"A Shade Too Unreserved": Destabilizing Sexuality and Gender Constructs of the New Negro Identity in Harlem Renaissance Literature

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“A SHADE TOO UNRESERVED”: DESTABILIZING SEXUALITY AND GENDER
CONSTRUCTS OF THE NEW NEGRO IDENTITY IN HARLEM RENAISSANCE
LITERATURE

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Much of the Harlem Renaissance artistic movement was directly intertwined with the New Negro social movement of the time. Race leaders spoke to and influenced artistic trends, while artists often engaged with the New Negro race issues and social debates through their works. Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston used their own fictional works to explore the New Negro construct being promoted. In examining the constructed nature of this New Negro identity, these artists strove to destabilize the social “norms” upon which the identity was based. As they thematically and stylistically explored such social constructs through their fiction, Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston simultaneously gave voice to those perspectives unrepresented within such restrictive constructs. This project examines these authors’ subversion of such social constructs through the frameworks of intersectionality and contextual dialogue.
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Introduction: The Social Construction of the New Negro Identity

After the Civil War, Black\textsuperscript{1} cultural leaders in the United States strove to combat rampant racism and to create a respected place for Black Americans within the surrounding hostile white social structure. They promoted an assertive Black identity, the New Negro, that attempted to counteract the pervasive racial stereotypes of the time. This New Negro identity was typically illustrated as a strong, cultured, educated man. Although Black leaders had been advocating socially “respectable” Black identities to combat racial stereotypes for hundreds of years, the movement gained further support after the Civil War. The 1919 Red Summer\textsuperscript{2} further emphasized the need for a strong, public socio-political stance within the Black community—a stance popularized by the promotion of the New Negro as a heroic, idealized identity. This socially-constructed New Negro became part of a cultural discourse, often directed toward the growing middle and upper class Black population. Black leaders promoted their own versions of the New Negro, arguing for the importance of such an identity in the further advancement of the race. Propaganda for and debate over the New Negro identity appeared in essays,

\textsuperscript{1} Throughout this paper, I use the capitalized “Black” rather than “black.” As the spelling “negro” shifted to “Negro” after the Civil War to represent the term’s shift from a description to an identity, this same capitalization as representing communal identity is seen in cultures, races, and communities across the U.S. Although lower-case spelling is currently more common than capitalization for the Black identity, my decision to utilize the capitalized Black spelling in this paper serves to parallel the capitalized Negro identity explored in the paper.

\textsuperscript{2} The name for the race conflicts during the summer of 1919, with riots and lynchings throughout dozens of cities including Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington D.C.
autobiographies, newspaper articles, magazines, and even novels, as the intellectual exchange began to trickle into popular culture.

By the 1920s, many Black artists considered the New Negro identity too restrictive, arguing that it did not reflect the lives of the majority of the population. As a result, Harlem Renaissance writers often chose to challenge this identity in their works by portraying characters that were the antithesis of the restrictive New Negro proposed by cultural leaders. Wallace Thurman’s character Paul in *Infants of the Spring*, Nella Larsen’s Irene in *Passing*, and Zora Neale Hurston’s Delia in “Sweat” are only a few examples of this broader trend among Harlem Renaissance writers. Authors argued that while these characters may engage in “immoral” or “uncultured” behavior, such characters reflect a reality of Negro life often glossed over by the idealistic portrayals of the New Negro. While such “immoral” characters were typically popular among general readers, many critics condemned the writers for perpetuating negative stereotypes of Black Americans.

However, just as the pervasive racial stereotypes were fictitious, the New Negro identity also promoted a restrictive and artificial portrayal of African American lives. Each person had his or her own idea of the New Negro identity; therefore, although each social leader promoted his own definition as universal, a single agreed-upon identity could never be reached. The Harlem Renaissance artists I explore in this project used their works to counter the common argument for a unified (and thus inherently restrictive) New Negro identity. By challenging such identity restrictions, these artists...
undercut any proposed “natural” racial or gender identity, instead exploring the social construction and enforcement of such roles.

In this project, I examine the techniques of three Harlem Renaissance writers, Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston, all of whom consistently challenge and complicate the socially constructed New Negro identity through their works. These authors are particularly significant in their incorporation of queer sensibilities within their texts as they interrogate the New Negro’s assumed gender norms. However, they are by no means unique in their interrogation of the New Negro construct. Instead, my hope is that my analysis of these authors’ works can be usefully applied to the works of other Harlem Renaissance authors, offering new ways of reading and engaging with the material. While each chapter focuses on an individual author’s texts, I simultaneously examine the ways these authors’ techniques are in dialogue with the other authors’ works and with the broader Harlem Renaissance community. Through their texts, these authors explore the complexities and interactions of multiple controversial social issues. Therefore, it is essential to engage in literary analysis that celebrates these complexities and interrelationships rather than simplifying or avoiding these issues.

In this introduction, I discuss the historical context of gender and sexuality social trends leading up to and during the Harlem Renaissance. I then explore the New Negro debate occurring during the late 1800s and early 1900s, including a discussion of women’s roles and debates within the New Negro movement. Once the historical context is established, I examine my own methodological framework for analyzing Thurman’s,
Larsen’s, and Hurston’s works through such contexts. These authors are in dialogue with the surrounding social contexts; therefore, analysis of the authors’ works must first recognize these contexts with which they are dialoguing in order to understand their subversion of such social trends through their works.

As Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston deconstruct the socially enforced “norms” of race, gender, and sexuality, they enable a re-reading of both their own texts and the formation of the New Negro identity. By examining the authors’ subversion of these socially imposed identities, I explore how these multiple identities exist in interrelation with each other and how these identities are held within a broader social power structure. Criticism of these authors’ works most often focuses on a single social identity issue, such as race or sexuality, in order to analyze the issue within the confined space of a critical work. Such a narrowing of critical focus is to be expected, as it is impossible to view all elements of an identity structure simultaneously. For example, my own work focuses narrowly on the authors’ themes of gender and sexuality roles as they interact with the New Negro identity construction. I am not focusing on the many other elements of social identity that appear in the authors’ works (for example, class, region, nationality, color, family structure, and many others). However, my goal in this project is to develop an analytical framework based on identity intersectionality and social contextual dialogue that can then be applied to further analysis in the Harlem Renaissance literary field. When we base our research solely on conventional identity structures, we reinforce the oppressive power structure that imposes these narrowed identity constructs. By queering (destabilizing) our conventional readings of these
identity norms through an exploration of these identities as social constructions, we are able analytically to deconstruct the norms themselves and thus to engage with the intersecting multiplicities of identities in new ways. Through this new framework, we can then engage the literary works’ complexities rather than forcing a narrowed, simplifying analytical lens.

These multiple identity structures within the authors’ works reflect a complex dialogue between the works and the social contexts to which they are responding. Therefore, it is important to recognize not only the context of the racial movements at the turn of the century, but also the trends determining social constructions of gender and sexual identities. For instance, at the turn of the century, women’s social roles changed dramatically, as the 1800s cult of true womanhood evolved into the autonomous New Woman. Both of these movements had a significant impact on the authors’ works in this project, as Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston navigated within such social expectations while subverting the role of these expectations as “norms.”

The cult of true womanhood is a contemporary term used to describe the white middle class gender ideology promoted during the early- to mid-1800s in the United States. Coined in 1966 in Barbara Welter’s article, “The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860,” the term is used to describe the gendered traits that constitute a socially-promoted “true” woman during the mid-nineteenth century. Welter narrows these traits to four categories: piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. “True” women portrayed all of these traits. Catherine E. Beecher portrays such definitions of womanhood in her 1841 book, A Treatise on Domestic Economy: For the Use of Young


*Ladies at Home and at School.* Beecher argues that God has set up a hierarchical world, with one role superior and the other inferior (26). A woman remains inferior to her husband in all social roles except that of the home—a woman’s power is in raising her children. Beecher explains, “The formation of the moral and intellectual character of the young is committed mainly to the female hand. The mother forms the character of the future man” (37). Beecher’s text reflects the cult of true womanhood’s prevalence at the time. She argues that a woman’s true place is in the domestic sphere; it is in this sphere that women hold true power, as they provide the moral compass for their families. In all other domains, women should submit to their husbands as superior, solely restricting themselves to their role in the domestic sphere. The cult of true womanhood effectively reinforced women’s “place” in the home while defining solely white middle and upper class women as “true” women.

Of course, the traits of true womanhood are impossible for women of color and of lower economic classes to achieve. Based on the cult’s definitions, “true” women lived solely in the domestic sphere. To work outside the home, a necessity for many women, was consequently to be “unwomanly.” In addition, Black women at the time were fighting the prevalent stereotypes of being labeled either unfeminine or hypersexualized. These opposing stereotypes effectively denied Black women the ability to inhabit the socially-defined “true” womanhood (Carby 38). Despite the racism and classism inherent in such a definition, the cult of true womanhood continued to exist as an ideal standard for many Black women, as they attempted to prove their femininity and thus negate the disparaging racial stereotypes of the time. The New Negro movement often encouraged a
“true womanhood” lens for Black women of the time, in an attempt to counteract racial stereotypes of Black women as unfeminine or immoral. Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston, on the other hand, explore the social significance and restrictions inherent within such gender roles and emphasize the constructed nature of such roles.

While the cult of true womanhood maintained a strong presence in Black communities as many Black women fought to negate “hypersexualized” stereotypes, white gender roles began to shift toward acknowledging women’s sexual desires. During the late 1800s and early 1900s, Victorian ideas of sexuality evolved, as women gained more social power, remained single longer, and often worked outside the home. This evolution developed into the “New Woman”—an opposing force to the earlier cult of true womanhood. With more middle-class women joining the work force and delaying marriage, the “New Woman” enabled this new generation to embrace more economic and sexual freedom. Charlotte Perkins Gilman portrays this new generation’s perspective in her 1898 book, *Women and Economics: A Study of the Economic Relations Between Men and Women as a Factor in Social Evolution*. She states that “a truer spirit” arises through “the increasing desire of young girls to be independent, to have a career of their own, at least for a while, and the growing objection of countless wives to the pitiful asking for money, to the beggary of their position” (152). For Gilman and the “New Women,” the earlier role of women’s domesticity and reliance on a husband is in fact a “pitiful” position of “beggary” that denies the woman independence. Through work, the New Woman gains newfound economic and social freedom, and in the process, contradicts the ideals of the earlier cult of true womanhood. The Harlem Renaissance is a point of
transition for these opposing gender role movements, with social pressures often conflicting. This intersection of opposing pressures is a prominent force within the authors’ works in this project, as each explores the complexities arising from such intersections through their character portrayals.

Social judgment was used to reinforce gender roles, often imposing an external morality onto individuals’ experiences, as can be seen in the social control of women’s sexualities. Before the start of sexual evolution with New Womanhood, during the early 1800s’ cult of true womanhood, sexually active women were considered “fallen” and thus irredeemable. Because women were considered the controlling moral force for men’s sex drives, women’s own sexual desires were thought to be either nonexistent or guided solely through morals and marital bonds. Those women who expressed sexual desires were considered immoral, primitive, and dangerous. In his article “‘Lost Manhood’ Found: Male Sexual Impotence and Victorian Culture in the United States,” Kevin J. Mumford explains the concept of the fallen woman in the 1800s: “[Reformers] generally treated disorderly women, whom they termed ‘fallen,’ as beyond reform” (39). These fallen women challenged “the cult of domesticity, particularly to the idea that innately pure women were responsible for restraining men’s lust. By the 1830s, it was widely believed that lost womanhood—unlike lost manhood—could not be redeemed” (Mumford 39). This sexual double standard encouraged the repression of women’s sexuality and the promotion of the “feminine ideal”—the cult of true womanhood.

These social definitions of sexuality and gender roles were directly interrelated with other imposed social definitions such as race. For instance, Black men and women
were considered inherently and irredeemably “fallen.” It would be impossible for them to achieve the sexual and moral purity of whites. White Victorians viewed Black men as barbaric and out of control, in contrast to white men’s restraint and morality (Mumford 46-47), while Black women were subject to similar stereotypes as hypersexualized, primitive, and immoral. James Weldon Johnson highlights the prevalence of such stereotypes, noting the integration of these stereotypes into artistic restrictions in venues like the theater:

One of the well-known taboos was that there should never be any romantic love-making in a Negro play. If anything approaching a love duet was introduced in a musical comedy, it had to be broadly burlesqued. The reason behind this taboo lay in the belief that a love scene between two Negroes could not strike a white audience except as ridiculous. The taboo existed in deference to the superiority stereotype that Negroes cannot be supposed to mate romantically, but do so in some sort of minstrel fashion or in some more primeval manner than white people. This taboo had been one of the most strictly observed. . . . So, with the establishment of the Negro theatre in Harlem, coloured performers in New York experienced for the first time release from the restraining fears of what a white audience would stand for. (Black Manhattan 171)

Just as slaves were not allowed to marry, this assumption of racial “inferiority” continued well after the Civil War, with whites assuming that such ideal, “cultured” concepts as romance and love could never apply to an “inferior” race. Whites reinforced their own social “superiority” through their reliance on stereotyping men and women of all other races. Such stereotypes continued well into the 1900s, while Black men and women were constantly forced to counter such assumptions—an issue explored by the authors within this project. In combating such racism, Black leaders and artists would often rely on standards like the cult of true womanhood in order to emphasize the feminine virtues of Black women. Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston used their fictional works to navigate
among these imposed racial stereotypes and the countering pressures from race leaders to oppose such stereotypes within their works.

Many in the New Negro movement felt that Negro artists should use caution when portraying Black men’s and particularly Black women’s sexuality in their works; they feared that explicit portrayals of sexuality would only serve to perpetuate whites’ rampant stereotypes. In her introduction to Nella Larsen’s novels, Deborah E. McDowell notes these social pressures, as Black writers, particularly women, were forced to navigate between the choice of refuting stereotypes and portraying reality. McDowell states,

Since the very beginning of their history running over roughly 130 years, black women novelists have treated sexuality with caution and reticence, a pattern clearly linked to the network of social and literary myths perpetuated throughout history about black women’s libidinousness. It is well known that during slavery the white slave master constructed an image of black female sexuality which shifted responsibility for his own sexual passions onto his female slaves. They, not he, had wanton, insatiable desires that he was powerless to resist. (xii)

These stereotypes continued throughout the early 1900s, reflecting part of Harlem’s appeal for the white “tourists.” Many white men used Harlem as an outlet for their own immoral activities, and in the process reasserted their own stereotypes of Negroes (Faderman 68). White men would often seek out Black prostitutes in Harlem and then use the Black prostitutes’ existence as evidence of the men’s own stereotype for Black women’s lasciviousness.

Black rights organizations fought to refute such stereotypes, using examples of moral, cultured New Negro citizens to counter the stereotypes. McDowell explores the permeation of this opposition into the novels of Black women in the 1800s and early
1900s, noting the dominating “pattern of reticence about black female sexuality” (xiii). She explains that Black women writers “responded to the myth of the black woman’s sexual licentiousness by insisting fiercely on her chastity” (xiii). Thus, in an attempt to “overcome their heritage of rape and concubinage, and following the movement by black club women of the era, they imitated the ‘purity,’ the sexual morality of the Victorian bourgeoisie” (McDowell xiii). In an attempt to contradict such stereotypes, Black women writers often relied on Victorian strict moral codes within their literature, long after social trends in the 1900s had begun to explore sexuality far more openly. Therefore, authors like Larsen and Hurston are noteworthy, as they push the boundaries of such Victorian “purity” in their characters.

Although the change occurred gradually for different groups, the 1900s marked a distinct shift in social concepts of sexuality away from the Victorian promotion of abstinence and restraint as the epitome of cultured morality. One major change was within the medical field, where there was an increased public focus on men’s impotence, and simultaneously on women’s active role in sex. Sexual experts now discussed men’s impotence publicly as a medical ailment, with many experts arguing that repressed desire was the cause of the problem—a noticeable change from the Victorian promotion of sexual restraint. As Mumford notes, these experts “were more likely to prescribe therapies of sexual release, rather than restraint” (50). Additionally, women’s “frigidity” was argued to be one of the causes of such impotence (Mumford 54). While in the 1800s women were assumed to have no sexual desires (and were condemned as immoral for expressing such desires), in the early 1900s sexually repressed women were blamed for
these same traits. Of course, in an unacknowledged contradiction, women were still expected to control their sexual desires and remain the moral restraining force on men’s sexual inclinations.

One way women navigated these conflicting social pressures was through an increased focus on “romance” as an acceptable excuse for sexual feelings. Pamela S. Haag explores this shift in concepts of women’s sexuality in the 1920s within her article, “In Search of the ‘Real Thing’: Ideologies of Love, Modern Romance, and Women’s Sexual Subjectivity in the United States, 1920-40.” Haag explains that, as women gained more freedom in choosing their suitors, they effectively relied on “romance” as social legitimization of their sexual desires, traversing “a tenuous territory between absolute vice and absolute virtue” (556). Labeling a relationship “romance” was utilized as a socially-acceptable excuse for acknowledging women’s sexual desires—desires typically linked to a woman’s “immorality.” As Haag notes, “Women could deploy the ideology that ‘anything was alright as long as you were in love’ to repudiate social barriers and customs” (556).

While this link between romance and sexuality enabled women to acknowledge and act upon sexual desires within a socially acceptable framework, it simultaneously perpetuated a gendered difference in the assumed agency of such sexual desires. Men were typically allowed an ownership over their own sexuality and actions, while women were denied a link between sexual feelings and conscious judgment (Haag 557). A common argument in excusing men’s sexual advances was that the woman “subconsciously” enticed the man. Often, women’s desires were subject to male control
and interpretation. As will be discussed in chapter two, Larsen portrays in *Quicksand* a clear example of this male control over the social portrayal of women’s sexuality. In the relationship between the artist Olsen and the novel’s protagonist Helga, Larsen incorporates a subversive critique of the gendered and racial power structures defining sexual desire. As Larsen notes, power structures are built upon various social pressures and imposed roles, with gender and race only two factors influencing such power hierarchies.

As women were denied agency over their own sexuality, social hierarchies of power ensured that Blacks were similarly denied the power of self-definition. Instead, white society enforced an external, imposed definition. Throughout the history of racial conflict in the United States, Blacks were often considered primitive and hypersexualized. However, as social views of sexuality began to shift in the early 1900s, such assumptions of Black sexual primitivism were redefined for the new social concepts of sexuality. Jackson Lears discusses the evolution of these racial stereotypes:

> If physical prowess was the mark of racial superiority, what was one to make of the magnificent specimens of manhood produced by allegedly inferior races? Could it be that desk-bound Anglo-Saxons required an infusion of barbarian blood (or at least the ‘barbarian virtues’ recommended by Theodore Roosevelt)? Behind these questions lay a primitivist model of regeneration, to be accomplished by incorporating the vitality of the vanquished, dark-skinned other. The question was how to do that and maintain racial purity. This was the tangle of white obsessions that ‘non-whites’ had to face in Gilded Age America. (109-10)

While Lears is discussing the initial social shift at the turn of the century, this same evolution of racial stereotypes infests the culture of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance, particularly in the white fascination with Black culture. As whites travelled to Harlem in
droves, often their goal was to immerse themselves in the “barbarian” primitivism of the stereotypes, not to experience Harlem’s everyday existence. Most white “tourists” in Harlem restricted themselves to the clubs and cabarets, never experiencing everyday Harlem life.

As more white customers flooded into Harlem, the clubs quickly realized that catering to white desires would increase profits. Jungle and “primitive” themes were common, with some clubs, such as the famous Cotton Club, becoming entirely segregated. The only Black men and women in these clubs were the servers and the performers—both groups trained to fulfill white expectations of the Harlem experience. Most white customers came to Harlem to view their fantasy, not the reality of life in Harlem. Langston Hughes notes this white tourism in Harlem in his autobiography, The Big Sea. Hughes relates,

Nor did ordinary Negroes like the growing influx of whites toward Harlem after sundown, flooding the little cabarets and bars where formerly only colored people laughed and sang, and where now the strangers were given the best ringside tables to sit and stare at the Negro customers—like amusing animals in a zoo. . . . So thousands of whites came to Harlem night after night, thinking the Negroes loved to have them there, and firmly believing that all Harlemites left their houses at sundown to sing and dance in cabarets, because most of the whites saw nothing but the cabarets, not the houses. (225)

Whites’ fascination with Harlem was grounded in the view of Harlem as a paradise of primitivism and exoticism. While the majority of Harlemites progressed through daily lives of work and family, whites came to Harlem to party—to let go of inhibitions that restricted them in their own daily lives. As Hughes notes, whites’ impression of Harlem is of the revelers and the carefully-choreographed performers in the clubs. They never
saw (and had no desire to see) the working, everyday lives of the Harlem residents.

Whites perceived Harlem as the “primitive” atmosphere that would enable them to leave behind their own moral lives and, as Lears notes, soak up an “infusion” of the “barbarian blood.”

Therefore, in many ways, white tourists were far less reserved in their actions than the Harlem residents. For whites, Harlem was an environment for sexual freedom—a place where they could release their inhibitions without fear of damaging their social standing. As a result, Harlem was a popular neighborhood for whites to engage in a wide variety of sexual “deviancy,” including homosexual activity. Lillian Faderman explains Harlem’s attraction for white tourists:

White fascination with Harlem seems to have smacked of a ‘sexual colonialism,’ in which many whites used Harlem as a commodity, a stimulant to sexuality. . . . Made braver by bootlegged liquor, jazz, and what they saw as the primitive excitement of Africa, they acted out their enchantment with the primal and the erotic. They were fascinated with putative black naturalness and exoticism, and they romantically felt that those they regarded as the ‘lower class’ had something to teach them about sexual expression that their middle-class milieu had kept from them. They believed Harlem gave them permission—or they simply took permission there—to explore what was forbidden in the white world. They could do in Harlem what they dared not do anywhere else. (68)

The rules for whites in Harlem were very different from the rules for Blacks. Whites tended to imagine their own fantasy Harlem of primitivism and debauchery. In reality, Harlem residents had no such freedom in their own community. While whites were strangers bringing in money, Blacks were friends and neighbors, whose actions would be held under scrutiny. Yet, Harlem was a community relatively accepting of social differences. Compared to other New York neighborhoods, Harlem offered a safe space
for “deviant” activities like homosexuality to a far greater extent than could be found in other areas. At the same time, Harlemites often fought against the stigmas of immorality and debauchery with which whites identified their community. Such stigmas reflected the history of similar racial stereotypes that Black Americans were constantly obliged to combat. In fact, as A. B. Christa Schwarz argues, many Harlemites blamed the white intruders for “contaminating” the Harlem community with such corrupting vices (Gay Voices 21). Thurman complicates such stances in Infants of the Spring, when he blurs the boundaries of race and gender through sexual encounters, utilizing his characters’ reactions as a lens into opposing social pressures.

