave her exhausted and desperate, ultimately leading to her submission to traditional racial and gender norms. Both authors use fashion as both a material metaphor and strategy, within the diegesis of their protagonists'

shifting desires, identity, and self-perception. However, while Fauset uses the female *bildungsroman* and romance to show Joanna's agency and reorientation towards societal expectations, Larsen critiques the genres' promise of fulfilment through marriage and motherhood through her tragic ending. Both characters' experiences with fashion underscore the persistent influence of racial and sexual ideologies, revealing the complexities and constraints faced by black and biracial women in their pursuit of self-definition

Plum Bun and *Passing* converge across multiple planes: the authors probe the psychology of a racialized woman who chooses to pass for white, rely on the character foil to illustrate the competing desires of freedom and community of their protagonists, and revise the passing narrative genre to pacify the traditionally tragic ending. The authors' respective second novels portray a daring exploration of the woman of colour's curation of subjectivity through sartorial ornamentation. Fauset and Larsen depart from the 'tragic mulatta' genre through white-passing biracial characters who "forsake their community of origin in search of new horizons in the white world."[228] They present the 'mulatta' as an agentic figure. Angela and Clare are aware of their racial heritage and choose to fashion themselves as white women in white society to experience life without racial oppression. By transforming themselves into surveyed spectacles, the pale-skinned biracial protagonists not only confront the gaze that seeks to define and confine them but also reclaim their subjectivity, using beauty and fashion as means of social protection and personal empowerment. They use fashion and their bodies to create *styles of femininity*; this complex interplay between appearance and identity, captured through the lens of fashion, reveals the authors' sophisticated engagement with contemporary issues of race, gender, and individuality. The New Negro Woman who emerges from their narratives is one who defies

[228] Gallego, *Passing Novels in the Harlem Renaissance: Identity Politics and Textual Strategies*, 124.

simplistic categorizations, seeking to harmonize personal desires with societal expectations without being subsumed by them. Evidently, both Fauset and Larsen assert the New Negro Woman's existence but question if American society permits her identity to flourish during the 1920s. The heroines' use of ornamentation serves challenges Alfred Loos's argument against artificial adornment. While Loos advocates for simplicity and practical fashion as a marker of elevated taste during the modernist period, Fauset and Larsen demonstrate that adornment can afford autonomy to those whose bodies are denied just participation in society. As Hurston notes, the act of adornment satisfies the will of the creator. By seeking to satisfy their own desires through the act of adorning their bodies with clothing, Angela and Clare break down the binary between aesthetic subject and aesthetic object. Only through this breakdown, do the protagonists begin to form their subjectivity.

I read *There is Confusion*, *Quicksand*, *Plum Bun*, and *Passing* in conversation with the broader issues of individual versus society that several black intellectuals were debating, such as Cooper. Wall argues that both "*Quicksand* and *Passing* contemplate the inextricability of the racism and sexism which confront the black woman in her quest for a wholly integrated identity."[229] I agree and respond to Wall's claims by analyzing how both Fauset and Larsen interrogate the ways New Negro and New Woman discourse contribute to sexist and racist parameters constraining women of colour. I must reiterate my agreement with Wedin's pithy claim about these works being first and foremost a *literature of search*. Prizing both Fauset's and Larsen's novels, here analyzed as literary projects which seek to probe the psychology and desires of the modern woman of colour, does not discredit their political impact. Rather, I contend that reading beyond these novels' political statements to uncover how they draw

[229] Wall, 'Passing for What?'

inspiration from feminist models and make contributions to the realm of literature, and especially black feminist literature, during and beyond the Harlem Renaissance better aligns with Fauset and Larsen's aims. Though not analyzed in this thesis, Maggie Ellersley in *There is Confusion* propels herself out of poverty and becomes a successful beautician thanks to Madame Harkness' beauty school, a clear reference to Madam C. J. Walker's women-centered enterprise. Zora Neale Hurston's Janie Crawford in *Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937)* takes bold control of her romantic life, as do Helga and Angela. Traces of Clare's wild, impenetrable nature appear in Toni Morrison's eponymous character Beloved.

In my analysis of these novels through the lens of fashion, I have shown Fauset and Larsen's attunement to the intersecting planes shaping the woman of colour's consciousness in the early twentieth century. Both prevailing New Negro and New Woman discourse efface her subjectivity and prevent her from exercising self-determination. Made immaterial, she reaches for the materiality of clothing to fashion her subjectivity. The multiple and varied literary depictions of clothing in these literary works underscores fashion's significance; fashion participates in identity formation. This dual role of fashion as both an empowering and restrictive force highlights the complex layers of identity negotiation faced by women of colour, illustrating how they navigate societal expectations and personal desires. By examining these narratives, we gain a deeper understanding of how fashion can both sometimes oppress and at other moments liberate the wearer. The heroines read their own bodies and are read by others through the lens of fashion, which acts as both a facilitator and a barrier, marking and affecting all characters.

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