Thurman is particularly noteworthy for incorporating same-sex relationships and gender-queering discussions into his literary works. Harlem communities were relatively accepting of difference, incorporating gay clubs and drag balls into nightlife and offering a safe space for some of the most prominent artists of the Harlem Renaissance to maintain same-sex relationships. However, these communities were not as tolerant of such relationships being incorporated into the artists’ public works. Schwarz explains,

> While their elevated social position and the relatively lax policing of Harlem allowed especially male same-sex-interested Harlem Renaissance artists what looks like a rather unrestrained lifestyle, their works were subject to close scrutiny as they were presented publicly. In this context, the private-public dichotomy does not merely signify the distinction between “within the privacy of home” and “outside home” but has the extended meaning of “within the black community (of Harlem)” / “before a white audience.” (Gay Voices 25).

Because Black stereotypes of debauchery were so prevalent, race leaders and communities often focused on the importance of combating such stereotypes in the fight for racial equality. At the same time, reinforcing “acceptable” sexuality and gender roles
and condemning any deviance from those roles necessarily created a restrictive, unrealistic “ideal.” The authors I address in this project are significant voices within the Harlem Renaissance’s artistic movement in their focus on destabilizing standard gender roles within their works.

During the Harlem Renaissance, both gender roles and concepts of sexuality were in flux. While women’s socially encouraged roles were shifting from the traits promoted in cult of true womanhood to the New Woman at the turn of the century, simultaneous transitions occurred in social perceptions of homosexuality. Homosexuality as an identity did not enter public consciousness until the early 1900s; it was not until the mid-1900s that sexual behavior was directly equated with the homosexual identity. Before this time, “degenerate” identities of “fairy” and “bulldagger” were reflective of a person’s effeminate or masculine persona, not of a person’s sexual activities. Therefore, many “normal” men, who portrayed the socially-acceptable masculine persona, had sex with other men and yet would be labeled “normal” rather than “fairy” (Chauncey 13). George Chauncey explains the historical context of socially labeling homosexuality as an identity in Gay New York. Chauncey notes, “The erotic behavior allowed ‘normal’ men three generations ago simply would not be allowed ‘heterosexual’ men today. Heterosexuality, no less than homosexuality, is a historically specific social category and identity” (26). At the turn of the century, sexual “deviance” had no relation to sexual behavior. Men and women were not condemned for engaging in same-sex relationships but rather for behavior or traits considered “deviant” from their assigned gender role.
In his 1900 article “Effeminate Men and Masculine Women” published in the *New York Medical Journal*, Dr. William Lee Howard reflects this social focus on restrictive gender roles when he argues:

> The female with masculine ambition is always amusing and often pitiable; but the attenuated, weak-voiced neuter, the effeminate male: pity him, but blame his mother for the false training, and give scorn to the father for his indifference. (687)

For Howard, such deviance from assigned gender roles is a result of bad parenting; if parents want their children to act appropriately masculine or feminine, they must train the child until he or she shows those “proper” traits. In placing the emphasis on gender roles, Howard equates any social “deviance” with “sexual perversion.” Therefore, a woman “possessed of masculine ideas of independence” who fights for gender equality is seen as simply another degree of “the female sexual pervert” (687). Howard’s article exemplifies the conflicting social pressures surrounding the shifting gender roles. For instance, while the New Woman role gained popularity, it instigated a parallel backlash, as these independent women were condemned for portraying “masculine” traits. In the early decades of the 1900s, social definitions of homosexuality began to evolve to equate homosexual behavior with homosexuality as an identity (Chauncey 13). However, at the time of the Harlem Renaissance, this transition was still in its early stages.

In order best to understand Thurman’s, Larsen’s, and Hurston’s radical themes within their works, the authors’ explorations of sexuality and gender roles must be framed within the historical and socio-cultural moment in which they were writing. It is important to recognize the social contexts of these authors in order to understand what social issues they are addressing within their works. For example, while the feminist
construct of the New Woman in the early 1900s was typically discussed through a white middle-class lens, these gender trends directly influenced Thurman’s and Larsen’s own examination of gender within the New Negro movement. In order effectively to analyze the authors’ works, one must address the relationship between these works and the social contexts influencing them. Therefore, although I engage with contemporary feminist and queer theory, these theoretical frameworks will be examined in relation to the historical socio-cultural framework of race, sexuality, and gender identities during 1920s Harlem.

Similarly, analysis of race issues explored within the authors’ works must address the broader social contexts in dialogue with the authors’ themes. The race issues discussed among artists and social leaders during the Harlem Renaissance have direct links to the race struggles of previous decades. For example, in the Gilded Age, white society quickly reacted against the newly freed slaves by enforcing racial hierarchies and forcing Black Americans into subordinate roles (Lears 90). By labeling Blacks as inherently inferior, whites were able to reinforce their own “superior” social standing. This assertion of a racial hierarchy was accomplished partly through renewed popularity of slavery-era stereotypes. These stereotypes pervaded white society, through media portrayals, advertisements, toys, literature, and everyday conversation. Some stereotypes, such as the pickaninny and the Sambo, emphasized the stereotypes of Black primitivism, laziness, and thievery, while other stereotypes, such as the Mammy and Uncle Tom, created a nostalgic ideal for whites of the “good old days” of the slavery era. According to these stereotypes, the end of slavery destroyed the happy, faithful servants of slavery. These “happy darkie” servants of white nostalgia were placed in contrast to
the “thieving,” “degenerate,” “dangerous” Blacks portrayed after the Civil War. The popularization of such negative Black portrayals links directly with the rampant lynchings that swept across the United States during the Gilded Age.

The term “new negro”\(^3\) was used by whites to represent the “dangerous” post-slavery Negro who supposedly threatened their way of life (Lears 103). Many whites argued that without the controlling force of slavery, Blacks could run rampant with their newfound freedom, destroying the racial power structure that benefitted whites. Lears examines these post-war fears:

> The pseudoscience of race provided legitimacy for white Southerners’ fear of the ‘new negro,’ who had never known the supposedly civilizing influence of slavery. Paternalist agendas of uplift survived, but the dominant image of the Negro shifted from Sambo to the black beast—from irresponsible but educable child to subhuman menace. This was not an exclusively Southern development. The idea that freed blacks were retrogressing to savagery surfaced in intellectually respectable venues, North and South.” (103-04)

Whites used the fashionable race “science” of the time, along with the sharp increase in Black stereotyping through popular media, in order to endorse this escalating portrayal of the “new negro” as a savage “subhuman menace.”

In reaction to such imposed white definitions of Black Americans, many Black leaders saw the need to counteract these stereotypes through the development of new, positive definitions of the Negro. While the term “New Negro” has been used in various

\(^3\) I use the lowercase “new negro” here to distinguish this definition from the New Negro identity discussed throughout the rest of the paper. Before it was popularized within the later New Negro movement, the term “new negro” was utilized as early as the 1700s, with varying contexts and definitions over the centuries (Read 250). Whites were typically less likely to capitalize Negro, particularly in the context of race hierarchies and racial stereotypes. Unlike the Black community’s usage of New Negro as representative of an embraced identity, whites in the above context used “new negro” as a derogatory epithet, with no positive social identity linked to it.
forms through history, it gained new significance and popularity for Black Americans after the Civil War\(^4\). Black leaders encouraged the use of the term as a way to differentiate this idealized portrayal of the strong, educated, politically motivated New Negro from the slavery-era stereotypes perpetuated by white culture (labeled the “Old Negro” in order to emphasize the New Negro’s contrast from such stereotypes). Emily Bernard examines this placement of the New Negro ideal in contrast to the stereotypes represented in the “Old Negro”: “Black people created the ‘New Negro’ as an attempt to convert popular stereotypes about blacks from those based upon absence (of morality, intelligence, and other basic features of humanity) to presence” (29). Rather than a definition of “Black” as the anti-white (lacking the traits that whites considered “ideal”), the New Negro was meant to be a definition that existed outside comparison to whites.

The New Negro identity was Black society’s opportunity for self-definition—a freedom from the stereotypes that white society imposed upon them. Kimberlè Williams Crenshaw emphasizes the potential for power within such group labeling: “The process of categorization is itself an exercise of power. . . . Subordinated people can and do participate . . . subverting the naming process in empowering ways” (1297). Despite the clear power inequalities, Crenshaw notes the “degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming” (1297). While the racist stereotypes perpetuated in white

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\(^4\) Although the term “New Negro” was in general use before the publication of his 1925 anthology *The New Negro*, Alain Locke is often recognized for popularizing the term. Others, such as James Weldon Johnson, cite W. E. B. Du Bois as the man who “paved the way for the ‘New Negro’” (*Black Manhattan* 141). Not all Black leaders used the specific term “New Negro;” however, despite the use of different terms, they were all engaging in the same larger social discussion. Therefore, I will be applying the term “New Negro” to the arguments of race leaders even if they do not utilize that specific term in their works.
society reflect the social power that whites held, so too does Black society’s self-naming through the New Negro identity reflect an agency and a fostering of social power.

Of course, in developing the New Negro as an identity free from the Negro’s historical definition as the antithesis of the white ideal, Black social leaders struggled in creating a New Negro definition that was truly free from white influence. Instead, different ideas for the New Negro identity tended to be either a reflection of white class and culture ideals or a direct resistance against them. In each case, white social structures held a strong influence over the New Negro identity. Some Black leaders focused so much on using the New Negro to refute negative stereotypes that they simply imposed new “positive” stereotypes to take their place. For example, in his 1903 essay “The Characteristics of the Negro People,” H.T. Kealing creates a list of positive Negro characteristics, like: “He is imaginative” and “He is affectionate and without vindictiveness” (166-67). Yet, like the negative racist stereotypes, Kealing’s “positive” characteristics are still sweeping stereotypes that label all Negroes under this (notably male) single umbrella of an inaccurate, “universal” Negro identity. Such a reliance on “positive” characteristics reflects Gayatri Spivak’s theory of strategic essentialism, where the essentialist statement is purposefully utilized in order to benefit the subaltern group (183). Kealing’s technique is an effective method of refuting racist stereotypes, as it provides a unified voice for Black Americans to fight such widespread social prejudice. However, while Kealing’s intentions were good, his strategic essentialist methods are problematic, ignoring the unique experiences and identities of the vast range of people encompassed under the label of the Negro race.
Kealing was part of a much broader trend of strategic essentialism within the movement for racial equality. By defining a universal Negro experience, leaders could use that universality as a means through which to unify and strengthen the voice of the racial equality movement. Hubert Henry Harrison, for example, argues that racial identity must come before all other identities for Black Americans in order for the fight toward racial equality to succeed. He contends, “Any man today who aspires to lead the Negro race must set squarely before his face the idea of ‘Race First’” (40). For Harrison, if Black Americans’ interests and politics are diverse, then the unified “Negro voice” needed to initiate social change will never come to fruition. In politics, this means that Black Americans should be voting for parties based on race issues rather than on the parties’ other platforms (Harrison 43). Harrison sees the New Negro as a political force that demands a place of equality within society. “Recognition” from white pundits was not enough; the generation of the New Negro had the power, through a unified racial voice, to demand Negro representatives (Harrison 43).

Harrison’s argument for a unified race represents one of the most complex issues Black leadership struggled with in the fight for racial equality. Such racial unity inherently denies freedom of expression, ignoring the many diverse experiences and identities throughout the race. At the same time, as Harrison notes, placing racial identity “first” then strengthens the movement’s voice in the fight for racial equality. This inner conflict had no easy resolution. While the New Negro leaders attempted to develop a unified racial voice, each leader had a different idea of what that voice should be.
Booker T. Washington, a prominent race leader at the turn of the century, believed Black Americans should find a way to work within white social and political systems. He felt that the key for Black men and women’s success was to find a place within one’s community and within one’s social/economic standing and to develop success from there. Washington placed strong emphasis on the importance of education, but while he acknowledged all education as good, he saw “practical” education as far more important than “higher” education. In his 1903 article, “Industrial Education for the Negro,” Washington criticizes the educational gap between higher education and common work. In one example, he describes a young woman who returned home from school to find herself “educated out of sympathy with laundry work, and yet not able to find anything to do which seems in keeping with the cost and character of her education” (23). Washington sees the solution to this problem as training the young woman in “the latest and best methods of laundry work” in order to change her perspective of seeing such work as “drudgery” (23). While Du Bois and other Black leaders would focus on the social racism that denies the woman other forms of work, Washington sees the woman’s dislike of laundry work as the problem. Through such statements, Washington encourages educating people for a place within their economic class position. Of course, while such practical education does lead to more immediate economic benefits (i.e., direct, practical jobs within the community), it tends to reinforce roles within the class system and within the racial hierarchy of the community rather than encouraging people to fight that imposed position and seek out something better.
Unlike Washington, William Pickens saw the New Negro as a forum through which to create a courageous hero for Black Americans—someone to oppose the system and lead the fight for equality. Throughout his works, Pickens is careful to ground his discussion of the New Negro in a broader historical discussion of racial generations. He argues for the connection, rather than the contrast, between the “Old” and the “New” Negro. In his 1916 book *The New Negro*, Pickens explains the problem of distancing the New Negro from the previous generations, arguing that “there is no sharp line of demarcation between the old and the new” (224). Rather, the new generation builds directly from the previous generation: “The present generation of Negroes have received their chief heritage from the former and, in that, they are neither better nor worse, higher nor lower than the previous generation” (224). In acknowledging such generational links, Pickens shows a history of Black Americans’ courageous struggle rather than holding up the New Negro as something unique.

However, in the same book, Pickens often perpetuates the standard “Old” and “New” Negro descriptives common among his fellow social leaders. He analyzes white fears of the New Negro, arguing that whites fear Negroes who hold the same traits that are considered “virtues” in a white men: “pride, ambition, self-respect, un-satisfaction with the lower positions of life, and the desire to live in a beautiful house and to keep his wife and children at home and out of ‘service’” (*New Negro* 229). In developing this New Negro construct, Pickens simultaneously builds the “Old” Negro as a contrast. For Pickens, the Old Negro seems to be the safe, devoted servant of the past, highlighted in
whites’ nostalgia for him and in their fear of the powerful “New” Negro, who stands as a hero to the race through his strength in opposing such white expectations of submission.

Pickens uses his fiction and non-fiction works as propagandist frameworks through which to portray this ideal New Negro. For Pickens, the New Negro represents the race’s hope for social power and for an equal voice in the nation, standing as an American Hero—strong, athletic, cultured, and moral. Pickens highlights these “ideal” traits in his own autobiography, *Bursting Bonds: The Autobiography of a “New Negro,”* in which he portrays himself as this ideal, particularly emphasizing his identity as a courageous, masculine, self-made man. Pickens uses the book as a forum in which he can create the ideal race hero personified by the New Negro identity, thus epitomizing his own argument for the importance of integrating propaganda into art. In his 1924 article “Art and Propaganda,” Pickens explains his own perspective on this broader literary debate: “Art and Propaganda always do exist side by side. . . . But (and here’s what the near-artists stumble over) it is the function of art to so conceal the propaganda as to make it more palatable to the average recipient, while yet not destroying its effect” (111). Pickens sees art as the “sugar-coating” that keeps people from perceiving that they are being fed propaganda, while he equates propaganda with “purpose” and attempts to erase any “sordid meaning” to the term (111).

Both Pickens and Du Bois argue for the importance of propaganda in art, though this stance was controversial among some Harlem Renaissance artists who often promoted artistic talent and creativity as more significant than the social message within art. Pickens sees the social significance in developing New Negroes to serve as hero
figures for his readers. Of course, Pickens’s New Negro is his own vision of an ideal, and as such, it is disconnected from reality. He fails to acknowledge that the New Negro characterization must encompass more ideals than solely his own. At the same time, in creating such a New Negro Hero figure, Pickens effectively offers Black readers an ideal that contrasts with the negative stereotypes pervading U.S. society at the time.

While Pickens’s New Negro ideal portrayed traits similar to those promoted by most other race leaders, the controversial Marcus Garvey refused to support this popular structure. Instead, he purposefully placed himself as the contradictory force against the prominent Black leaders of the time, including W. E. B. Du Bois and the NAACP. While such leaders tended to encourage assimilation and portrayed the New Negro as cultured, educated, light-skinned, and wealthy, Garvey actively fought the classism and colorism inherent in such definitions. He claims, “Some of us . . . believe that the nearer we approach the white man in color the greater our social standing and privilege and that we should build up an ‘aristocracy’ based upon caste of color and not achievement in race” (2: 56). While most race leaders argued for racial unity in the fight for equality, in reality, colorism was a rampant problem within many jobs and social circles. In addressing the issue of colorism, Garvey chose to attack one of the most prominent race organizations in the nation, the NAACP, and in doing so, he made enemies of many powerful race leaders.

In his attack on the NAACP, Garvey often focused on Du Bois as the central enemy in his fight. He condemned Du Bois for his classism and his promotion of assimilation: “Du Bois represents a group that hates the Negro blood in its veins, and has
been working subtly to build up a caste aristocracy that would socially divide the race into two groups: One the superior because of color caste, and the other the inferior” (2: 57). Garvey criticizes Du Bois for arguing that the “Talented Tenth” should serve as race leaders and underscores Du Bois’s own issues of classism. At the same time, Garvey’s description of Du Bois and the NAACP as “a group that hates the Negro blood in its veins” is a radical statement that offended many. While Garvey made a controversial decision to attack an organization that helped many people in the fight for racial equality, he offered a voice to those who were underrepresented by that organization. This stance is highlighted in one of his most controversial public statements, when Garvey asserts that he respects the Ku Klux Klan—“for their honesty of purpose towards the Negro”—more than he does the NAACP (2: 71). In a time period rampant with lynchings and racial violence, such a statement proved volatile, leading to severe public backlash. At the same time, Garvey achieved his goal of publicly censuring the NAACP’s hypocrisies.

Garvey’s radicalism is part of what appealed to his many followers. He was known for making the extreme arguments that other social leaders dismissed. For instance, while most race leaders focused on assimilation as a step toward racial equality, Garvey argues, “Miscegenation will lead to the moral destruction of both races, and the promotion of a hybrid caste that will have no social standing or moral background in a critical moral judgment of the life and affairs of the human race” (2: 62). He argues that there will only be a strong Black identity when the race is allowed to develop on its own; miscegenation will weaken that racial identity. To advance this racial identity, Garvey promoted the emigration of Black Americans to Africa. He contended that racial equality
could never exist in the United States because each race would always put its own priorities first. The Africa “solution” would give the Negro “a country and a nation of his own,” which would “provide an outlet for Negro energy, ambition, and passion, away from the attractions of white opportunity and surround the race with opportunities of its own” (Garvey 2: 5). Contending that a free Africa was the basis for gaining a global voice for Negroes, Garvey made contact with Liberia’s government and began preparing ships and passengers for the journey. Garvey offered his followers direct, immediate action in the fight for racial equality—a rarity in the centuries-long struggle.

Of course, Garvey’s lofty goals and faulty planning led swiftly to financial disaster, but his Back to Africa movement reflects a significant social voice of the time. Despite (or perhaps because of) his controversial tactics, Garvey used his strong public voice to present a counter perspective against the other prominent race leaders of the time. He offered a voice to those Black Americans who were not included or represented in the New Negro ideal and the fight for racial equality.

W. E. B. Du Bois, on the other hand, was one of the most prominent race leaders of the time, with considerable influence within the race movement. While Garvey was the controversial rebel, Du Bois was the authority—a fitting target for Garvey’s invectives. Du Bois was one of the most vocal promoters of the New Negro ideal, with his own specific definition of the New Negro. One of his most famous arguments is set forth in his 1903 essay “The Talented Tenth,” in which he contends that the Negro uplift movement should focus its attention on the top ten percent of the population. Because he believes that the race “is going to be saved by its exceptional men,” Du Bois argues that
Negro education “must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth; it is the problem of developing the Best of this race that they may guide the Mass away from the contamination and death of the Worst” (33). He sees the Talented Tenth, the “aristocracy of talent and character,” as the saviors of the race (45). Without them, the “masses” will never rise on their own. Of course, such an argument is grounded in the assumption that certain cultural traits and classes are better than others, and that the “worst” class is not worth saving. He maintains, “It is, ever was and ever will be from the top downward that culture filters. The Talented Tenth rises and pulls all that are worth the saving up to their vantage ground” (45). Du Bois’s Talented Tenth, representatives of his ideal New Negro, reflect Du Bois’s own judgment on who is a “proper” Negro and who is not “worth the saving”—a disgrace to the race. It is this stance that many young Harlem Renaissance writers held in greatest contention. Hurston and Thurman, as well as Langston Hughes, Claude McKay, and many others, focused much of their writing on the lives of the “masses,” including those whom Du Bois deemed immoral and unworthy of saving. Du Bois’s “top down” assumption of culture is also consistently negated throughout the Harlem Renaissance through folk, blues, dances, and other cultural art forms that often developed in the lower classes and trickled into the upper classes. For Du Bois, the inclusion of such “unsuitable” subjects in art plays into the white stereotypes of Negroes as immoral or animalistic.

Over the years, Du Bois’s argument radically changed. For example, in his 1921 essay “Negro Art,” Du Bois contends that “truth” is the most important element of art. Rather than focus on “the best and highest and noblest in us,” we should seek out
portrayals of us as “simply human with human frailties” (55). Du Bois argues that when people focus only on the best of human character, they then ignore all of the problems that exist in all groups regardless of race, class, or culture. In focusing only on the ideal, “we insist that our Art and Propaganda be one. This is wrong and in the end it is harmful” (55). Du Bois’s stance in this early essay sharply contradicts his later arguments in his 1926 essay, “Criteria of Negro Art,” where he claims that “All art is propaganda and ever must be” (296). At this point in his career, Du Bois sees all art as containing some form of propagandistic message; therefore, he focuses on the importance of ensuring that all sides of the debate are given a voice instead of one side being silenced by the other. Because he sees art as propaganda, it becomes imperative that the proper message is included within the art. As white artists often incorporated negative Black stereotypes in their works (for example, portraying Black subjects as primitive, sexualized, and less than human), Du Bois saw the importance of counteracting those common stereotypes with positive portrayals of Black subjects. Of course, this focus on solely positive portrayals must then silence the negative, immoral, or “uncultured” experiences of Black life. In shifting focus to the need for positive portrayals of Negroes in art, Du Bois repositions his critical stance away from his earlier artistic ideal of portraying both positive and negative “truth” in art.

Despite his own vacillating stance, Du Bois never shied away from criticizing other leaders in the race movement. He frequently disparaged artists, critics, and social leaders whose views did not reflect his own. Two of his most prominent subjects of
rebuke were Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. In both cases, each debater tended to simplify his opposition’s argument in order further to emphasize his own point. While Garvey criticized Du Bois for classism in his Talented Tenth platform, Du Bois responded in kind, critiquing Garvey’s own works for their extremism and impractical ideas (“Reconstruction” 166). Similarly, in critiquing Washington’s promotion of “compromise,” Du Bois argues that Washington in fact silences any political evolution toward racial equality. He then simplifies Washington’s complex political stance, describing him as soliciting Black Americans to relinquish three things: “First, political power, Second, insistence on civil rights, Third, higher education of Negro youth” (Souls 53). Through such statements, Du Bois portrays Washington’s “compromises” as combating the very civil rights the Black community is fighting for. Of course, Du Bois emphasizes the problems in Washington’s political stances in order to highlight his own claims as the best solutions toward gaining racial equality. In reality, both social leaders showed strengths and significant problems within their stances.

While Du Bois’s stance favoring leadership through a privileged few was widely supported at the turn of the century, the Harlem Renaissance highlighted rebellion from such constraints. James Weldon Johnson’s 1930 historical description of Harlem, Black Manhattan, reflects the evolving perspectives during this time. Though his earlier 1912 novel, The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man, reflects a classist, cultured perspective similar to Du Bois’s Talented Tenth, in his later Black Manhattan, Johnson praises the younger generation of controversial artists like Claude McKay, whose work Du Bois denounces as “filth” (“Browsing Reader” 202). Johnson uses Black Manhattan to
develop a definition of the New Negro as a rebel against Du Bois’s older generation. For Johnson, the old generation of Negro artists relied on “sentimentality” and “propaganda” within their works (267). Johnson thus distinguishes himself from race leaders such as Pickens and Du Bois, who emphasize propaganda as a significant part of the New Negro movement. Instead, Johnson argues that the new generation of artists no longer wants to focus solely on race within their work.

Johnson notes that most of these artists’ best works still explore race issues but are not constrained by the older generation’s styles and themes. He emphasizes the New Negro artist as “an active and important force in American life . . . a contributor to the nation’s common cultural store; in fine, he is helping to form American civilization” (*Black Manhattan* 283-84). Through this impact on American culture, the New Negro artist helps break down social barriers to equality. Johnson’s focus on the new generation of artists’ significant social and artistic evolution parallels the arguments of Alain Locke.

Critiquing both white and Black perpetuation of Black stereotypes, Locke sees the New Negro as the generation to move beyond such stereotypes and portray people as human, regardless of race, with both strengths and flaws. Locke notes, “The Negro today wishes to be known for what he is, even in his faults and shortcomings, and scorns a craven and precarious survival at the price of seeming to be what he is not” ("The New Negro” 11). For Locke, artistic creation should be grounded in truth of experience as opposed to moral messages or audience expectations. He critiques the previous generation of writers for their focus on the social message of a piece at the expense of the artistic work itself. In his 1925 essay “Negro Youth Speaks,” Locke claims that: “The
elder generation of Negro writers expressed itself in cautious moralism and guarded idealizations. . . . They felt art must fight social battles and compensate social wrongs” (50). Locke criticizes social leaders and artists like Pickens and Du Bois who see art as a form of propaganda. He argues that instead of writing to teach a white audience about the Negro experience, Negro artists should be writing about their own experiences as individuals, as the new generation of poets “have now stopped speaking for the Negro—they speak as Negroes” (48). However, Locke’s distinct separation between the “Old” and “New” Negro generations leads to problems in his arguments, as it does not fully acknowledge the generations’ interactions and diversities. For instance, Locke discusses the new generation’s shift away from the “sentimentalism” of the previous artists’ works: “Reason and realism have cured us of sentimentality: instead of the wail and appeal, there is challenge and indictment” (“Negro Youth Speaks” 52). However, such a stark distinction between the two generations is unrealistic. The New Negro’s “challenge and indictment” are still voicing social protest, just like the supposed “wail and appeal” of previous artists. Such broad statements about the “Old” and “New” generations of Negro artists ignore individual artistic differences and writing trends.

In creating a contrast between the “Old” and “New” generations, Locke attempts to highlight the New Negro generation as the heroes of the race, rectifying the flaws of the previous generation. Locke sees the New Negro as “a new order . . . a fundamentally changed Negro” who must build a new relationship with whites, based on equality instead of paternalism (“The New Negro” 8). In creating this before/after dichotomy in his description of the “New” Negro, Locke attempts to motivate his readers toward taking
social action and thus building optimism for a future of racial equality. However, such a dichotomy inaccurately implies that all earlier (“Old”) generations were unsuccessful, reliant on white “paternal” support for survival (10). In labeling the New Negro as “fundamentally changed,” Locke must then reproach the earlier generations in order to glorify the current one.

At the same time, Locke does promote artistic freedom—a rarity in the controversial debate for a New Negro ideal. Locke seems to value real, flawed portrayals within artists’ works, as opposed to Du Bois’s primary focus on art as propaganda, portraying the “right” type of message. Unlike Du Bois, Locke claims that Black artists “must choose art and put aside propaganda” in their works (“Art or Propaganda?” 12). At the same time, Locke has still developed a restrictive definition of the New Negro, imposing his own desires on the term. Immediately before he urges artists to “put aside propaganda,” he explains that such a focus on art is important because “in our spiritual growth genius and talent must more and more choose the role of group expression, or even at times the role of free individualistic expression” (“Art or Propaganda?” 12).

Despite his argument against propaganda in art, he expects most artists to portray a “group expression,” which must necessarily rely on a unified perspective or voice.

In assuming a single New Negro ideal, such critical debate tends to ignore those who do not fit within that definition. For example, because the New Negro is almost always described as a man, women’s roles within the New Negro movement are far less defined. Often, women are entirely ignored within the New Negro discussion. Those who do address women typically portray women’s role as a support for the men. For
example, women are often portrayed as contributing to the New Negro movement by encouraging the New Negro men as they go out on their heroic journeys, not by the women representing the New Negro identity themselves. These gendered roles within the movement can be seen in works like Paul Laurence Dunbar’s 1903 essay “Representative American Negroes.” Dunbar, one of the few critics even to include women in his New Negro discussion, still relies on a strictly gendered definition when discussing the New Negro identity. Throughout the essay, Dunbar focuses on examples of heroic, courageous men who represent “sturdy Negro manhood” (193). He is careful to acknowledge women’s achievements as well, in a special section of the paper.

However, Dunbar falls into a common trend among writers who discuss the New Negro; these women sections tend to describe women specifically in relation to their role of helping men. For example, Dunbar introduces this section by stating, “I have spoken of ‘men and women,’ and indeed the women must not be forgotten, for to them the men look for much of the inspiration and impulse that drives them forward to success” (206). Rather than women developing prominent successes in their own right, they are acknowledged through the lens of men’s “inspiration,” as the men move forward in success. Not surprisingly, many women writers in the Harlem Renaissance took issue with such restricted portrayals of their roles within the New Negro movement and began using their own works to complicate such portrayals. I examine how Larsen and Hurston pushed back against such restrictive gendered roles in the later chapters of this project.

At the same time, many women writers chose to reinforce this subordinate role for women within the New Negro movement. While female social leaders were more likely
to focus on women’s roles than male leaders were, the roles portrayed were often the same—women as support for the men, who were the true New Negroes and the heroic hope for the future. Even writers like Elise Johnson McDougald, who emphasized women’s education and careers outside the home, still promoted these gendered roles within the movement. In her essay “The Task of Negro Womanhood,” McDougald focuses on women’s social contributions through a variety of careers, including the typically white male careers of bacteriology, chemistry, and pharmacy (374). She commends educated women for their careers in social work, “[devoting] their education and lives toward helping the submerged classes” (373). Many female social leaders, as discussed below, addressed married, upper-class women whose primary focus was domestic life, with the occasional charity work through social clubs. McDougald, on the other hand, portrays social work as a full-time career, arguing that women who choose that career path should be honored for their dedication.

Yet, when discussing the “New Negro,” McDougald assumes that this identity is male. She praises women teachers for their inspiration and influence in molding the new generation of the New Negro student and “what he is determined to make of himself tomorrow” (376). As is typical in New Negro discussions, McDougald sees the New Negro as the new generation of Black men—the hope for the race’s future. Women in this discussion are relegated to supporting roles, encouraging the New Negro man toward his leadership role.

This focus on morality and domesticity is exemplified in Katherine Tillman’s 1895 essay, “Afro-American Women and Their Work.” Tillman argues that a Christian
woman’s task is “to aid man in all of his stupendous undertakings” (477). It is through women’s roles as Christian mothers and wives that Black women can play a role in race progress. Tillman acknowledges the hard work of the “laboring classes of our women,” but through the context of arguing that a “life of service” is far more acceptable role than the alternative—“a life of shame” as a prostitute (496). Tillman’s primary focus is on upper class “society women,” whom she considers the ideal for New Negro womanhood. As Tillman explains, “The fashionable Afro-American, like her Caucasian sisters spends her time in novel reading, card playing . . . whirling through the intricate mazes of the dance . . . and many secret benevolent societies” (497). Tillman sees “fashionable” African American society life as paralleling the society life of upper-class white women. As was common among African American elite at the time, “cultured” life was defined by white constructs of upper class culture.

This same comparison to white upper class culture is clear throughout discussions of the Black upper class, particularly in the context of women’s roles. Fannie Barrier Williams exemplifies this cultural comparison in her 1900 essay, “The Club Movement among Colored Women of America,” where she focuses on the benefits of the popular club movement among upper class Black women, modeled upon similar white women’s social organizations. Because Black women have historically been “the least known, and the most ill-favored class of women in this country,” Williams sees the increasing link between Black and white women’s social structures as a positive change (382).

However, Williams’s evidence for these positive changes is problematic. She argues that Black women’s clubs would offer “respect and character” for Black women—
“a race of women who had no place in the classification of progressive womanhood in America. The terms good and bad, bright, and dull, plain and beautiful are now as applicable to colored women as to women of other races” (402). While there is a very positive change in public acknowledgement of Black women’s identities outside of slavery era stereotypes, Williams’s examples of this positive change are based on a perpetuation of gender stereotypes, with women’s social roles grounded in beauty and class. This focus on Black women’s identities as equal to white women’s results in a perpetuation of the (already highly problematic) Victorian white ideal of the cult of true womanhood. For Williams, the ideal New Negro womanhood is based on “those domestic virtues, moral impulses, and standards of family and social life that are the badges of race respectability” (379+), grounding women’s roles in the New Negro ideal within a framework of domesticity and morality.

At a time when the New Woman movement was gaining force and women often worked outside the home, the New Negro movement chose to focus on traditional women’s roles, often adhering to the old cult of true womanhood more than the recent New Woman trends. Social leaders like Alice Dunbar-Nelson showed concern over the New Woman’s focus on career instead of motherhood. In her 1927 article “Woman’s Most Serious Problem,” Dunbar-Nelson claims that a decrease in Black women choosing to have children, particularly among wealthy and educated women, is in fact harming the race. She asserts that women choosing careers over childbearing means they fail to embrace their most important role within the New Negro movement—serving as mothers to raise the next generation of New Negroes.
For Dunbar-Nelson, even teaching, a praised career among other critics, is an unacceptable career for a married woman. She argues that teaching is in fact the “worst” offender “because [it is] more subtle and insinuating in its flattering connotation of economic freedom, handsome salaries and social prestige . . . [resulting in] the consequent temptation to refrain from child-bearing” (73). In addition to arguing for the importance of Black women becoming mothers, Dunbar-Nelson goes on to critique mothers who work, arguing that women who work are the primary cause of “juvenile delinquents” (73). This focus on the importance of women’s roles as stay-at-home mothers is inherently class-based, as many working women did not have the option to stay at home. Work, for many lower-class women, was a necessary element of survival.

While Dunbar-Nelson’s argument reflects the popular promotion of Black women’s domestic role within the New Negro movement, it represents an interesting stance in light of her own life. Dunbar-Nelson was a teacher for more than a decade, was married three times, carried on multiple lesbian affairs during her marriages, and never had children. She stands as the epitome of the non-domestic woman whom she rails against in this essay, and as such, her own life stands as a counterpoint to the idealized domestic role being promoted in the New Negro movement. This same seeming contradiction is common among Harlem Renaissance women writers. Writers such as Jessie Fauset and Angelina Weld Grimke portrayed New Negro propriety through their literary works, yet, like Nella Larsen who is explored in this project, these authors’ works can be read for layers of subversion and complication beneath the surface of the social identity portrayed.
The authors explored in this project use their own works to respond to such prevalent restrictive definitions for women through examining how such definitions erase the diversity inherent in women’s real lives. Such historical context is essential in understanding how Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston’s works engage in a larger social conversation. At the same time, literary analysis must extend beyond such history to examine how one’s own historical and cultural contexts exert a strong influence on the reading of the texts. Through exploring such contextual dialogues, my goal in this project is to analyze the multiple layers of meanings existing simultaneously within the text. I apply a hermeneutic lens of intersectionality to these authors’ works, which enables me to explore how these texts are in conversation with multiple identity, social, and historical contexts. The Harlem Renaissance developed through a convergence of multiple conflicting social factors, while contemporary criticism brings its own multiple social lenses to the text. My intersectionality framework reflects the social convergence of the historical movement, enabling me more fully to analyze the authors’ integration of and dialogue with such social factors through their work.

Intersectionality is a common framework utilized by theorists to explore social identity constructs such as race, class, gender, and sexuality, among many others. As every person maintains multiple social identities, theoretical exploration of such identity constructs must examine the intersections among a person’s identities rather than examining each identity in isolation. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Steven Seidman, and Leela Fernandes all explore the significance of intersectionality as a theoretical lens through which to examine the social constructs of identities.
Crenshaw, an early proponent of the intersectionality framework, contends that “The problem with identity politics is not that it fails to transcend difference, as some critics charge, but rather the opposite—that it frequently conflates or ignores intragroup differences” (1242). While many gender and cultural fields of study have begun incorporating the intersectionality theoretical framework, there remains a tendency to privilege certain identity elements over others. Such privileging leads to an (often unintentional) enforced silencing of a person’s other identities. Crenshaw emphasizes the problem in submerging intragroup differences during identity discussions:

Although racism and sexism readily intersect in the lives of real people, they seldom do in feminist and antiracist practices. Thus, when the practices expound identity as ‘woman’ or ‘person of color’ as an either/or proposition, they relegate the identity of women of color to a location that resists telling. (1242)

These moments of identity intersection that “resist telling” in the forum of a traditional group identity are the essential voices of dissent and difference that serve to expand such identity discussions beyond the boundaries of single definitions.

In literary analysis, this identity privileging is far more common than in gender and cultural studies. Literary critics tend to isolate specific themes to explore within a text. While this is a logical framing technique used to narrow the topic of critical analysis, in Harlem Renaissance literary criticism it often leads to critical work that isolates themes through race, gender, sexuality, class, or other singular frameworks. By isolating such themes, these critics do not fully explore the significance of such social identities intersecting with each other and creating a far more complex theme than is acknowledged through isolating such identities.
In his article “Identity and Politics in a ‘Postmodern’ Gay Culture,” Seidman critiques poststructural trends toward erasing lines of identity demarcation, contending instead that identities must be acknowledged as socially created, and thus reflections of the society in which they exist. Therefore, he argues that identity must be viewed as a point of “ongoing social regulation and contestation rather than a quasi-natural substance or an accomplished social fact. Identities are never fixed or stable, not only because they elicit otherness but because they are occasions of continuing social struggle” (134). Fernandes builds upon this need for a broad framework when examining identity. However, she does not see intersectionality as a framework flexible enough to accomplish this.

Discussing third wave feminism’s embrace of intersectionality, Fernandes sees intersectionality as analyzing “the ways in which the intersection between inequalities such as race, gender, and class shaped women’s lives and structured the social location of specific groups of women of color in distinct ways” (102). However, her narrow definition of intersectionality restricts the framework to focusing solely on inequalities for women of color. As such, she sees the use of intersectionality within the three-wave model of feminism as reductive, isolating the voices of feminists of color to the third wave movement. However, Fernandes is herself reducing the intersectionality framework to a simplistic reflection of social inequalities. Such a definition does not encompass the significance of identity intersections and interactions within each person. Yet, Fernandes does address a significant issue within the intersectionality framework—the importance of focusing within a specific historical and social moment rather than in broader context.
While Fernandes centers her discussion of this problem within the context of third wave feminist writings, I argue that this same need for broader social and historical context exists when applying intersectionality to literary criticism.

Identity intersectionality, while a useful framework through which to examine social and identity interrelationships, does not encompass the significance of broader historical and cultural contexts within which such discussions exist. For the purpose of this project, my analytical framework extends beyond these theories of identity intersectionality to address the contextual dialogues among historical and cultural perspectives within which these identity constructs exist.

In examining the authors and texts for this project through multiple historical and contemporary contexts, one can then better explore the dialogue among the texts’ various layers of meaning. This intersectionality of critical approaches allows for a deeper understanding of the texts’ complexities. For example, in applying queer readings to the works in this project, I impose a contemporary lens onto the texts. While the historical context of the queer themes allows for a deeper understanding of the text and the author’s intentions, the text is itself a living artifact whose meaning evolves with each reader’s perspective. Yuri M. Lotman addresses this evolution of meaning in *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. While discussing the evolution of facts through historical perspectives, he contends that the creator’s text is “reconstructed” by the researcher, as “the historian can select the elements which from his or her point of view seem significant” (218-19). He continues, “If history is culture’s memory then this means that it is not only a relic of the past, but also an active mechanism of the present”
How a text is perceived says as much about the reader’s context as it does about the historical context of the text itself. While Lotman is discussing historical facts as reinterpreted with each new culture’s perspective, literary texts portray this same evolution as contexts and perspectives change. Examining a text through multiple historical and contemporary contexts enables the reader to explore more layers and potential meanings within the piece.

In utilizing a contemporary queer lens for a historical text, for example, such a lens has the potential to highlight meanings within the texts that went unnoticed among the Harlem Renaissance critics but that reflect the historical context of evolving sexual identities and social roles. Dana L. Cloud notes the potential for such layered meanings: “Queer texts can often be found embedded within dominant texts; these subtexts may be recognizable to those in the know as queer while remaining oblique to other audiences” (35). As contemporary readers, we are able to recognize such subversive themes within texts. At the same time, such subtexts should not be read in isolation. Queer elements of the works are in constant dialogue with historical, cultural, race, class, gender, and many other contexts simultaneously. To isolate a single reading is to ignore the significance of the contextual dialogue occurring at these points of contextual intersection.

The authors in this project engage with such social issues on multiple critical levels, with the issues shifting between explicit and implicit depending on the reader’s historical and cultural perspective. Lotman addresses this dialogue between historical contexts. He argues,

The interrelationship between cultural memory and its self-reflection is like a constant dialogue: texts from chronologically earlier periods are
brought into culture, and, interacting with contemporary mechanisms, generate an image of the historical past, which culture transfers into the past and which like an equal partner in dialogue, affects the present. But as it transforms the present, the past too changes its shape. This process does not take place in a vacuum: both partners in the dialogue are partners too in other confrontations, both are open to the intrusion of new texts from outside, and the texts, as we have already had cause to stress, always contain in themselves the potentiality for new interpretations. (272)

Lotman focuses on chronological history in this claim; however, his argument can be directly applied to other forms of social contexts, as he shows in his theory of the semiosphere. For the purpose of my project, I apply this idea of contextual dialogue to a multi-context reading of Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston’s texts. I examine the points of intersection where identity, social, and historical contexts are in dialogue, opening the potential for new insights into the texts.

The very discussion of identities must be grounded in an examination of how those identities exist and are interpreted in their surrounding social and historical context. The authors analyzed in this project explore the cultural trends and expectations portrayed through the New Negro identity—a symbolic construct created as a (theoretically) unified socio-political voice. Of course, as the race leaders above exemplify, such a unified perspective was an impossibility. The authors of this project grounded their works in these identity debates, and in the process, effectively exposed the constructed nature of such social identities. At the same time, as Seidman notes, it is impossible to destabilize one social construct without imposing a new construct. Yet the very acts of social constructs and counter-constructs lead to new insights. To understand better the complexities of the contexts in which the authors of this project are writing, it
is important to analyze the intersections of constructs and the social dialogue being developed through these authors’ works.

Chapter one of this project examines *Infants of the Spring* (1932) and *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), two socially provocative works by Wallace Thurman. Thurman thrives on critical controversy, as he gives voice to contentious issues left unaddressed by other authors and critics of the time. He examines the social constructions of sexuality, colorism, gender, and class through his exploration of such identity intersectionality. By using his novels to cast a critical eye on the popular New Negro ideals endorsed by his contemporaries, Thurman creates a direct dialogue between his own works and these surrounding social debates.

As will be discussed in chapter two, Nella Larsen relies on more subtlety than Thurman in addressing controversial issues in her two novels, *Passing* (1929) and *Quicksand* (1928). Such subtlety embeds her contentious themes within her popular themes of mixed race identities and the fight for racial equality. This choice enabled her to gain widespread public recognition for her novels, including the support of Black leaders such as Du Bois and Locke. Because Larsen’s surface stories focused on educated, wealthy, cultured characters, she was able to develop public support for her texts from some of the most powerful voices of the New Negro movement. This layering of socially subversive gender, sexuality, class, and race themes within respected storylines enabled Larsen to gain a much broader public audience for her works than would otherwise be possible. At the same time, such layering relies on textual silencing,
requiring the reader to excavate the subversive themes from hints and traces rather than Thurman’s bold declarations.

Like Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, explored in chapter three, uses “Sweat” (1926) and “Muttsy” (1926) to give voice to social silencing as she addresses controversial themes within her works. These stylistic choices highlight the gendered, class, race, and other imposed silencing occurring within social power structures. While Larsen primarily grounds her novels in middle and upper class social circles, Hurston centers her stories around lower class, regionally-specific settings, giving voice to experiences often excluded from the New Negro discussions. In the process, she places her works in dialogue with the broader social context of the New Negro movement and expands that dialogue to incorporate diverse race, class, cultural, and gender experiences.

Through their works, Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston effectively highlight the constructed nature of social identities in the New Negro movement. While such social deconstruction is a significant focus for critical analysis, this destabilization of social “norms” is developed through a broader intersection of literary, social, and historical contexts. As each author’s works subvert the cultural norms they portray, in return, varied social and historical contexts highlight different themes within such subversion. It is important to ground critical analysis of these texts in a recognition of these points of intersection among identity structures as well as among the many social contexts influencing these texts.
Chapter One: “More civilized and circumspect than she”: Controversy and Deconstruction of Norms in Wallace Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* and *The Blacker the Berry*

While the New Negro social movement initiated strong debate among race leaders, these discussions were then taken up by artists like Wallace Thurman, extending the debates about art and propaganda into the art itself. Thurman was a strong critic of the popular New Negro construct, utilizing his writing as a forum through which to address the constraints and hypocrisies inherent within the New Negro movement. At the same time, in arguing for artistic freedom in his fictional works, Thurman relied on political propagandistic techniques similar to those used by the race leaders he was critiquing. However, while Thurman struggles to intertwine artistic techniques with his social message in his satirical novel *Infants of the Spring*, he effectively uses the novel to push the boundaries of social propriety and race portrayals promoted by the New Negro movement. Thurman’s characters, a group of disillusioned artists seeking out an audience for their works and ideas, refuse to play the parts expected of them by outside social forces. In his novel *The Blacker the Berry*, on the other hand, Thurman focuses on the internalization of such social forces, as his protagonist, Emma Lou, struggles to find her own identity amidst the external and internal social biases influencing her life. In both novels, Thurman transgresses social norms in order to highlight the constructed
nature of such norms, exploring the influences of sexuality, gender, color, and class as they intersect with the racial discussions at the center of the New Negro movement.

Through these explorations of social identities, Thurman struggles to highlight the constructed nature of such social roles while simultaneously writing as part of the very social movement he is critiquing. Just as other New Negro social leaders utilize the strategic essentialism described by Gayatri Spivak in order to maintain a communal voice, Thurman navigates between this need for a communal voice and his desire to destabilize the social construction of social roles. Yuri M. Lotman notes,

One of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation is the boundary, and the boundary can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form. This space is “ours”, “my own”, it is “cultured”, “safe”, “harmoniously organized”, and so on. By contrast “their space” is “other”, “hostile”, “dangerous”, “chaotic.” (131)

As Thurman attempts to transgress such boundaries, he must necessarily exist within these boundaries. It is this struggle to navigate among such contradictory contexts that makes Thurman’s works a particularly interesting site for such analysis. In pushing the boundaries of social expectations, Thurman offers an important critical lens into the New Negro movement.

Thurman utilizes Infants of the Spring’s satirical framework to highlight some of his most explicit criticism of the New Negro movement. Throughout the novel, Thurman incorporates controversial storylines and critiques the social constraints that restrict such topics in New Negro art. Renoir W. Gaither notes that “satire and social realism became for Thurman the chief means by which he attempted to identify, explore, and replace the
values associated with the New Negro” (81). While many critics focus on Thurman’s themes identifying and exploring New Negro values, Gaither’s minor note that Thurman attempts to “replace” those values leads to the most intriguing conflicts in Thurman’s works. In opposing one social framework, Thurman then replaces that framework with his own, as represented in Raymond’s speeches throughout the novel. However, such a replacement does not offer the social or artistic freedom for which Thurman seems to be arguing. This struggle for artistic freedom within the varied inescapable social pressures highlights the inherent contradictions and yet powerful reflection of such social complexities within Thurman’s works.

James Kelley explores these intersecting points of conflict through the characters’ dialogues in *Infants of the Spring*, focusing on Alain Locke’s and Countee Cullen’s fictional characters who struggle to find a hybrid position between primitivism and classicism for New Negro art. Kelley notes the boundaries Locke and Cullen “fail to transgress, or perhaps unwittingly reinscribe, as much as by the violations they permit” (513). Kelley’s focus is on Locke’s and Cullen’s unintentional reinscription of social boundaries, reflecting Thurman’s own critique of these social leaders’ stances. Yet such reinscription is a problematic inevitability for Thurman as well, as he struggles throughout both his fiction and nonfiction to reconcile his promotion of racial heritage with his deconstruction of race as a social concept. Clarence Major explores this inner conflict represented in Thurman’s protagonist Raymond, arguing that “race consciousness” is the trap from which Raymond cannot escape:
[Raymond] does not wish to leave himself and his history behind, but to change our perception of both. But he fails to realize that in American society his dream of freedom from “race consciousness” has no context in which it can be understood without contradiction. (135)

I would extend Raymond’s fictional struggles to encompass those of Thurman as well. In attempting to subvert the social pressures and expectations of the New Negro movement, Thurman must still write within that context, navigating among race, class, gender, and sexual “norms” that he may either acknowledge or refute, but in each case his actions are necessarily influenced by those surrounding contexts.

While the other authors discussed in this project tended subtly to intertwine such social commentary into elements of their fiction, Thurman was very explicit and vocal in his social critiques, through both his non-fiction and fictional works. Thurman’s strident arguments are what make his works such significant forums for contextual analysis, as we can explore his navigations through and struggles with the complex social pressures of the time. Thurman was often a harsh critic, with his biting insights assailing popular authors and social leaders. He criticized prominent names in the field, including Jessie Fauset, Walter White, Locke, and Du Bois, for highlighting the social message of Negro art as more critically significant than the artistry of the work. In his essay “Negro Artists and the Negro,” Thurman disparages each of the above authors for failing to create skillful artistic works due to, he argues, their excessive focus on social messages. He notes, “They all treated the Negro as a sociological problem rather than as a human being. I might add that only in [Alain Locke’s] The New Negro was there even an echo of a different tune. The rest were treatises rather than works of art” (39).
time, Locke is by no means safe from Thurman’s criticism. Throughout *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman uses Locke’s fictional double, Dr. Parkes, as a foil against which Thurman addresses his barbs.

In his critiques, Thurman portrays such social leaders and artists as an opposition to his own points. In portraying the opposition, Thurman highlights his own arguments as distinct from such perspectives. This technique of strategic essentialism parallels the New Negro movement’s similar rhetorical creation of opposition between the Old Negro and the New Negro. As the New Negro movement progressed, young artists like Thurman critiqued the social trends that the New Negro movement had brought with it. However, like the Old Negro versus New Negro debates, Thurman’s portrayal of the opposition, represented in social figures like Du Bois and Locke, is grounded more in underscoring his own point rather than fully examining his constructed opposition.

In censuring the authors above for writing novels as “treatises rather than works of art,” Thurman highlights the problematic emphasis on propaganda during the New Negro movement, to the detriment of artistic freedom. Yet, he utilizes these same rhetorical tendencies within his own novel, *Infants of the Spring*, as he develops the book as social commentary. Despite his critique of this very technique, Thurman, like Fauset, White, Locke, Du Bois, and many other artists, integrates social propaganda into his fiction. Despite his anti-“treatises” stance, Thurman in fact effectively utilizes such treatises in his fiction to subvert the trends among other artists and race leaders,
highlighting social issues often underrepresented in discussions during the New Negro movement.

Thurman critiqued social restrictions placed upon New Negro artists as they were expected to portray public respectability to counter the negative racial stereotypes of the time. Noting the many elements of diverse racial experiences glossed over or ignored by social leaders, Thurman argued that there was a clear disparity between the New Negro renaissance and realities of everyday life. In “Negro Artists and the Negro,” Thurman discusses this social emphasis on “respectable” portrayals within the Black community (37). He notes:

Negroes in America feel certain that they must always appear in public butter side up, in order to keep from being trampled in the contemporary onward march. They feel as if they must always exhibit specimens from the college rather than the kindergarten, specimens from the parlor rather than from the pantry. They are in the process of being assimilated, and those elements within the race which are still too potent for easy assimilation must be hidden until they no longer exist. (38)

Thurman argues that these upper class, well-educated portrayals, while reflecting the New Negro identity and maintaining “respectability” in the face of the white world, fail to portray the diversity of real experiences. In contrast to these trends within the New Negro movement, Thurman attempted to highlight the very social experiences that were unrepresented in such portrayals.

In order to emphasize these experiences, Thurman utilized fictional versions of artists and social leaders within the New Negro movement as opposing voices against which he could ground his arguments. One of the most prominent subjects of criticism
throughout *Infants of the Spring* is Locke’s fictional double, Dr. Parkes. Thurman often develops conversations between Parkes and his own fictional character, Raymond, allowing Thurman to portray Locke’s stances on key issues in the New Negro movement while also underscoring his own arguments against those stances. However, Thurman’s fictional version of Locke reflects Thurman’s own need to develop an opposition to his perspectives rather than address the nuanced complexities of Locke’s actual arguments. Thurman utilizes such contrived oppositions to portray Locke as focused on public respectability to the detriment of artistic freedom. While Locke did note the importance of such public personae in contradicting racial stereotypes, he also was a vocal advocate for artistic freedom—an element of Locke’s social stances that Thurman de-emphasizes in his portrayal of “Dr. Parkes” in the novel.

By highlighting Locke’s focus on public persona, Thurman uses Locke as an opponent against whom to portray effectively his own stance on artistic and personal freedom. In the newspaper scene within the novel, for example, Thurman utilizes the character Dr. Parkes to voice the common focus in the New Negro movement on public respectability. That character’s argument then serves as the platform for Raymond’s speech on the artistic problems with such publicity. Dr. Parkes and Raymond discuss a new article in the newspaper that appears after one of Raymond’s particularly wild house parties. Thurman describes an article in the *New York Call*, emphasizing the newspaper’s social role as: “Harlem’s most respectable news weekly” (197). In describing the *Call* as a “respectable” newspaper, Thurman focuses his critique on the New Negro elite who
patronize that paper. This connection enables Thurman to denounce the paper’s gossip and imply a parallel denouncement of such gossip among Harlem’s elite under the guise of moral judgment.

The newspaper article describes the wild party at Raymond’s house, arguing that rather than “pursuing their work,” the artists were “drinking and carousing with a low class of whites from downtown” (197). Because of these actions, the artists are labeled as having no “racial integrity” (197). Instead, “They were satisfied to woo decadence, satisfied to dedicate their life to a routine of drunkenness and degeneracy with cheap white people, rather than mingle with the respectable elements of their own race” (197). The article criticizes these Harlem Renaissance artists for their choice in friends and parties, noting the group’s decadence, drunkenness, and degeneracy with “cheap whites” rather than with the “respectable” New Negros in Harlem. Yet, while the characters view such a newspaper as a tactless invasion of their personal lives, Thurman further complicates the characters’ stance when Raymond’s and Paul’s landlady later evicts them from their house for their raucous behavior. The inclusion of this later scene lends an element of credence to the newspaper’s earlier judgments, as Thurman overlaps the public and private spheres of the characters’ lives. The characters are censured in their private lives for the exact actions that had earlier caused public censure in the newspaper article. However, the characters’ later eviction could also be read as simply a reflection of reality (Thurman and Nugent were evicted from their home on the same charge) rather
than as an acknowledgment of this public and private overlap (an overlap that Thurman strongly opposed throughout his writings).

Thurman creates Raymond’s house as a parallel to his own house, where he and his friends often carried on raucous parties. Thurman’s friend Hurston dubbed the house “Niggeratti Manor,” a term applied to Infants of the Spring’s fictional house as well (40). Through developing such parallels between reality and fiction, Thurman encourages a reading of Niggeratti Manor as a fictional representation of reality. Both fictional and real versions of the home served as the central meeting place for Thurman and his other artistic and literary friends—some of the most prominent names in the New Negro movement, including Hurston, Nugent, Langston Hughes, and Aaron Douglas among many others. Throughout the novel, Thurman engages with fictional parallels not only of the house, but also of his friends and acquaintances within it.

Thurman and his friends often hosted such wild parties at their house, much to the chagrin of the social leaders who hoped for more decorum among the New Negro movement’s young artists. Thurman uses the fictional newspaper article as a reflection of these conflicting perspectives between the movement’s different factions. The newspaper article continues its critique of the partiers, arguing that such “drunkenness and degeneracy” negatively influenced the artists’ works:

This showed of course in their work, which was, almost without exception, a glorification of the lowest strata of Negro life. Led on by their white friends, they were pandering to a current demand for the sensational, libeling their own people, injuring them, insulting them by being concerned only with Jezebels, pimps and other underworld fauna. Thus they aided and abetted those whites who would have the world
believe that the Negro was an inferior, worthless creature, not capable of appreciating or indulging in the better things in life. (197)

After reading the article, Dr. Parkes is worried that such publicity will negatively influence the movement and perpetuate negative stereotypes of the race. Raymond, on the other hand, laughs, asking: “Surely you don’t take this tripe seriously?” (198).

Through the newspaper article itself as well as the character Dr. Parkes, Thurman effectively portrays the common desire within the New Negro movement to refute negative racial stereotypes by maintaining a respectable public persona.

For Dr. Parkes, the newspaper article reflects a potentially much larger issue than a single description of a party—he sees a distinct need for the leading artists in the New Negro renaissance to maintain social respectability. Parkes argues that “It’s a matter of protecting yourself from unnecessary attacks on your reputation” (198). He explains the broader social standing each artist must maintain: “Talented Negroes are being watched by countless people, white and black, to produce something new, something tremendous. They are waiting for you to prove yourselves worthy so that they can help you” (198). Therefore, scandal stories like these “certainly won’t influence the public favorably” (198). Thurman’s portrayal of Parkes opens a forum in which to discuss Locke’s own stances on such issues. Locke held the portrayal of the New Negro as highly important, in his hope that respectable portrayals would positively influence the Black race’s social position in the fight for racial equality. For Locke, the New Negro movement was a chance for an artistic and social evolution into something new. As Locke’s parallel Dr. Parkes notes, “This is a new day in the history of our race” (198). For Parkes, this
moment in history is so significant that one must maintain an effective public persona in order to ensure the movement’s success. Raymond, on the other hand, refuses to maintain such a public persona for the sake of the movement. He argues, “I don’t owe anything to anyone except myself” (198).

Terrell Scott Herring argues that this struggle between public and private spheres at the time was predominantly a problem for Black artists, while white artists tended to benefit from such publicity. Noting Raymond and Parkes’s newspaper article discussion, Herring claims that this scene in Infants of the Spring “reveals just how little control minority subjects actually have over their own representation” (“Negro Artist” 581). Herring’s point highlights the broader social pressures under which Black artists were working. White patrons, publishers, and readers all directly influenced the reception of and expectations for Black artists. Through such social power, white audience expectations affected the styles of work Black artists were producing and the popularity of certain styles and authors over others.

At the same time, the Raymond and Parkes newspaper scene Herring refers to does not emphasize the Black artists’ loss of “control” through direct white influence but rather through Black influence, as a Black Harlem newspaper imposes moral judgment upon the artists. Yet, as Thurman notes, white influences did affect Black social expectations. Similar to the rise of a New Negro construct through an attempt to contradict racial stereotypes permeating white society, New Negro moral and artistic expectations during the Harlem Renaissance were often grounded in a desire to influence
white racial perceptions. Rather than addressing these interracial influences noted by Herring, Thurman instead extends his discussion to explore the problematic intraracial pressures resulting from such white influences.

Parkes’s and Raymond’s stances on public versus private spheres are reflected in their real counterparts, Locke and Thurman. Locke maintained this separation between public and private activities in his own life, while Thurman refused to define his public persona by others’ desires for what he “should” be. Herring reads Thurman’s fictional double, Raymond, as opposing social publicity. He argues, “Thurman’s protagonist implicitly contends that publicity ruins the Harlem Renaissance” (“Negro Artist” 584). However, such an argument simplifies the far more complex relationship between public and private spheres for both the fictional characters in Infants of the Spring and their real counterparts. In a 1928 editorial essay for his magazine Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life, Thurman explores this relationship among the New Negro construct, the Harlem Renaissance, and the publicity surrounding these movements. He describes these social and artistic movements as: “Then came the so-called renaissance and the emergence of the so-called new (in this case meaning widely advertised) Negro” (216). For Thurman, these movements were created through publicity, with no grounding in the real, everyday lives of Harlem residents. He sees such publicity as emphasizing the constructed nature of the Harlem Renaissance rather than “[ruining] the Harlem Renaissance.”

Thurman extends his emphasis on the movement’s social construction into Infants of the Spring through the death of the character Paul. Paul’s suicide stands as an
extravagant public performance, submerging the devastating real emotions of a friend’s suicide under Paul’s attempted publicity for his book through a lavish death scene. Paul’s death reflects the extravagance of his life, often described by critics as representing the “Bohemian aesthete” and the “dandy” in the novel (Glick 419, 422; Miller 199). His elaborate, exaggerated social performances are often read as a method of destabilizing racial stereotypes and New Negro constructs of masculinity (Cobb 339; Jarraway 43; Knadler 900). Throughout the novel, Paul pushes the limits of propriety, queering racial, cultural, and gender constructs.

J. Martin Favor notes Thurman’s transgressive style, particularly in context of transgressing New Negro race constructs. He argues that one of Thurman’s “primary modes of attack” is “to undermine the very ‘reality’ of race as a concept . . . to dismantle race identity as a stable and ultimately knowable set of categories” (204). While Favor does not directly equate this transgression with Thurman’s deconstruction of masculinity and sexuality through characters such as Paul, other critics often read Thurman’s transgression through this lens. David R. Jarraway argues that Paul’s “sexual difference” encourages a re-reading of identity as “safely ordered or unified”—deconstruction of that apparent identity “order” (43). Such a queer critical reading encourages exploration of Paul through not only a racial or sexual lens but also through the intersection of such identity contexts.

Paul’s dandy persona serves simultaneously to highlight and deconstruct racial, cultural, and gender roles. Masculinity within the New Negro movement was a
problematic gender construction, similar to the New Negro woman’s struggle to embrace sexuality without perpetuating racial stereotypes. Black men were stereotypically viewed as primitive and aggressive; therefore, masculine personae could be read as perpetuating such stereotypes. At the same time, masculinity was viewed in the New Negro movement as representative of the courageous, heroic New Negro race leader promoted by authors such as William Pickens. Feminine traits among men were seen as weak and deviant. As discussed in the introduction, while homosexual activity had only recently gained a clear-cut social stigma, gender role blurring was strongly censured. Although Paul was portrayed as engaging in homosexual relationships, the dandy role was not necessarily equated with sexual activity. Rather, the dandy deconstructed gender roles, forcing a re-evaluation of seeming “norms.” Elisa F. Glick notes the intersection of racial and gender deconstruction through the role of the dandy: “By refusing to define blackness in the New Negro’s terms—as, in other words, a nostalgic appeal to African origins—the black dandy challenges the primitivist aesthetic of the Renaissance” (424). Glick characterizes the dandy figure as a deconstruction of the New Negro concept of race. However, she views Locke as a dandy figure, while Monica L. Miller defines both Locke and Du Bois as dandies. Therefore, although the dandy figure does deconstruct expected racial and gender roles, its relationship with the New Negro construct is complex. The dandy role has served both as a refutation of racial stereotypes (as can be seen in Du Bois and Locke through their promotion of the New Negro) and as a
deconstruction of the New Negro’s proposed “norms,” as Thurman seems to be addressing through the character Paul.

Through his portrayal of Paul, Thurman re-appropriates the dandy as a socially destabilizing figure, blurring the racial and gender categories set forth in the New Negro movement. Cobb claims that “the stability of a Lockean model of race is narratively dissolved” by Paul’s disruption of such race ideals (337). However, such an argument is complicated by Thurman’s text. As discussed above, Locke’s own arguments are utilized in *Infants of the Spring* to develop an opposition against which Ray can argue. Locke in fact encouraged the rebellion and artistic freedom presented by Thurman and his compatriots through projects like Thurman’s controversial, short-lived magazine, *Fire!!*.

At the same time, while Locke expressed great respect for Thurman’s work, he voiced concern over “sex radicalism” themes in both *Fire!!* and Thurman’s later magazine, *Harlem: A forum of Negro Life* (Rev. of *Fire* 563)—evidence of the dissolving Lockean race model on which Cobb bases his claim. Throughout his critiques of Thurman, Locke continually recognizes the importance of Thurman’s rebellious themes while remaining uncomfortable with their potential social influence. In his review of *Fire!!*, Locke praises the magazine’s contributors for their “charging brigade of literary revolt, especially against the bulwarks of Puritanism” (563). However, he argues,

> If Negro life is to provide a healthy antidote to Puritanism, . . . [then] its flesh values must more and more be expressed in the clean, original, primitive but fundamental terms of the senses and not, as too often in this particular issue of Fire, in hectic imitation of the ‘naughty nineties’ and effete echoes of contemporary decadence. (563)
Locke supports the young artists’ goal in launching a “literary revolt” against the restrictions of the older generation, praising them for “[repudiating] any special moral burden of proof along with any of the other social disabilities that public opinion saddled upon his fathers” (563). In his portrayal of Locke as Dr. Parkes in *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman does not acknowledge Locke’s support for the young artists in their disruption of social “respectability.” Instead, he highlights Locke’s concerns over social reactions to these disruptions, thus editing the version of Locke that the reader is allowed to see.

While Cobb views Paul in *Infants of the Spring* as representing an effective destabilization of “a Lockean model of race,” Thurman’s own portrayal of Paul remains ambivalent. In choosing to kill off Paul at the end of the novel, Thurman complicates queer readings of Paul as a strong destabilizing social force in opposition to race and gender expectations. As the only openly queer character within the novel, Paul’s death further complicates queer readings of the novel through comparison to the other queer storyline involving Raymond and Stephen. Raymond and Stephen never acknowledge their desire for each other, and Thurman purposefully avoids explicitly portraying that desire. These characters survive, while the effeminate dandy, a danger to gender and racial norms, commits suicide. Stephen Knadler argues that this suicide of the queer dandy reflects Thurman’s own struggles with a queer identity in its intersection with a racial identity: “Through Paul’s suicide, Thurman sought to kill the queer inside himself so as to reconcile racial politics with a presentable aesthetic philosophy of personality” (927). Knadler contends that for Thurman, a queer identity is in conflict with “the manly
work of serving as a cultural race bearer,” and Paul’s portrayal is an “allegorical unconscious” struggle with Thurman’s conflict of identities (919, 925). However, while such an argument addresses Thurman’s ambivalence in his portrayal of Paul, Knadler simplifies both Paul’s portrayal and Thurman’s own perspectives on the Harlem Renaissance. Knadler argues that, for Thurman, “The revitalization of the Harlem Renaissance . . . lies in the disavowal of and final death of the self-identified gay black male” (925), but such an argument assumes Thurman’s desire to revitalize the Harlem Renaissance—an inaccurate stance based on Thurman’s own view of the Harlem Renaissance as socially and publicly constructed with little connection to reality.

In addition, Knadler’s claim that Paul represents “the disavowal and final death of the self-identified gay black male” forces Paul’s death into a singular reading as the death of a gay man because he cannot fit within the race world. Such a reading avoids Thurman’s broader social and artistic goals in portraying Paul’s suicide. Thurman carefully ensures that Paul remains sexually ambiguous, despite his explicit relationships with men. He is never a “self-identified gay black male.” Instead, Paul consistently blurs the race and sexuality binaries that enforce such socially imposed identities. For example, Paul transgresses race expectations as he laughingly uses the word “nigger” in a mixed-race group, eliciting horror from his companions. Raymond notes the broader social implications of using such an offensive term: “To say nigger in the presence of a white person . . .” (44). Thurman’s use of ellipses at the end of the thought indicates Paul’s extreme social transgression. Paul’s comments disrupt the message of race pride
being promoted by others in the New Negro movement, as he seems to play into white prejudices. Yet, through such remarks, Paul effectively critiques the imposed social moralities that impose such expectations. Throughout the novel, Paul maintains a transgressive public persona designed to disrupt racial and sexual social boundaries.

Thurman utilizes his portrayal of Paul, in particular, as the central figure in the most controversial element of the novel—the explicit portrayal of homosexual desires and relationships. Through Paul’s actions and comments, Thurman effectively destabilizes constructions of gender and sexuality. For example, in a conversation between Samuel and Paul, Samuel is troubled by Paul’s fluid sexuality and constantly attempts to pin him down as either homosexual or heterosexual. When Paul describes an erotic presence in one of his dreams, Samuel immediately asks, “Was the presence male or female?” to which Paul responds, “I don’t know” (46). The interrogation continues, with Samuel digging into Paul’s previous sexual experiences. When Samuel learns that Paul has “certainly” enjoyed sexual experiences with both women and men, he makes a final attempt to label Paul within the sexual binary, asking: “Which did you prefer?” (47). Paul, however, refuses to fit within the label, responding: “I really don’t know. After all there are no sexes, only sex majorities, and the primary function of the sex act is enjoyment. Therefore I enjoyed one experience as much as the other” (47). Through this scene, Thurman engages with the broader social debates about sexual identity at the time. His argument for a fluid identity blurs the line between “normal” and “degenerate” labels by framing the sex act as enjoyment rather than identity.
In portraying Samuel’s reaction to Paul, Thurman effectively integrates these debates about sexual identity into the controversies over New Negro propriety. When he hears that Paul has “[indulged] in homosexuality,” Samuel’s face “turned red,” while the other partygoers all laugh at Samuel’s reaction (47). Samuel is the one member of the group who is uncomfortable with Paul’s “immoral” activities. As Thurman later portrays, Samuel parallels Dr. Parkes’s views in encouraging respectable social personae for New Negro artists. However, while Samuel is embarrassed by Paul’s extravagant disregard for such social moralities, the other characters all mock and berate Samuel for his moral judgments. Such interactions do not fit within Knadler’s argument that Paul’s death is an allegory for Thurman’s own inability to reconcile queer and race identities. Instead, Thurman’s goal is to destabilize such restrictive social identities, emphasizing their constructed nature, rather than attempting to work within the identities themselves.

Paul’s very dandy persona serves as a critique and deconstruction of social norms rather than as a portrayal of a complex reality. Unlike Thurman’s *Blacker the Berry* protagonist Emma Lou, Larsen’s protagonists Helga and Irene, or even Raymond in *Infants of the Spring*, Paul’s character is never extended beyond his role of deconstructing social norms. While Thurman and Larsen imbue the above protagonists with complex inner struggles as they navigate between inner identities and outside social pressures, Paul shows no inner identity. Instead, he emphasizes his own control of outward social pressures. Paul verbally manipulates characters such as Samuel and Dr. Parkes, emphasizing their own foolishness for relying on such social constructs.
Paul’s death could be read as a tragic suicide of a man buried within his own constructed external persona. At the same time, there is no evidence of Paul being depressed before his suicide. Instead, it seems solely to be an attempt at a dramatic public spectacle—a continuation of Paul’s role as a symbol of the Harlem Renaissance’s own construction through publicity. Paul creates an elaborate scene for his suicide, as he “donned a crimson mandarin robe, wrapped his head in a batik scarf of his own designing,” and spreads the pages of his new novel across the bathroom floor (282-83). This intricate scene reflects Paul’s extravagance in all elements of his life. Raymond wonders, “Had Paul the debonair, Paul the poseur, Paul the irresponsible romanticist, finally faced reality and seen himself and the world as they actually were? Or was this merely another act, the final stanza in his drama of beautiful gestures?” (280). While Raymond is obsessed with the depressing realities of the dying New Negro Renaissance, Paul, even in his suicide, embraces the glamour and romanticism of the Harlem Renaissance’s public portrayal rather than its reality.

However, such a reading of the scene is further complicated by Paul’s ironic failure. His attempt at using his glamorous suicide to create “delightful publicity to precede the posthumous publication of his novel” results in destroying that very novel (283). Paul’s romantic ideals cannot compete with reality. The bathtub in which Paul kills himself overflows onto the pages of the book, rendering his masterpiece illegible. On the dedication page, Paul “had drawn a distorted, inky black skyscraper, modeled after Niggeratti Manor, and on which were focused an array of blindingly white beams of
light” (284). Through this sketch, Thurman links Paul’s death to the death of the “Niggeratti” artistic movement. The New Negro Renaissance, represented in the “inky black skyscraper,” is beginning to collapse. In the final lines of the novel, Thurman describes this symbolic image: “The foundation of this building was composed of crumbling stone. At first glance it could be ascertained that the skyscraper would soon crumble and fall, leaving the dominating white lights in full possession of the sky” (284). Through Paul’s symbolic death, the New Negro movement is buried under the “dominating white” competing artistic movements.

In his portrayal of this final scene, Thurman seems to argue that, as Paul’s suicide is a romantic but wasted gesture, so too is the New Negro movement a futile hope for racial progression. By ending the novel with Paul’s suicide, Thurman subverts the public portrayal of the New Negro movement’s lofty ideals. Just as Paul’s elaborate public persona falls apart under the reality of the tub water spilling onto his manuscript, the New Negro’s publicly-promoted ideals dissolve under the realities never addressed by the movement. Paul’s symbolic suicide, in conjunction with Raymond’s stark cynicism, are likely the reason that Infants of the Spring has been deemed “the obituary of the Harlem Renaissance” (Huggins 191). However, it is important to note the positive elements within a seemingly dark, cynical story.

Raymond’s cynicism in many ways seems to parallel Thurman’s own cynicism toward the Harlem Renaissance ideals so often detached from reality. At the same time, Raymond’s cynicism, when read in conjunction with other elements of the novel, leads to
a more complex understanding of the novel’s themes. Scott Herring argues that Raymond exists as an opposition to the New Negro movement, describing the character as “Thurman’s anti-New Negro Ray” (*Queering* 19). However, such a description of Raymond as “anti-New Negro” is an oversimplification. Raymond critiques elements of the movement and expresses cynicism at its focus on social reactions. At the same time, Raymond also recognizes and appreciates the realities that have been buried under these trends.

Despite his disagreements with many perspectives in the New Negro movement, Raymond never stops engaging with these arguments. Although he maintains a cynical persona, Raymond cares enough about the movement to fight for his beliefs, seeing such freedom of expression as worth fighting for. As Raymond is talking to Stephen, he discusses his frustration:

> Do you know, Steve, that I’m sick of both whites and blacks? I’m sick of discussing the Negro problem, of having it thrust at me from every conversational nook and cranny. I’m sick of whites who think I can’t talk about anything else, and I’m sick of Negroes who think I shouldn’t talk about anything else. (215)

However, this complaint is not a detachment from racial issues. He critiques those characters who attempt to distance themselves from such racial issues. Raymond sees race as a significant element in his works; yet, it is a single, personal element rather than a broader social voice that he is expected to emulate. He contends, “I most certainly do not blind myself to what it means to be a Negro. I get it from all sides” (215). For Raymond, the problems in the New Negro movement are grounded in the very fact that it
is constantly forced upon him, with outside voices attempting to determine what he writes. At the same time, Raymond is willing to continue writing in his own voice, even if his novel will be “criticized severely, then forgotten” (214). Raymond wants to express “what it means to be a Negro” but argues that his art should not be restricted by that.

Raymond’s stance reflects that of many artists within the New Negro movement, as they sought to maintain artistic freedom within the movement’s expectations. However, this stance does not mean Raymond is the “anti-New Negro” that Herring argues. Rather, Raymond is forcing an expansion of what the New Negro means.

For Raymond, Harlem has become a symbol rather than a place, reflecting external expectations. Therefore, although he still feels a connection to Harlem as a community, he is disgusted by the symbolic Harlem that serves to reflect social expectations. Such a symbol attempts to erase the diverse, “bland,” everyday life of Harlem that so appeals to Raymond. He claims,

Eventually I’m going to renounce Harlem and all it stands for now. You see, Harlem has become a state of mind, peopled with improbable monsters. There are a quarter million Negroes here, and it is fashionable only to take notice of a bare thousand . . . the cabaret entertainers, the actors, the musicians, the artists, and the colorful minority who drift from rent party to speakeasy to side-street dives. The rest are ignored. They’re not interesting. Because we live in an age when only the abnormal is interesting. (222)

Raymond reflects Thurman’s own non-fiction arguments about the ignored majority in Harlem. In its role as a white tourist destination, Harlem is seen only through the small population that represents something desirable for whites. In his 1929 article “Few Know Real Harlem, the City of Surprises: Quarter Million Negroes Form a Moving, Colorful
Pageant of Life,” Thurman voices the same arguments that he develops for Raymond. He notes the “lavishly” wealthy upper class and the “great Negro middle class” who go unnoticed by “the white person who views Harlem from the raucous interior of a smoke-filled, jazz-drunk cabaret” (4M). Such white expectations help to develop the symbolic Harlem that Raymond so reviles. At the same time, this symbolic Harlem is not solely developed by the white, external perspective. Throughout Infants of the Spring, Thurman argues that the New Negro movement creates the same problem as the white tourists do, as it promotes one Harlem experience over others. He examines the varied perspectives within the New Negro movement, each focused on its own specific vision of Harlem. While members of the movement like Dr. Parkes focus on social propriety rather than the cabaret entertainers, the result is the same—the promotion of Harlem as a symbol instead of its diverse reality.

Rather than portraying the “obituary” of the New Negro movement, Thurman instead utilizes Infants of the Spring as a forum to ground the movement’s idealistic, symbolic discussions in the realities of Harlem and its artists—details often left unacknowledged by the movement. Granville Ganter and Jarraway both view Thurman’s transgression of boundaries as a primary focus within his novels. Ganter notes Thurman as breaking “many social taboos” (83), while Jarraway argues that Paul’s “sexual difference” encourages a re-reading of identity as “safely ordered or unified,” deconstructing the apparent “ordered” identity (43). These critics effectively emphasize the significance in Thurman’s sexual transgressions through his portrayal of Paul,
Raymond, and other characters within the novel. Yet, both critics focus on Thurman’s sexual boundary transgressions without fully addressing how these points intersect with his multiple other transgressions of identity and social constructs. Thurman extends such boundary transgression not only to race and sexuality, but also to gender, class, New Negro constructs and expectations, and many other intersecting social influences. At the same time, as I earlier discussed, it is problematic to explore Thurman’s transgressive goals as solely disrupting such boundaries—this transgression inherently relies on the reframing of new definitions and boundaries.

This transgression and reframing of boundaries is particularly evident in Thurman’s own fictional portrayal of Raymond. Because Thurman is clearly portraying real people through his characters in *Infants of the Spring*, his controversial themes carry with them much more danger for people’s social reputations than in entirely fictitious works like *The Blacker the Berry*. In particular, Thurman’s discussion of same-sex desires is perhaps the most precarious line he walks, as such discussions within the novel move from the fictional abstract to real, specific lives. Multiple writers, including Thurman himself in *The Blacker the Berry*, incorporate characters with same-sex desires into their fiction during the Harlem Renaissance. However, Thurman’s decision to do so in *Infants of the Spring*, a thinly-veiled satire of real life, presents the potential for far more danger to his friends’ and his own social reputations. These broader social implications permeate Thurman’s decisions in portraying the queer storylines within the novel. For example, while Raymond is consistently labeled queer by contemporary
critics, Thurman is careful to portray Raymond and Stephen (the fictional representative of Thurman’s own long-time lover, Harald Stefansson) strictly in the context of heterosexual relationships. Unlike his portrayal of Paul, in which Thurman purposefully transgresses the binaries of heterosexual and homosexual labeling, his portrayal of Raymond and Stephen seems to rely on that same binary as a protective “norming” for the characters, subsuming their queer elements underneath a binary-assumed heterosexual surface.

Even in his portrayal of the transgressive Paul, Thurman incorporates clear links to the social identity of the dandy figure and to the common portrayal in fiction of the time of queer male characters as effeminate. However, even when grounding his character in such social identities, Thurman effectively expands his portrayal beyond the more shallow dandy and sexual stereotypes that writers tended to rely upon. In addition to blurring sexual binaries through Paul’s relationships with men and women, Thurman effectively extends this blurring beyond Paul himself to implicate other characters as well as the reader in such sexual transgression.

Such implication is clear in the party scene, when Paul arrives at the house party with a beautiful man on his arm. Paul introduces the man as Bud, “a bootblack, but he has the most beautiful body I’ve ever seen. I’ll get him to strip for the gang soon” (175). The man serves solely as a sex object and is never portrayed with an identity beyond that role. In portraying Bud, Thurman forces the audience to acknowledge the queer dynamic, offering no subtle layerings of storylines such as Larsen utilizes to submerge
safely the queer themes in *Passing*. As Paul enters the party with Bud, he offers up the beautiful man as an object of sexual desire for his audience. He shouts out, “This is Bud. He has the most perfect body in New York. I’m gonna let you see it soon” (176). The partygoers all react with excitement, shouting out, “Bravo” and “Go to it” (176). This group reaction unites all of the partygoers in this sexual desire of the male body.

Through his portrayal of such reactions, Thurman purposefully blurs the line between the homosexual/heterosexual binary, as party-goers of each gender admire the man’s beauty.

Thurman continues to transgress gender, racial, and sexual binaries through this scene, as he frames the characters’ actions with the description, “The room was crowded with people. Black people, white people, and all the in-between shades. . . . Paul and his protégé were surrounded by an avid mob” (176). Through such descriptions, Thurman implicates all members of the party in this group desire, regardless of racial or sexual identity. This technique effectively transgresses such social boundaries. At the same time, in response to Locke’s and other New Negro leaders’ fears that such explicit portrayals of sexuality in New Negro art would perpetuate stereotypes of Black sexual degeneracy, Thurman utilizes this transgression of boundaries to avoid such stereotypes.

Unlike race leaders who hope to highlight Black respectability, Thurman instead explicitly portrays sexuality and “immoral” behavior but detaches this behavior from racial stigmas by highlighting such sexual desires in members of all races, effectively rejecting the racial stereotype while portraying this social “degeneracy.”
However, even Thurman’s explicit sexual storylines, like the above party scene, are rarely directly addressed by Harlem Renaissance critics of the time. Instead, the critics tend to rely on vague, broad descriptions in order to avoid these “inappropriate” topics. For example, George S. Schuyler criticizes the characters’ “liquor drinking and lechery” in his review of the novel, but he purposefully avoids direct description of the characters’ homosexual activities (10). Such critiques work against Thurman’s own attempts to bring these unspoken, “inappropriate” elements of New Negro lives into public conversation.

Yet, even Thurman struggles with expressing such controversial themes in his work. In portraying his friend Richard Bruce Nugent’s fictional double, Paul, Thurman openly explores Paul’s queer desires. However, Thurman is far more reticent in discussing his own same sex relationships, almost entirely erasing that element of the relationship between his own fictional double, Raymond, and his lover’s fictional double, Stephen. Throughout the novel, Thurman strives to over-emphasize Stephen’s sexual relationships with women while avoiding any explicit discussion of sexual desire between Stephen and Raymond, enabling readers to infer the two characters’ heterosexuality.

However, despite Thurman’s purposeful avoidance of explicitly queer dialogue or actions between Raymond and Stephen, many contemporary critics assume that the characters are lovers (Comprone 240; Ganter 96; Knadler 926; Singh xxiii). Often critics rely on Thurman’s own relationship with Stefansson as evidence of a parallel sexual
relationship between their fictional doubles. Knadler, for instance, claims that “Thurman fears the disclosure of his and Raymond’s dirty secret” (926). This statement assumes Thurman’s own discomfort with a public, fictional portrayal of his sexual relationships. Yet, Thurman does clearly incorporate a subtext of sexual desire between Raymond and Stephen. If these (real and fictional) desires were a “dirty secret,” of which Thurman feared public “disclosure,” then he would not have incorporated such sexual thematic layering in his portrayal of Raymond.

Thurman clearly makes a purposeful decision in his inclusion of subtle homoerotic desires between Raymond and Stephen. At the same time, he never directly addresses those desires, and unlike Larsen in *Passing*, he even avoids clear sexual double-meanings in his word choices. While some critics note potential sexual desire in lines such as, “I feel as if I had known you all of my life” (13), such dialogue could easily be read without sexual connotations. While Larsen purposefully creates a layering of meaning within her characters’ dialogue, Thurman does not offer his readers such clear evidence in which to ground their queer readings of the characters. When considered in conjunction with Thurman’s typically explicit discussions of queer sexuality and his heightened emphasis on Raymond’s and Stephen’s heterosexual relationships, Thurman’s reasoning is unclear in his decision to include this implicit but unspoken sexual relationship between Raymond and Stephen. Miriam Thaggert explores this seeming contradiction in Thurman’s literary portrayals of sexuality among his characters. She contends that while Thurman’s explicit portrayal of Paul’s sexuality is an impressive
“experimental risk,” these thematic choices seem to be “masked by Raymond’s unexpressed homoerotic feelings for Stephen” (182). Thaggert notes that Thurman’s rhetorical decision is “a curious silence when one considers Thurman’s other works such as The Blacker the Berry and ‘Cordelia the Crude,’ both of which contain characters who experience several sexual encounters and are unapologetic about their sexuality” (182). Despite his many explicit portrayals of “immoral” sexuality throughout his works, Thurman shows a subtlety in his portrayal of Raymond that is both curious and intriguing.

While other critics see Raymond’s and Stephen’s dialogue as evidence of their relationship, that dialogue works seamlessly in the story with no sexual connotations whatsoever. Therefore, the dialogue seems to be weak evidence upon which to base a queer reading of the characters. I argue instead that Thurman utilizes the scene’s surrounding context to imbue Raymond’s and Stephen’s interactions with an unspoken undertone of sexual desire. For example, Thurman relies on the surrounding explicitly sexual party scene to influence the tone of Raymond’s own search for Stephen. As the partygoers amorously admire Bud during his implied strip show, Raymond leaves the scene to find Stephen. Thurman states, “Raymond sauntered back into the kitchen. Stephen was still standing in his isolated corner, a full glass progressing toward his lips. His face was flushed. His eyes half closed. Raymond started toward him” (177). On the surface, the scene can be read as Raymond walking across the room to talk to his friend.
However, in describing Stephen’s lips, “flushed” face, and “eyes half closed,” Thurman hints at a more sensual reading of Raymond’s desire for Stephen.

Later, after Raymond is distracted by conversations with other partygoers, he once again searches for Stephen, ostensibly to chat about the other guests at the party. However, through his desire to find Stephen, Raymond is described as wandering through a house filled with sexual activity. Thurman intertwines Raymond’s search with descriptions of “a brown girl. . . doing a cooch dance to a weird piano accompaniment,” “many amorous couples in the darkened rooms,” and men gathered around Paul to “admire his bootblack’s touted body” (184). The party’s sexual atmosphere tints Raymond’s own search for Stephen with an undertone of sexual desire. Yet Thurman relies solely on such subtle references without explicit discussion of Raymond’s sexuality, and by extension he avoids any public implication of his own sexuality.

Thurman’s goal in such a subtle portrayal is unclear. While he utilizes Paul to transgress sexual identity boundaries, Thurman’s emphasis on heterosexual relationships in his portrayal of Raymond and Stephen counteracts any potential boundary transgression in their unspoken relationship. David Blackmore notes the significance of the characters’ racial identities as an intriguing element for further analysis in their relationship: “An interesting pattern develops during the two men’s discussions of their relationship. Whenever an acknowledgment of their erotic attraction for each other seems imminent, Ray shifts the conversation to issues of race” (521). The characters clearly feel sexual desire toward each other, and yet that desire does not enter their
conversation. Instead, Raymond and Stephen ground their discussions in racial debates about artists and the New Negro movement. To view Raymond’s and Stephen’s relationship solely through a racial framework would be inaccurate, but so too would be viewing their relationship solely through a sexual framework. Thurman’s exploration of these characters’ relationship encourages an intersectional analysis. Raymond and Stephen discuss their differing racial perspectives and the power dynamics linked to such perspectives (in broader society, in Harlem, and in Niggeratti Manor itself). These discussions overlay the sexual desire left unspoken in such dialogue. At the same time, the discussions intersect with these desires beneath the men’s surface interactions.

Thurman offers no clear interpretation of these interactions for the reader. Instead, he relies on surprisingly vague subtexts in comparison to his typically explicit social arguments. Such vagueness results in destabilizing the reader’s interpretation of the characters’ relationship, as the reader is unable to rely on cues within the text to encourage a single reading.

Although Thurman tends to incorporate explicit social arguments within his works, he does occasionally utilize more subtle narrative techniques. This subtlety in his portrayal of Raymond and Stephen in *Infants of the Spring* creates an intriguing forum for in-depth analysis. Similarly, in *The Blacker the Berry*, Thurman intertwines his explicit social commentary with more subtle, complex discussions of the interaction between external social roles and internal desires. These intersecting influences are highlighted in the protagonist Emma Lou’s experiences with social prejudice. Coming from a wealthy
“blue vein” family, Emma Lou is consistently reminded that the blue veins are a “superior class . . . a very high type of Negro . . . entitled, ipso facto, to more respect and opportunity and social acceptance than the more pure blooded Negroes” (28). From an early age, Emma Lou is trained to see light-skinned, wealthy Negroes as superior. Therefore, she lives in constant conflict between her own prejudices and those prejudices used to judge her.

Emma Lou views others through her own lens of class and color prejudice. However, those in society around her are simultaneously judging her through their own prejudices. As she walks down the street in Harlem, men laugh at her, commenting to each other, “Man, you know I don’t haul no coal” (98). Similar comments are made among the men at UCLA, as they describe her as a pickaninny and hottentot (48). Emma Lou comes from a wealthy, respectable family, and she carries herself with upper-class “culture.” However, she is dark-skinned, and she is a woman, which ensures her own struggles with social prejudice wherever she goes.

In choosing to focus the novel on the problems of colorism in the Black community, Thurman is able to ground his novel in his own experiences with such prejudice as a dark-skinned Black man. However, Thurman intentionally builds a strong separation between his own experiences and his fictional novel by developing a female protagonist who faces many gender-specific struggles throughout the novel. Despite this clear separation, critics often describe Emma Lou as a fictional version of Thurman. As David Levering Lewis argues in When Harlem was in Vogue, “Emma Lou was obviously
Wallace Thurman” (237). However, such an assumption restricts analysis of the character and of the novel’s complex themes. Unlike Infants of the Spring’s consistent links to real people, The Blacker the Berry’s characters exist as a fictional creation. Solely to equate the characters and events with parallels in reality would do the novel’s complex themes a disservice. Despite hints of his own experiences within the novel, Thurman moves far beyond his own biography in his development of the storyline and Emma Lou’s experiences. As Daniel M. Scott III notes, “Emma Lou also frees Thurman to interrogate gender and, more precisely, the confluence of intraracial bias and gender” (327). Through this story of Emma Lou, Thurman expands his novel to encompass issues not only of intraracial and gender bias, but also of class, region, sexuality, and other influences, each in discourse with the others.

Thurman uses The Blacker the Berry as an effective portrayal of such intersecting social influences, particularly in his examination of the added social pressures for women within such racial, cultural, and class contexts. Unlike his focus on Emma Lou in The Blacker the Berry, Thurman’s incorporation of female characters and perspectives in Infants of the Spring is minimal. He includes a short discussion of Sweetie May Carr (a fictional version of Zora Neale Hurston) and notes Aline and Janet, the women fighting over Stephen, as an emphasis of Stephen’s heterosexual relationships. However, other than these few references, the novel relies almost entirely on male characters. Yet despite this male focus, Thurman still integrates minor, though socially significant, scenes that highlight gender-specific social pressures for women. For example, he develops a
storyline about a young woman, Lucille, who decides to have an abortion. Such a storyline, while an important issue for women of the time, would have been highly controversial. Thurman takes an even more controversial stance in this scene through his refusal to condemn the woman for her “immoral” choice. Similar to his portrayal of the young prostitute Cordelia in his short story “Cordelia the Crude,” Thurman does not condemn Lucille’s actions through the New Negro constructs of social morality, thus erasing any possibility of a “moral” lesson. In fact, Thurman emphasizes the ease of Lucille’s operation: “Lucille was introduced to the lady, arrangements were completed, and in almost no time, and with little ill-effect, her body had been rid of Bull’s seed once and for all” (255). After the operation, Lucille is relieved, stating, “Well, old dear, I’m a free woman” (255). In portraying the abortion as a positive choice for Lucille, Thurman takes a highly contentious stance; his refusal to moralize such actions reflects his radical artistic choices as he courts debate and censure among his critics.

This same radicalism is integrated throughout The Blacker the Berry. At the same time, Thurman’s focus on Emma Lou as the protagonist of the novel enables him more fully to explore Emma Lou’s internal struggles—a complex analysis of identity and social pressures that he does not incorporate into Cordelia or Lucille in his other texts. As Thurman emphasizes throughout The Blacker the Berry, colorism is much more extreme against women than men, a fact that highlights Emma Lou’s own difficulties as she struggles to progress up the social ladder. Emma Lou’s mother laments Emma Lou’s gender, wailing, “Oh, if you had only been a boy!” (34). Through his portrayal of Emma
Lou’s family and dating experiences, Thurman highlights the often unspoken issues of colorism in “cultured” Black society. Emma Lou is fighting to socialize with “the right sort of people”—a culture that will not accept her (59). In Emma Lou’s upper class social circles, men tended to seek out light-skinned women. Thurman explains these social pressures: “A wife of dark complexion was considered a handicap unless she was particularly charming, wealthy, or beautiful. An ordinary looking dark woman was no suitable mate for a Negro man of prominence” (60). Emma Lou judges potential suitors based on their skin color, and yet she is horrified that men judge her based on the same prejudices. Through portraying this layering of social bias and the internal reaction to such bias, Thurman emphasizes both the internalization of social power structures like colorism and the constructed nature of those internalized “norms.”

While Thurman uses The Blacker the Berry to focus on the problems of colorism in Black communities, he integrates many other issues of prejudice into the novel, exploring how such social hierarchies interact through their impact on the characters’ lives. For example, while Emma Lou clearly highlights her own color prejudices in her dating choices, these color prejudices link to class and regional bias as well. At UCLA, when students judge Emma Lou for the color of her skin, she simultaneously judges another student for her use of dialect and her “uncultured,” brightly-colored clothing. Emma Lou immediately labels the young woman a Southerner: “That’s what she was, a southerner—Emma Lou curled her lips a little—no wonder the colored people in Boise spoke as they did about southern Negroes and wished that they would stay South” (40).
The young woman, Hazel, is friendly toward Emma Lou when everyone else avoids her. However, Emma Lou assumes that a friendship with Hazel will hold back her own social progression. Through Hazel, Thurman emphasizes the distinction between a character’s kindness and a character’s social standing. Emma Lou argues that Hazel cannot fit in among the cultured, upper class students of UCLA and should instead return to the “environment in which she rightfully belonged” (46). Emma Lou admits, “There was not, as she had said, ‘a selfish bone in [Hazel’s] body.’ But even that did not alter the disgusting fact that she was not one who would be welcome by ‘the right sort of people’” (46).

Through Emma Lou’s own bias, Thurman effectively emphasizes prominent biases within Black communities, against color, class, and region. Emma Lou assumes that Hazel cannot and should not fit in among “the right sort of people.” To accept her would be to deny the social hierarchy rules ingrained in her by her family. Yet, these same rules do not allow Emma Lou to rise in social standing because of her color. Thurman explains Emma Lou’s internalization of these social expectations:

Had anyone asked Emma Lou what she meant by ‘the right sort of people’ she would have found herself at a loss. . . . She really didn’t know. She had a vague idea that those people on campus who practically ignored her were the only people with whom she should associate. (59)

Emma Lou recognizes upper class, color-prejudiced groups, like her blue-vein family, as the “superior” groups and thus makes joining them her social goal. She cannot reconcile her own prejudices with the social discrimination against her, a fact that intensifies her own internal conflict.
Similar to Helga in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Emma Lou inhabits a socially-constructed identity that feels false. For Emma Lou, the disconnect seems grounded in her dark skin color, which does not allow her to inhabit the same social sphere as her family and other community members. Scott notes the “discontinuity between appearance and identity” for Emma Lou, as she struggles to reconcile these conflicting influences: “This awareness renders race a constructed performance rather than a natural, given fact. Caught up in the hierarchy of color and performance early in the novel, Emma Lou sees her own skin as a mask that prevents her from being who she really is” (329). These sentiments are clear throughout the novel, as Emma Lou is continually rejected due to her skin color. However, her impression of “who she really is” also reflects a social construction.

Emma Lou views herself as part of the upper class blue-veins—a proud identity for the rest of her family. She simultaneously views her dark skin as something ugly—a mask hiding her true self that must be removed at all costs. Emma Lou attacks her skin like an enemy, attempting bleaches and eating arsenic wafers in order to lighten it. Thurman states, “The only visible effect of all this on her complexion was to give it an ugly purple tinge, but Emma Lou was certain it made her skin less dark” (128). Emma Lou sees her dark skin as the worst possible affliction. Even when her colleagues try to tell her that “she looked twice as bad with paint powder as she would without it,” she assumes that they must be playing a practical joke (210). Emma Lou’s sense of identity
is so caught up in viewing her skin color as the enemy that she is unable to view herself any other way.

Emma Lou’s sense of self is an imposed identity, ingrained in her by her family’s blue-vein goal, “whiter and whiter every generation,” and her grandmother’s reminder that with her dark skin, Emma Lou “would never find a husband worth a dime” (34). These social messages, echoed over and over by her surrounding community, develop Emma Lou’s contradictory sense of identity. Scott notes these social pressures upon identity, arguing that the novel is “an exploration of non-essentialized, de-natured constructions of the self” (329). However, such an argument ignores the moments within the novel that hint at identity beyond social influence.

The novel clearly focuses on the social construction of identity, as it dismantles social expectations of race, gender, class, and other identities. At the same time, Thurman ends the novel with Emma Lou rejecting the social prejudices that she has internalized throughout her life. Such an ending by no means argues for racial or color essentialism. Throughout the novel, Thurman emphasizes the constructed nature of such social identities. However, Emma Lou’s final choices do highlight an essential identity beyond those socially constructed. She recognizes the need to accept herself rather than relying on others’ judgments. In recognizing her own culpability in prejudice, Emma Lou gains a better understanding of herself and is finally able to walk away from her abusive relationship. In coupling Emma Lou’s own realizations about herself with her
decision to leave Alva, Thurman effectively equates her internal and external abuse, tracking the detrimental influences of such social prejudices.

Surprisingly, Du Bois actually accuses Thurman of such color prejudice in his review of *The Blacker the Berry*. For Du Bois, Thurman’s choice to focus on such a troubled, unlikeable protagonist reflects Thurman’s own prejudice against dark skin. Du Bois argues that in order to do justice to Emma Lou’s story and the broader themes of colorism, “Above all, the author must believe in black folk, and in the beauty of black skin as a color of human skin. I may be wrong, but it does not seem to be that this is true of Wallace Thurman. He seems to me himself to deride blackness” (249-50). Yet, throughout the novel, Thurman highlights the issues of colorism in society and emphasizes the bias and hypocrisies of such arbitrary social hierarchies. Therefore, Du Bois’s criticism seems grounded in something other than Thurman’s supposed color bias.

Du Bois praises the first part of the novel, noting that “the experience of this black girl at the University is well done,” but the story devolves once it reaches Harlem (249). The university scenes portray upper class, “cultured” Black men and women. The Harlem scenes, on the other hand, focus on lower-class characters, drinking, clubs, and sex. As Du Bois argues, “Nothing in [Emma Lou] seems to develop beyond sex” (250). Therefore, it seems likely that Du Bois’s problems with the novel are more based on Thurman’s inclusion of “immoral” characters than on Thurman’s colorism. Emma Lou is openly sexual, seeking out men to sleep with. She feels no guilt about her “promiscuous” sexuality, which makes her a problematic protagonist within a New Negro moral
structure. Thurman portrays Emma Lou’s sexual desires explicitly, with no exploration of the intersection between those desires and the external social pressures based on racial and gender stereotypes of the hypersexualized Black woman. In their own works, Larsen and Hurston explore the complications inherent in Black women acknowledging sexual desires within a culture that imposes such stereotypes upon those desires. Both Larsen and Hurston view this intersection of internal and external influences as a significant struggle to address. However, while Thurman explores similar contextual intersection of social pressure in Emma Lou’s struggle with colorism, he does not portray these issues in her expression of sexuality. Like Thurman’s Cordelia and Lucille, Emma Lou is unapologetic in embracing her sexual desires. In fact, Thurman’s portrayal of Raymond’s sexuality in *Infants of the Spring*, with the inherent dangers in addressing such desires explicitly, is far more similar to Larsen’s and Hurston’s portrayals of the complex intersection of race, gender, and sexuality through social pressures.

Rather than addressing the struggle between desire and gender roles in openly exploring Emma Lou’s sexuality throughout the novel, Thurman uses Emma Lou’s unapologetic sexual activities to rebel against the restrictive gender roles in the New Negro—similar to his boundary destabilizing portrayal of Paul’s sexuality in *Infants of the Spring*. At the same time, Emma Lou’s sexual relationships are constantly influenced by enforced social roles and by her own internalized prejudices. In Emma Lou’s first relationship, she “[loves] this man,” Weldon, and decides to have sex with him “to be introduced into a new and incomparably satisfying paradise” (64). Emma Lou plays her
role in the romance, telling herself that she is a young woman in love. However, in her
descriptions of Weldon, she does not portray actual emotion; instead, she compares him
to an internal checklist of “desirable” traits. Voicing her own color prejudices, Emma
Lou notes, “She did wish that his skin had been colored light brown instead of dark
brown” (62). Despite his dark skin tone, Emma Lou praises Weldon for his good looks,
telling herself, this “is the type of man I like” (62). Weldon is a “type” rather than a
person—someone to play the role in her romantic fantasy. Like Axel Olsen’s
objectification of Helga in Larsen’s novel Quicksand, Emma Lou only views Weldon
through an objectifying lens of the role she wants him to inhabit in their relationship.
The false notes in this “romance” between Emma Lou and Weldon do not restrain Emma
Lou in her decision to have sex with him. Thurman states, “Not for one moment did
Emma Lou consider regretting the loss of her virtue” (64). Emma Lou fails to portray the
New Negro role of the chaste, “proper” young woman, transgressing New Negro gender
role expectations.

Throughout both his fiction and non-fiction, Thurman portrayed sexually active
men and women. For Thurman, sex was a part of embracing life. In a letter to his friend
and fellow author Dorothy West, Thurman encourages her to seek out sex in her life and
“get rid of the puritan notion that to have casual sexual intercourse is a sin. It’s a
biological necessity my dear” (172). In contrast to the gender expectations of the time,
Thurman argues that women should not be any more chaste than men, contending that
“Sex is after all but an expression of bodily hunger and must be appeased like the hunger
of the stomach. Not immoderately of course, for gluttony is always harmful to one’s physical and mental organs. But when one is hungry one should eat” (172). Despite his subtle, unspoken portrayal of Raymond’s and Stephen’s desire for each other in *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman’s stance on sex as a biological “hunger” to be fed is integrated throughout Thurman’s texts. It is these same controversial stances that critics expected and often despised in his works. In Eunice Hunton Carter’s review of *The Blacker the Berry*, she condemns the book for “the exploitation of the vices of the Negro of the lowest stratum of society and to the mental debauching of Negroes in general” (162). This “exploitation of vices” and his focus on “the lowest stratum of society” results in severe criticism of the novel; however, these same artistic decisions within the novel allow Thurman directly to critique the New Negro promotion of “respectable” Negro portrayals in literature. While he does incorporate “respectable” characters, these characters are some of the most color- and class-biased characters in the book. Thurman effectively highlights the hypocrisy in such “respectability” while developing his “immoral” characters like Emma Lou as complex individuals.

Throughout her relationships, Emma Lou makes many bad decisions, often influenced by her own prejudices. While Emma Lou’s choice to have sex is never framed as a bad decision, her struggles with internalized prejudices consistently lead her into bad relationships. Emma Lou’s choice in men (a choice typically based on the color of their skin) leads her to date men who tend to be selfish, cruel, or stupid. For example, Emma Lou dates Benson Brown solely because he has light skin and “she was flattered
that a man as light as he should find himself attracted to her” (201). Benson “was as ugly as he was stupid,” but Emma Lou “remained blind to everything save his color (202). Similarly, Emma Lou dates Alva because of his light skin, excusing the fact that he and his friends are not “intellectuals or respectable people” (156). Alva is terrible to Emma Lou, but she clings to him because he is light-skinned. She even breaks up with a nice dark-skinned man solely because of his skin color and instead chooses to date Alva, a cruel light-skinned man.

Emma Lou’s bad choices in men lead to a recurrence of miserable relationships. For instance, Emma Lou’s relationship with Weldon ends with him leaving her. Emma Lou assumes that this is because she has dark skin: “It never occurred to her that the matter of her color had never entered the mind of Weldon” (69). Thurman explains, “Emma Lou did not understand that Weldon was just a selfish normal man and not a color prejudiced one, at least not while . . . there were none of his college friends about to tease him for liking ‘dark meat’” (69). Emma Lou sees only the possibility of his color prejudice rather than his general selfishness. Throughout her journeys, Emma Lou continues to assume colorism where there is none, destroying the chance for good relationships with friends and colleagues in her life. However, Thurman is careful to note the existence of such prejudice in those around her. While Weldon does not break up with Emma Lou because of her color, he is not innocent from voicing this prejudice in another context. Therefore, although Emma Lou is paranoid, seeing colorism everywhere in her life, that paranoia is well-founded.
In Emma Lou’s emotionally abusive relationship with Alva, Alva effectively uses Emma Lou’s own paranoia against her. He recognizes what need he fulfills in her life and manipulates that need in order to profit financially from their relationship. Marlon B. Ross examines Emma Lou’s consistently unhealthy dynamic in her relationships:

Emma Lou’s relationships repeatedly trap her in an extreme manifestation of heterosexual feminine submission. . . . The psychic disequilibrium created in Emma Lou by her color complex makes her vulnerable to a series of imbalanced sexual relationships that restrict her sexuality to a [suffocating] norm. (382)

Emma Lou’s goal is to maintain a relationship with a light-skinned man. As her grandmother’s words remind her, Emma Lou’s dark skin means she “would never find a husband worth a dime” (34). This constant social emphasis on intersecting gender and color hierarchies remind Emma Lou that her end-goal, as a New Negro woman, should be marriage, but that her skin color denies her the power to marry successful men. For Emma Lou (and external social hierarchies), light skin equals success. Therefore, for Emma Lou, dating Alva is in itself a success.

Alva recognizes the significance of his role in Emma Lou’s life and uses that to his own financial advantage. As he and his friends converse, they laugh that “The only thing a black woman is good for is to make money for a brown-skin papa” (134). Alva refuses to be seen with her in front of his friends for fear that they will mock him for being out with a dark-skinned woman. However, when Emma Lou points out elements of his color prejudice, Alva effectively manipulates Emma Lou’s own internal struggles with colorism, telling her that she is paranoid. He argues, “I’m afraid . . . that you are a
trifle too color-conscious” (179). While Alva is clearly prejudiced, he condescendingly blames Emma Lou for being “too color-conscious.” Through this emotional manipulation, Alva maintains the power in the relationship, despite the fact that he is living off of Emma Lou’s wages. Similar to Sykes’s manipulation of gendered power hierarchies in Hurston’s “Sweat,” Alva utilizes these social structures to hold power over Emma Lou. This power dynamic reflects the imposed color and gender hierarchies, effectively negating Emma Lou’s higher class position.

Soon, Emma Lou is relegated to the role of banker, as she funds Alva’s adventures while he continues to date outside of their relationship. When he and another girlfriend end up with a mentally disabled child, Emma Lou steps in as the caregiver, described by Alva as the baby’s “mammy” (212). Each of these offenses builds up Emma Lou’s rage, but still she remains with Alva. It is only when Emma Lou walks in on Alva “on the bed embracing an effeminate boy” that she finally convinces herself to leave. Even during this argument, with the boy still awkwardly standing in the room, Emma Lou “suddenly felt an immense compassion for [Alva] and had difficulty in stifling an unwelcome urge to take him into her arms” (220). She describes these feelings as resulting from her own memories of who Alva used to be — the man she loved. When Emma Lou describes Alva as he is now, she sees him as “a drunken, drooling libertine, struggling to keep the embarrassed Bobbie in a vile embrace” (221). Alva has clearly physically degenerated with his alcoholism. However, he has always been a “vile”
“libertine.” The man Emma Lou mourns seems to be a construction of her own imagination.

Unlike his portrayal of Paul in *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman does not offer a positive reading of the queer scenes in *The Blacker the Berry*. Alva’s assignation with Bobbie reflects his moral degeneracy. Similarly, Thurman’s early reference to a landlady, Miss Carrington, portrays the woman as a lecherous lesbian attempting to seduce Emma Lou. Thurman depicts Miss Carrington “[tightening] her arm around Emma Lou’s waist” and pointing out the “nice girls” in the house, where they “have parties among ourselves” (120). Emma Lou flees from the lesbian scenario, fearfully trying to avoid the lecherous Miss Carrington. Both queer characters, Alva and Miss Carrington, exhibit Thurman’s tone of “moral degeneracy” throughout the novel. However, this tone is reflective of virtually all characters within the novel, not simply the two queer characters. Therefore, this portrayal of “moral degeneracy” seems to be an expression of Thurman’s broader goal within the novel, critiquing the New Negro movement’s promotion of “respectable” portrayals of Negroes in literature. In *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman utilizes the dialogue between Paul and Samuel to portray same-sex relationships as normal reflections of sexual desire. This dialogue counters the sexual debauchery portrayed in *The Blacker the Berry*; at the same time, such debauchery reflects Thurman’s broader goals in critiquing the validity of enforced “respectability” in the New Negro movement.
Some contemporary critics struggle to reconcile Thurman’s incorporation of queer stereotypes in his character portrayals. Knadler, for example, reads Thurman’s portrayal of the degenerate Alva as representative of Thurman’s own “fractured self, a figure who represented an unapproachable ego-ideal and an image of revulsion to be disavowed and shunned” (920). To connect Thurman’s perspective to Alva simplifies Thurman’s complex, varied portrayals of queer and sexually transgressive characters. Alva stands as the villain of the story, which is further highlighted by his degeneracy. However, strictly to view Thurman’s queer portrayals through Alva and Miss Carrington is to simplify Thurman’s queer social transgressions throughout the novel. Schwarz also observes Thurman’s reliance on “casually incorporated homosexual stereotypes” within his fictional works, noting Bobbie as a prominent example of these character portrayals: “Thurman thus introduced the effeminate Bobbie at the very end of his novel Blacker the Berry (1929) as a somewhat disgusting and weak character. . . . These are sexually transgressive figures contemporary readers could easily recognize” (“Transgressive” 146). Thurman relies on sexual stereotypes like effeminacy in his description of the queer character Bobbie, as Schwarz notes, to offer a social character that “readers could easily recognize.” At the same time, Thurman’s portrayal of Paul in Infants of the Spring emphasizes his technique of utilizing such stereotypes while simultaneously developing positive characters, thus moving beyond the social expectation of queer characters as solely degenerate.
While he relies on stereotypes to portray his explicitly queer characters, Thurman’s queer themes in *The Blacker the Berry* extend beyond his discussion of same-sex relationships. By applying the term “queer” as a destabilization of norms, one can clearly track such a queering of norms throughout the novel. Thurman develops a clash between character perspectives in order to underscore this queering of New Negro propriety and imposed “norms.” For example, Thurman develops a dichotomy between Emma Lou’s desire for upper class respectability and the raucous environment of Harlem nightlife into which she is drawn. While Emma Lou attempts to remain aloof to such immoralities, she is quickly drawn into the scene herself. This is clear in her first trip to a cabaret, when Emma Lou becomes completely enraptured by the singers, who are “singing all the time, their bodies undulating and provocative, occasionally giving just a promise of an obscene hip movement. . . . Emma Lou, all of her, watched and listened. As they approached her table, she sat as one mesmerized” (108). Emma Lou is attracted to these provocative performers—an attraction that intertwines race and sensuality.

The singers represent the “uncultured” life of debauchery that she has been warned against. And yet, they appeal to an unacknowledged part of herself that exists outside the structured class and culture expectations in which she has been raised. Emma Lou is drawn into the music: “Something in her seemed to be trying to give way. Her insides were stirred, and tingled” (108). For a moment, she “forgot herself”—at once both freeing and dangerous to her constructed sense of identity as a cultured woman above such debauchery (109). After the show, “Emma Lou blinked guiltily as the lights
were turned up. She had been immersed in something disturbingly pleasant” (109). Through Emma Lou’s immersion in the “disturbingly pleasant” experience and her immediate guilt for those feelings, Thurman skillfully queers constructions of race, class, and sexuality. Like Helga in Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Emma Lou sees such dances and music as too primitive and sensual—a perpetuation of white stereotypes rather than a reflection of the respectable New Negro construct. However, in each case, Emma Lou and Helga are attracted to the scene, and to a part of themselves of which they disapprove. Emma Lou is also immersed in, though attempting to ignore, a physical desire for these performing women, fixating on their “undulating” and “provocative” bodies. Like Irene in Larsen’s *Passing*, such desire does not necessarily reflect strictly “lesbian” feelings. Instead, Thurman effectively queers heteronormativity, blurring the lines among such strict definitions. Emma Lou feels the sensuality of the singers’ performance, as “her insides were stirred, and tingled.” She desires the women, though that desire is intertwined in a destabilization of the race, class, and sexuality “norms” in her life. Her own feelings do not fit within the social constructs she has created for herself, so she fears the meaning of that desire.

By highlighting the boundaries of such constructs, Thurman utilizes his characters to transgress and thus destabilize them. Just as Emma Lou finally recognizes the constructed nature of the social boundaries within which she has been living, Paul highlights such boundaries in order to transgress them. Through his exploration of such social transgression, Thurman must necessarily navigate new boundaries and
transgressions. As he notes, the New Negro and the Harlem Renaissance are symbolic constructions. Yet, these constructions respond to real trends and social pressures that influence Thurman’s texts, whether or not explicitly acknowledged. As Lotman explores, the semiotic boundary has a constant outer edge, shifting but invariably defining the center and the periphery. Throughout both novels, Thurman focuses on themes of transgressing social boundaries and encouraging individualism. At the same time, this transgression and individualism exist within race, class, gender, and sexual external definitions imposed upon the texts and upon Thurman’s own freedom as a writer. It is this dynamic dialogue between text and context that highlight his works as such significant forums for literary analysis.
Chapter Two: “She still intended to hold fast to the outer shell”: Social Subversion through Rhetorical Layering in Nella Larsen’s Passing and Quicksand

Nella Larsen was consistently praised by critics for her “courageous” and “subtle” analysis of race issues, with Du Bois acclaiming her talents in Quicksand as the best fiction “since the heyday of Chesnutt” (“Browsing Reader” 202). Such praise is well-deserved. However, reviews often focused on Larsen’s characters as “typical of the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman” and “a cultured woman of the Negro social group,” praising Larsen for a “refreshing” change from “super-sex stories” like Claude McKay’s Home to Harlem (Du Bois, “Browsing Reader” 202; Labaree 255; “Book a Week” 6). Such focuses within the reviews do not encompass the complexities of Larsen’s works and her skillful subversion of New Negro expectations. While Larsen portrays her characters through a framework of middle class New Negro propriety, she simultaneously queers such social constructs, highlighting the problems inherent in the social identities that her protagonists inhabit. In both Passing and Quicksand, Larsen utilizes her protagonists’ own internal struggles with their identities to emphasize the influence of social pressures upon those identities. In Quicksand, the protagonist, Helga, criticizes the various perspectives of the New Negro identity in those around her without realizing that she, like Thurman’s Emma Lou, has internalized and is controlling her life based on these same social biases. Larsen portrays this same internalization of social expectations in Irene, the protagonist of Passing. Irene represses any element of herself
that does not fit within social expectations for an upper class New Negro woman. In both novels, these characters’ internalization of expected social roles leads to misery in their lives—an intriguing subversion of the New Negro social structure that critics praised Larsen for portraying. Larsen creates an intersection of racial, sexual, and social “passing,” influencing and conflicting with internalized identities. Through such layering of social performance and internal identities within her characters, Larsen effectively disrupts such social expectations as “norms.”

Like Thurman, Larsen uses her works to critique expected social roles of race, gender, class, and sexuality, among her many themes. However, while Thurman courts controversy in his works, Larsen relies on subtle layering of her themes. As a result, while Thurman was often harshly critiqued by his contemporaries, Larsen was often praised by these critics for the socially respectable portrayals that she was in fact critiquing. In both of her novels, Larsen focuses on light-skinned or mulatta, middle to upper class, female protagonists. Such protagonists theoretically reflect the “ideal” for New Negro women. However, in basing her novels on such idealized representatives of New Negro womanhood, Larsen is then able to critique the validity of these social constructions.

Larsen is most extreme in her critique of such New Negro ideals through her portrayal of Irene in *Passing*. However, by framing the story around Irene’s perspective, Larsen allows the reader multiple interpretations of the events. Larsen consistently reminds the reader of Irene’s unreliability as a narrator, encouraging a critical eye on her
arguments. However, book reviews of the time, for example, Aubrey Bowser’s review in the *New York Amsterdam News*, tended to view Irene as a trusted narrator, while Clare was seen as a “despicable” character with “no morals” (20). Significantly, Clare is typically viewed as the protagonist of the novel, notwithstanding the novel’s clear focus on Irene. Due to *Passing*’s title, reviewers seek out the storyline of Clare’s racial passing, despite Larsen’s far stronger thematic emphasis on Irene’s and Clare’s relationship. For instance, in her 1928 review of *Passing* in the *Journal of Negro Life*, Mary Fleming Labaree describes the novel as having an “indirect” storytelling style because it is narrated through Irene’s perspective rather than Clare’s, the woman who is racially passing (255). However, Labaree misses the possibility that Clare may not be the only one passing. By applying the title *Passing* to its protagonist, Irene, critical analysis of the novel is then able to extend far beyond solely the theme of racial passing into an intriguing intersection of various forms of social passing, including Clare’s racial passing as well as Irene’s (and the novel’s) implied sexual passing.

Irene is portrayed as the ideal, respectable New Negro woman—a wife of a doctor who is raising two healthy sons. Yet if Irene is passing, as the title hints, that means this upstanding social persona she inhabits is in fact a mask. Like Thurman’s protagonist Emma Lou, Irene convinces herself that she is this “ideal” New Negro woman—the respectable identity that society encourages her to embrace. As Deborah McDowell notes, “Irene paints herself as the perfect, nurturing, self-sacrificing wife and mother, the altruistic ‘race woman,’ and Clare as her diametrical opposite” (xxiv). By intertwining
Irene’s narrative voice with the events in the story, Larsen effectively highlights the division between Irene’s perspective and other possible readings of those same events.

Larsen emphasizes Irene’s unreliability as a narrator in scenes such as the supposed affair between Irene’s husband and Clare. Late in the novel, Irene suddenly fears such a relationship, and many critics and reviewers accept that affair as reality (Bowser 20; Comprone 206; Youman 239). However, the reader is only offered Irene’s impressions rather than facts. Irene’s sudden obsession with the apparent affair parallels her own fears of losing the safe, secure life that she has built for herself. Therefore, in assuming Brian is attracted to Clare, Irene could just as easily be imposing onto him her own attractions to Clare. Larsen further blurs the lines between reality and the narrator’s perception by purposefully incorporating scenes that emphasize Brian’s lack of interest in Clare as parallels to Irene’s own growing obsession with Clare.

Underscoring Irene’s own unacknowledged biases, Larsen highlights these contrasting portrayals of Brian and Clare’s interactions: Brian does not show “any disapproval of Clare’s presence, . . . it also couldn’t be said that her presence seemed to please him. It didn’t annoy or disturb him, so far as Irene could judge. That was all” (209). Yet, despite Brian’s clear indifference toward Clare, Irene’s own attraction to her means she is unable to understand such indifference. Irene asks Brian, “Didn’t [you] . . . think Clare was extraordinarily beautiful?” (209). When Brian responds, “No,” Irene continues to push him. He explains, “No, honestly. Maybe I’m fussy. I s’pose she’d be an unusually good-looking white woman. I like my ladies darker. Beside an A-number-
one sheba, she simply hasn’t got’em” (209). Larsen skillfully pairs this discussion with Irene’s later description of Clare’s “hypnotic eyes,” thus emphasizing Irene’s own fascination with Clare rather than her husband’s interest in her (209).

By framing Irene’s accusation of an affair within such scenes that portray a separate reality from Irene’s narrator perspective, Larsen encourages a critical reading of the biases within Irene’s perspective. Irene’s interpretations must constantly be questioned throughout the novel; her lack of self-awareness enables the reader to experience Irene’s view of events and the events themselves as two distinctly separate things. McDowell notes, “As is often typical of an unreliable narrator, Irene is, by turns, hypocritical and obtuse, not always fully aware of the import of what she reveals to the reader” (xxv). Even Irene freely admits to herself the lack of evidence behind her various assumptions. At one point, she questions her own fears of an affair, realizing that she has no evidence on which to base her assumptions:

Nothing. She had seen nothing, heard nothing. She had no facts or proofs. She was only making herself unutterably wretched by an unfounded suspicion. It had been a case of looking for trouble and finding it in good measure. Merely that. (223)

Larsen effectively intersperses Irene’s assumptions with reminders to the reader that those assumptions are unreliable. The reader must dig beneath Irene’s stated perspective to possible other meanings within events.

Larsen’s decision to develop an unreliable narrator encourages varied, potentially conflicting readings of the events in the story. This decision has subsequently led to consistent disputes in the literary field, as critics have distinctly different perspectives on
the novel’s themes. For instance, Mary Mabel Youman sees class issues as the primary focus of the novel, arguing that “it is class, not race that motivates Irene” (237). Deborah McDowell, on the other hand, is recognized as the first critic to explore the characters’ sexuality as a subversive theme within the surface-level discussion of racial passing. Merrill Horton sees race as the framework for all other themes, using Freud to argue that “the other themes and issues in Passing have their genesis in the childhood of the author and the childhood games of her characters, and are reducible to the issues of racial identity” (31). In focusing on a single theme, these critics do not explore fully how such themes are in fact interacting with each other.

Throughout the novel, Larsen places Clare and Irene in contrast, with each woman’s opposing perspective highlighting the complexities of the issues. While Clare has chosen racially to “pass” into white society, she actively pursues her desires. Irene disapproves of such a choice, and, despite her own occasional racial passing, she purposefully maintains her own race pride through her personal and social life. Of course, such a purposeful race pride is in itself problematic. Irene consistently makes her life choices based on her chosen role as a New Negro public role model. She disapproves of any perspectives or social actions that complicate the carefully created New Negro identity that she has developed for herself. Such a stance emphasizes the intersectionality among Irene’s varied identity structures and social pressures, as race, class, gender, and sexuality intersect (and clash) within her identity and within her publicly portrayed persona.
Youman, on the other hand, sees class as the primary social influence on Irene’s behavior. She argues, “Irene’s primary concerns in life are security, middle-class morality, and middle-class standing” (236). This argument is supported by Irene’s consistent reinforcement of strict class roles in her life. She describes her maid Zulena as a “mahogany-colored creature” and disapproves of Clare’s friendliness toward the maids (184). Irene notes Clare’s “exasperating childlike lack of perception” as Clare crosses class boundaries to “spend her visit in talk and merriment” with Irene’s maids (208). Irene’s intense focus on class roles reflects the social persona she strictly maintains.

However, Youman inaccurately equates Irene’s class consciousness with “whiteness,” ignoring the interrelationship between Irene’s class consciousness and the New Negro persona she maintains. Youman assumes that Irene has “lost her Black heritage” and is passing “into the conventionalized, mechanized, non-humane white world” (236). She views Irene’s self-repressions and emphasis on social standing as a rejection of her Black heritage of “spontaneity, freedom from convention, and zest for life” (236). However, in focusing on Clare’s portrayal of “Black heritage” as the central conflict between the two women, Youman simplifies Larsen’s portrayals of race in the novel and ignores the many other influences on the characters. Youman bases her argument for Irene’s devolution into “white inhumanity” on no clear evidence from the text. Instead, Larsen often emphasizes Irene’s strong connection to race issues, far more than Clare. For example, when Clare’s racist husband offensively describes “niggers” as “the black scrimy devils,” Irene is enraged at his racism and at the fact that her friend
placed her in a position to be affronted by her husband (172). Clare, on the other hand, has chosen to marry Bellew, fully aware of his extreme racism. Youman’s argument for Irene’s loss of “Black heritage” ignores Larsen’s portrayal of Irene as a New Negro woman—a far more complex analysis of race roles than Youman allows in her definition of Black heritage.

Larsen uses the characters to portray a variety of perspectives on race issues, not the single racial identity that Youman assumes in her argument for a Black heritage of “spontaneity, freedom, and zest for life.” Instead, Larsen expands restrictive definitions of race through her exploration of Irene’s and Clare’s experiences. The scenes Youman sees as representative of Irene’s “white” perspective are clearly examining Irene’s social role as a New Negro woman. Irene shows strong race pride and race solidarity, but she also expresses classism, as she structures her life around strict social expectations. When Clare comes to parties with Irene, Irene blames Clare for disrupting her social standing: “It wasn’t, she assured herself, that she was a snob, that she cared greatly for the petty restrictions and distinctions with which what called itself Negro society chose to hedge itself about; but that she had [an] . . . aversion to the kind of front-page notoriety” that Clare Kendry would bring to Irene’s reputation (157). Irene builds the ideal life for herself, as a socially-prominent wife of a doctor, and she fears anything that may endanger that structured life. Youman’s argument does not acknowledge that Irene is striving for the “ideal” identity of the New Negro woman, not a “white” identity. When the novel is examined through this New Negro context, Youman’s argument is negated.
Such a New Negro context does not mean Larsen solely is portraying the New Negro identity. Rather, Larsen explores the complexities and conflicting messages within such a social role. Irene expresses race pride while simultaneously relying on classism and structured gender roles in an attempt to maintain her identity. However, as Clare enters Irene’s life, she endangers this identity; Clare’s presence forces Irene to experience new emotions that she both desires and fears.

Irene’s race pride is clear throughout the novel, though her claims of race pride in her relationship with Clare hint toward other influences as well. For example, when Irene does not respond to John Bellew’s racist remarks, she realizes that her silence is entirely due to Clare. Irene points out, “She had toward Clare Kendry a duty. She was bound to her by those very ties of race which, for all her repudiation of them, Clare had been unable to completely sever” (182). Irene’s sense of race pride is reflected in a duty to race. Yet, Irene’s feelings toward Clare are far more complex than simply racial unity. Clare’s mere presence in Irene’s life disrupts the social structures that Irene has built for herself. Irene’s biggest fear is for Clare to be free because that freedom would force Irene to confront the social construct of her own marriage. However, Irene continually frames these fears in discussions of duty to race. Irene sees “loyalty to a race” as the reason she cannot separate “herself from Clare” (227). However, Irene clearly is not driven solely by race loyalty, as she contemplates murdering Clare solely to keep her own family and social life safe. Irene thinks, “If Clare should die! Then— Oh, it was vile! To think, yes, to wish that! She felt faint and sick. But the thought stayed with her. She
could not get rid of it” (227). Clare’s desire for freedom forces Irene to analyze her own marriage and her feelings toward Clare. However, if she were to pursue her desires and give up her marriage, Irene would lose the “security” of her social position.

Irene realizes that she never loved her husband. However, their marriage is essential to her social role, and thus, “she meant to keep him. . . . She still intended to hold fast to the outer shell of her marriage, to keep her life fixed, certain” (235). In *Passing*, as well as *Quicksand*, Larsen portrays marriage as an imposed social role for women rather than an institution of love. Irene is desperate to maintain this social role because she fears who she would be outside of this role—it is an essential element to her identity as a New Negro woman. Irene describes this desire for security in her life: “Security. Was it just a word? If not, then was it only by the sacrifice of other things, happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy that she had never known, that it could be obtained?” (235). Irene sees Clare as the gateway to “some wild ecstasy that she had never known,” and yet she fears the unknown so much that she is willing to kill Clare to preserve her life of security.

Like Youman, Merrill Horton views Irene’s desire for Clare as a desire for whiteness. Horton reads Clare’s murder as solely an issue of racial passing, with Irene desiring Clare’s white skin. However, such a textual analysis ignores Irene’s own comfort in her racial position. When Clare asks Irene whether she ever considered passing, Irene promptly responds, “‘No. Why should I?’ And so disdainful was her
voice and manner that Clare’s face flushed” (160). Irene never shows a desire to inhabit Clare’s social role and often pities Clare for the difficulties she must endure in passing.

Instead, rather than desire Clare’s racial position, Irene desires Clare herself. Even as she pushes Clare out the window, she sees Clare as “a vital, glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold” (239). Larsen’s choice of description emphasizes Clare as a reflection of the “wild ecstasy” that Irene desires and fears. Horton simplifies the scene, attempting to read Irene’s emotions solely as jealousy of Clare’s white skin. As Larsen portrays Irene’s reaction to Clare’s “glorious body mutilated,” Horton reads the scene as Irene coveting Clare’s choice to pass into white society (240). Horton argues, “While Irene is glad that Clare is dead, she nonetheless mourns her friend’s whiteness” and references Larsen’s description of Clare’s “glorious body” (45). Horton does not acknowledge the characters’ relationship as anything beyond jealousy, and as a result, she misses the multi-layered nuances through which Larsen builds their relationship. Irene and Clare absolutely interact through their racial connections, but class, sexual desire, and many other contexts influence that relationship.

Neither critic explores the homoerotic subtext within Irene and Clare’s relationship, and as a result, they fail to analyze the multiple influences creating the characters’ relationship. Irene and Clare’s relationship should by no means be read solely as sexual. Recognizing the characters’ desires should be one element of a complex thematic analysis of the novel. However, exploring Larsen’s portrayal of Irene and Clare’s desires is a significant element of this textual analysis.
The novel’s homoerotic subtext links not only to queer readings of the characters but also to a broader analysis of structured gender roles. This interaction is emphasized by Larsen’s manipulation of the subject/object roles from their traditionally masculine/feminine labels. When Irene first sees Clare across the restaurant, Larsen portrays Irene’s emotions as discomfort and fear that her racial passing for the afternoon may have been discovered. However, even before Irene voices those apparent fears to herself, she can’t help noticing Clare’s own sensuality: “What strange languorous eyes she had!” (150). Clare’s “intense interest” in her and Irene’s returning gaze place both women simultaneously into the roles of subject and object in a sensuous moment of connection (149).

Irene’s discomfort during the scene can easily be read as a discomfort at the sexual charge between the two women instead of her apparent fear of being discovered passing. This sexual reading of the scene is further emphasized in the women’s continued conversation. While Irene’s “suspicions and fears vanished” quickly under the “charm” of Clare’s smile, her discomfort with Clare’s sensuality and her own reactions to that sensuality become more and more prominent throughout the scene. Irene is attracted to, and yet judges Clare for, her “provocative” smile and “luminous” eyes (152, 155). Larsen describes Clare’s awareness of Irene’s “desire and her hesitation” as relating solely to Clare’s life of racial passing (157). However, while the dialogue focuses on race issues, the women’s reactions to each other throughout the scene hint at the sexual tension entwined within their discussion.
At the same time, reading these scenes for the sexual subtext should not negate a reading of the surface storyline of racial passing. Larsen does not separate these storylines as distinct from each other. Instead, Irene’s attraction to Clare and discomfort with the emotions rising in herself reflect not solely Clare’s sexuality or Clare’s choice to racially pass, but rather Clare’s freedom and the ease with which she ignores the social roles in which Irene confines herself. Clare represents everything Irene desires and fears. To embrace those desires within herself would be to destroy the restrictive but “safe” social role Irene has forged.

Irene’s desire for and fear of Clare has very little to do with Clare herself. Instead, Clare represents for Irene the pieces of her own identity and desires that she wants to avoid. Throughout the novel, Irene misreads Clare, imposing her own fears onto Clare’s actions. This can be seen in Irene’s apparent fears of an affair between Clare and Brian, Irene’s husband, as Irene admits to herself that she never loved her husband, but “nevertheless, she meant to keep him” (235). For Irene, Brian represents the safety of a socially acceptable role as bourgeois wife and mother. As is clear throughout the novel, it is the role itself that is so important—something that must be preserved, even at the cost of her family’s happiness.

Irene fears that Brian’s unhappiness will eventually cause him to leave her, but she is unwilling to reconcile their relationship. While Irene tells herself that she wants Brian to be happy, she resents “his inability to be so with things as they were, and never acknowledging that, though she did want him to be happy, it was only in her own way
and by some plan of hers for him that she truly desired him to be so” (190). In contrast, Irene’s sudden desire for Clare, emotions she has never felt for her husband, further instigates her fears that she will lose the safe life she has built for herself. Clare simply serves as a person to blame for these fears as Irene buries her own “dangerous” desires in order to maintain her constructed social identity.

To emphasize Irene’s own subconscious motivations, Larsen is careful to frame those moments of supposed attraction between Brian and Clare with reminders that it is Irene’s perspective, not reality, that the reader is privy to. Irene sees, “[Clare] was looking at [Brian] with that provocative upward glance of hers, and his eyes were fastened on her face with what seemed to Irene an expression of wistful eagerness” (emphasis added 273). Larsen skillfully frames such descriptions through Irene, highlighting the unreliability of Irene’s voice. Therefore, such apparent moments of interaction between Clare and Brian expose more about Irene’s own feelings than about those of her friend and husband. It is Irene, not Brian, who sees Clare’s glance as “provocative.” She imposes her own attraction to Clare onto them.

Even in the moments before Irene kills Clare5 in order to preserve the “safe” life she has created for herself, Irene does not feel rage or disgust at the woman supposedly stealing her husband. Instead, Irene focuses on “a faint smile on [Clare’s] full red lips

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5 Larsen purposefully refuses any resolution at the end of the novel. While she hints at the likelihood that Irene pushes Clare out the window and that Clare dies, none of these points are explicitly stated. Therefore, readers have varied interpretations of the novel’s final scene. However, in the final moment before Clare falls out the window, Irene places her hand on Clare’s arm and thinks to herself that she cannot have Clare free to destroy Irene’s life (239). Because Larsen implies that Irene in fact pushed Clare out the window, further highlighted in Irene’s sudden fear at the end that Clare might not be dead, I read the final scene as Irene killing Clare.
and in her shining eyes” (239). She desires Clare, and it is that desire that she is attempting to kill. In murdering Clare, Irene is (ineffectually) attempting to destroy her own attraction to her. Ann duCille argues that Clare is in fact a part of Irene, so by killing Clare, Irene is killing a part of herself. duCille notes, “If we pursue the doubling line and view Clare as Irene’s repressed other, her death at Irene’s hands is not only murder but suicide” (440). duCille sees Clare as Irene’s “repressed other”—a representation of Irene’s own identity. In arguing that these characters are two parts of a single identity, duCille ignores the significance of the characters’ relationship with each other as distinct entities. However, in seeing Clare’s murder as Irene’s suicide, duCille effectively highlights Irene’s intentions in the act, as Irene kills Clare to kill a part of herself. Although Clare and Irene serve as two distinct characters within the novel, these characters clearly also serve symbolic, reflective roles in each others’ lives.

Through her portrayal of the women’s relationship, Larsen utilizes expected social roles in order to subvert those roles. Emily J. Orlando argues that Clare serves as a feminine object to Irene’s masculine gaze. She explains the trend of gendered objectification among Black male authors as a “popular Harlem Renaissance construction: the black woman as dead object subjected to a male gaze that objectifies and denies agency” (66). Larsen reappropriates such agent/object gendered roles through her portrayal of Irene and Clare’s desires. In asserting a Black female gaze as the agent, Larsen disrupts the racial and gender imposed hierarchy. Orlando notes the significance in Larsen choosing to restrict the frame of the novel to Irene’s narrow, unreliable gaze:
“Larsen makes clear the vast and significant discrepancy between Irene’s perception and the truth of the world around her; Irene’s glance, like the objectifying male gaze, is one that does not penetrate the surface, and it follows that her reading of Clare is misguided” (78-79). Irene’s perception parallels the male gaze, where the male does not truly see the object of his desire; rather, he sees the version that he desires. Similarly, Irene (and the reader) does not see Clare—she sees the part of Clare that engages her own desires. Irene views Clare as a symbolic representation of the thoughts within herself that she both desires and fears. Similar to Hurston’s portrayal of Pinkie and Muttsy as discussed in chapter three, Clare’s uniqueness as a person is buried within Irene’s *portrait* of Clare through her narrator perspective.

As Orlando argues, this objectification of Clare through Irene’s gaze parallels the common masculine/feminine agent/object gaze common in literature. She explains, “The gaze Irene directs at Clare recalls that of the English Renaissance poets, in its efforts to catalog and fragment a woman’s beauty” (79). By emphasizing Irene’s fascination with and fragmentation of Clare’s beauty, Larsen develops a strong connection between Irene’s gaze and the masculine gaze in literature. This connection further hints toward Irene’s erotic desire inherent within such a gaze. Irene is transported by Clare’s sensual body without understanding or even acknowledging Clare’s mind.

Orlando’s argument for the agent/object gazes in *Passing* offers useful insight into Larsen’s manipulation of socially encouraged gender roles. However, in her analysis of these agent/object gazes, Orlando does not acknowledge the mutual reciprocity of the
gaze. She argues that only Irene sees Clare’s sensuous mouth and eyes as “objects to be
gazed upon—to be admired as precious works of art—and not as themselves active
participants in the gaze” (79). Therefore, Orlando contends, “Through Irene’s
objectifying gaze we are encouraged to read Clare as a spectacle that titillates and pleases
the eye; she is ascribed considerable aesthetic value” (79). However, this argument does
not acknowledge the mutuality of the gazes within the novel: while Clare is clearly the
sexual object of Irene’s gaze, Irene too is the object of Clare’s gaze.

In fact, it is Clare herself who initiates the women’s relationship. When Clare and
Irene meet, Clare gazes at Irene across the restaurant with “intense interest” and “utmost
singleness of mind and purpose” (149). Clare then approaches Irene’s table and begins to
speak. Similarly, Clare attempts to progress their relationship by seeking out Irene
through her letters. It is Clare’s choice of words that inflames Irene’s own desire again.
Clare pursues Irene, writing of her “longing to be with you again” and “this terrible, this
wild desire” that was aroused when she saw Irene (145). Throughout the novel, Clare
expresses her own agency within the relationship. As Irene gazes upon Clare, Clare is
gazing back. Orlando overlooks this mutuality—Larsen does not create solely a reversal
of the agent/object gaze. Instead, she develops the women’s relationship as a disruption
of the gendered and racial power structures imposed upon the Black female body. Irene
and Clare create a reciprocal gaze of mutual agency that, while paralleling the masculine
gaze, simultaneously disrupts the masculine gaze from this woman-to-woman
relationship.
What exactly these gazes mean is hotly debated among critics. While Horton attempts to negate any hint of eroticism between the characters and contends that Irene is simply jealous of Clare, McDowell argues for a clear, if unspoken, sexual attraction between the women. duCille further complicates McDowell’s argument, noting the symbolism of the characters’ attraction rather than an explicit relationship between the two women. duCille claims, “Viewed in historical perspective, the looking, touching, and caressing that McDowell reads as signs of lesbian attraction may have more to do with homosociability than with either homo- or heterosexuality” (438). She offers two other potential readings of the characters’ relationship: “The interaction between Clare and Irene may reflect the moment’s preoccupation with the always-already-sexual black female body, or it may suggest a not necessarily sexual way of women being together” (438). duCille’s point is valid. Irene and Clare’s interactions can (and should) be viewed through multiple frameworks. At the same time, such re-readings do not contradict McDowell’s argument but rather expand it to encompass a contextual dialogue among the multiple meanings.

As duCille notes, the characters’ descriptions of each other parallel the common objectification of the “always-already-sexual black female body.” Such objectification and fragmentation of the body absolutely should be explored when examining Irene’s interactions with Clare. This reading of their interactions highlights an important contextual dialogue Larsen develops between her text and the social trends to which she is responding. Throughout her obsession with Clare, Irene focuses on elements of
Clare’s body. Even in the moment of murder, Irene fragments Clare, describing “the soft white face, the bright hair, the disturbing scarlet mouth, the dreaming eyes, the caressing smile, the whole torturing loveliness that had been Clare Kendry” (239). Such fragmentation reflects the common objectification of women, particularly Black women, through the male gaze. Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar explore this male gaze and women writers’ response to this gaze in their seminal text, *The Madwoman in the Attic*. They argue, “A woman writer must examine, assimilate, and transcend the extreme images of ‘angel’ and ‘monster’ which male authors have generated for her” (17). While Gilbert and Gubar focus on nineteenth-century white women authors, this same need to “transcend” the gaze imposed by social hierarchies is clear in works such as Larsen’s. Race in intersection with gender power hierarchies further emphasizes and complicates this external gaze and the authorial need to “transcend” that gaze.

In *Passing*, Larsen skillfully subverts such social objectification through the characters’ development of social personae as well as through their own agency within the gaze. Miriam Thaggert argues that Larsen’s integration of fashion and etiquette with her discussion of social passing in the novel emphasize these themes as forms of “reinventing the self, . . . restyliz[ing] how the black or the black/white female body can be read, or indeed ways to deny any reading at all” (70). Through her focus on social “passing,” Larsen effectively destabilizes such identity constructs as race, gender, class, and sexuality. Thaggert’s claim that such reinvention of the body as object can effectively “deny any reading at all” is problematic, as, similar to Thurman’s own
struggles to deconstruct the New Negro, such a deconstruction of the norms necessarily reimposes new constructs.

This is clear in Larsen’s exploration and subversion of the social gaze—such deconstruction of the gaze will not then erase the power of the social gaze. Instead, as Orlando notes, the gaze is being reappropriated in *Passing*. As Irene and Clare both maintain agency within this gaze, their identities as Black women subvert the social power hierarchies typically imposing a white male gaze onto such body fragmentation. At the same time, both women’s racial and sexual identities are further deconstructed through Larsen’s themes of passing: race, gender, and sexuality as social constructions are further queered by this blurring of agent and object.

In arguing for a re-reading of Irene and Clare’s relationship as an objectification of the Black female body, duCille does not acknowledge the broader racial, sexual, and social disruption of social power structures that Larsen accomplishes. Through her manipulation of the traditionally male gaze, Larsen develops an interaction among race, gender, class, sexuality, and the multiple other factors influencing these characters’ relationship. McDowell’s interpretation of the women’s erotic desires should not be confined to solely a discussion of sexuality but rather as a queering of identity structures.

Correspondingly, duCille’s argument that Irene’s and Clare’s interactions can be read as “a not necessarily sexual way of women being together” seems to miss this potential for multiple readings of the relationship. duCille is correct that the characters can be read as having a non-sexual relationship. In fact, no critic argues that the women
are engaging in a physical sexual relationship (though some critics, including Horton, still feel the need to deny this possibility). Instead, as McDowell argues, the women engage in powerful, unspoken desires toward each other. Those desires likely contain an erotic component, but that eroticism does not directly equate to a “lesbian” physical relationship. Rather, similar to Larsen’s deconstruction of race roles, these characters’ desires queer social expectations of gender roles and re-appropriate the social stereotypes of Black women as sexual objects.

duCille goes on to argue for a symbolic reading of Irene’s and Clare’s relationship, with Clare serving as a reflection of Irene’s own repressed desires. duCille contends, “The text’s actual sexual preference may be for the autoerotic: Clare and Irene may be read as body doubles or, perhaps more precisely, as halved selves. . . . Clare is less Irene’s alter ego than her alter libido, the buried long-denied sexual self” (439). duCille makes a significant point—Irene’s attraction to Clare is intertwined with elements of herself that she is repressing. Clare represents a (dangerous) freedom for Irene, while Irene represents that same freedom for Clare. However, to view the characters as “halved selves” with the desire between the women read as solely “autoerotic” is to ignore the layers of interrelated meanings within these characters’

As noted in the introduction, sexual identity was only initially starting to develop in public consciousness during the 1920s. Previously, sexual desire and sexual acts were not equated with an identity. Gender role disruptions, rather than sexual desires, were labeled socially deviant. Therefore, to label Clare’s and Irene’s desires “lesbian” is problematic. Based on the historical and cultural context of the novel, such a label tends to lead to broader contemporary connotations of identity that do not fit these characters’ experiences. While the label “lesbian” is inaccurate, “homoerotic desire” does describe the characters’ feelings for each other. Additionally, although the connotations are contemporary, I utilize the term “queering” to note Larsen’s skillful destabilization of social “norms” through her portrayal of these characters.
relationship. While the characters are clearly responding to an element of themselves in their desire for the other person, an analysis of their desire should not be limited to a reading of autoeroticism.

Instead, the sensuality and fear within these characters’ desires highlight the multiple contexts entwined in their relationship. Larsen effectively dismantles social constructions of race, class, gender, and sexuality, among other influences, through Irene’s spoken and unacknowledged perspectives. As duCille notes, “The text ultimately affirms neither Irene’s values nor Clare’s; rather, it holds both up to scrutiny, if not ridicule, as signs of the times” (441). Instead, Larsen highlights the women’s own internal struggles as they attempt to frame their identities through social expectations and hierarchies of power. She explores this same struggle between individual identity and imposed social identities in her other novel, *Quicksand*. In both of her novels, Larsen focuses on her characters’ racial, class, and sexual desires and the conflict between those desires and the social roles the characters are expected to play. In *Quicksand*, Larsen moves her protagonist, Helga, through various social settings, each with its own set of expectations for the role Helga must portray.

At the beginning of the novel, Helga is a teacher at Naxos, a Southern school. At Naxos, Helga is expected to maintain a persona of respectability and propriety. In the culture of Naxos, this entails wearing drab clothing and fading into the background—neither of which is a comfortable role for Helga’s vibrant personality. Helga illustrates this cultural conflict as exemplified in the women’s clothing, noting contemptuously “the
dull attire of the women workers. Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown” (17). However, while the rest of the faculty see bright colors as “vulgar,” Helga sees these same vibrant tones as “gorgeous” on dark-complexioned people (17-8). Helga laments, “These people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter” (18). The cultural elements that those in Naxos condemn (bright colors, dancing, laughter) are all used in Black stereotypes, such as the Sambo figure, from which the Naxos community tries to distance itself. However, Larsen argues that in distancing oneself from such stereotypical portrayals, a piece of actual culture and identity is lost.

At Naxos, the social goal seems to be to act white, while simultaneously being careful to avoid garnering any negative attention from the surrounding white community. Helga’s bright clothes and vibrant sense of fashion set her apart as different—a danger to the bland, placid, “cultured” Negro existence cultivated at Naxos. Larsen uses the culture of Naxos as a clear parody of Booker T. Washington’s own plan of social compromise and his Tuskegee Institute. In naming her school Naxos (“Saxon” backwards), Larsen emphasizes the hypocrisy in developing a Black school’s culture around appeasing white expectations.

Larsen further highlights such hypocrisy through her incorporation of scenes like the visiting white preacher who comes to speak to the Naxos students and faculty. The patronizing, insulting “holy white man of God” proudly points out to his Black audience
the “strength” of the school—that these Negroes know how to conduct themselves properly (2). Larsen describes the preacher’s speech:

He had dared any Northerner to come south and after looking upon this great institution to say that the Southerner mistreated the Negro. And he had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste. (3)

Naxos is glorified by the surrounding white community as “the finest school for Negroes” because the school reinforces the racial hierarchy—the Naxos Negroes “knew enough to stay in their places” instead of fighting for a distinct voice and racial equality. In portraying Naxos’s relationship with the white world, Larsen subtly criticizes Booker T. Washington and Tuskegee Institute’s parallel position of compromise and the concurrent patronizing racism inherent in the relationship with white society.

However, Larsen does not critique solely Washington’s social platform; she uses Helga’s travels among varied communities as a forum through which to criticize many other issues of race, class, and gender that are often unacknowledged by the race leaders of the time. Throughout her examination of these social issues, Larsen still notes leaders like Washington and Du Bois as important voices in the fight for racial equality (38). Yet, each social leader holds up his or her own ideal for racial identity, and as Larsen explores, each of these ideals contains its own flaws.

Larsen portrays these flaws in social ideals through various characters within the novel. For example, when Helga develops a social group of chic, cultured friends in
Harlem, at first she is excited to hear their criticism of Naxos: “Her New York friends looked with contempt and scorn on Naxos and all its works. This gave Helga a pleasant sense of avengement” (43). While Helga enjoys finding these “sophisticated” friends and leaving behind the stifling, bland hypocrisy of Naxos (43), she quickly recognizes that the cultured lives of her Harlem friends contain their own elements of hypocrisy. For instance, Helga’s friend Anne spends much of her time fighting for racial equality, but she fails to note the problems in her own expectations of a racial “ideal.” Anne is “obsessed with the race problem,” constantly preaching, “Equal opportunity for all” (48). However, while Anne spends her life fighting for racial equality, her “deep and burning hatred” of white people contrasts sharply with her views of what is cultured or fashionable (48). Larsen effectively emphasizes the hypocrisy inherent in such stances, common within the broader New Negro social movement, as she highlights the schism between Anne’s rhetoric and her praxis. Helga notes this schism, describing Anne’s tastes as parallel to those of the white people she purports to hate:

She aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living. While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race. Toward these things she showed only a disdainful contempt, tinged sometimes with a faint amusement. . . . Theoretically, however, she stood for the immediate advancement of all things Negroid, and was in revolt against social inequality. (48-49)

While Anne is fighting for racial equality, her views of fashion, art, and culture directly reflect white upper class views. Her fight for “the advancement of all things Negroid” is grounded in a theoretical Negro identity that fits into the white upper class mold of a
“cultured” life, while she is disdainful of Black identities that do not fit into that cultural construct. As such, she fights for racial unity without fully embracing the diverse race that she is fighting for.

While Anne seems unaware of her own hypocrisy, Helga is much more conscious of her own struggles with racial identity. Throughout the novel, Helga continually questions how identity is determined by one’s community, by external pressures, and by one’s self. Feeling confined by her friends’ constant discussions of racial discrimination, Helga reflects,

It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk? (54-55)

Helga feels that freedom to be herself will only come when she can separate herself from the race and community that defines her. She is seen solely as a Black woman by the outside world, and that restricted identity impacts how she can see herself.

While portraying Helga’s Black identity as a social construct engaged with a broader community, Larsen also highlights the constructed nature of “whiteness.” Through her portrayal of Helga’s Danish family members, both in Copenhagen and in the United States, Larsen highlights the white families’ false construction of a distance between themselves and the mulatta Helga. For instance, Helga’s aunt refuses to acknowledge that they are related to each other, ignoring the biological basis contradicting her claims (28). In *Passing*, Larsen creates a similar familial interaction, though with different outcomes. She highlights white racial construction through Clare’s
aunts, who refuse to admit that they have a mulatta niece (159); they create a white identity for Clare so that she will fit within their socially-constructed white lives.

In both novels, Larsen dissects race as a defined social identity, noting the contradictions in such a broad label while acknowledging the necessity for a unified Black social voice in the fight for equality. These contradictions are apparent in Helga’s own struggles, as she attempts to define herself racially while existing between and within two socially restricting races. Immediately after she laments being “yoked to these despised black folk,” Helga berates herself for such a cruel thought: “‘They’re my own people, my own people,’ she kept repeating over and over to herself. It was no good. The feeling would not be routed” (55). Helga recognizes the kinship she should feel toward the dark faces around her. This sense of communal bond is the basis for the concept of the Black community that Anne is constantly describing. However, Helga does not see herself in the people around her. Larsen states, “She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (55). Race is not enough of a bond for Helga to feel a connection to a Black community. The one commonality for them all is the racial prejudice they must all struggle against; however, this is the commonality that Helga runs from, hoping to find freedom in Copenhagen. Helga describes her dreams of Copenhagen, “where there were no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice” (55). In Helga’s mind, if there are no Negroes, there will be no racism. In attempting to erase her connection to the Black race, Helga
hopes to detach herself from the externally-imposed identity of “Black Woman” that overwhelms all of her other identities, which might then allow her to find her own sense of identity that has been buried so long under imposed social expectations.

In utilizing Helga’s journey to interact with different elements of the New Negro movement, Larsen relies on Helga’s and other characters’ own hypocrisies and inner conflicts to highlight problems inherent in intra-community censure and the resulting hierarchy of “acceptable” Black identities. For example, when dancing at a Harlem party, Helga struggles with the dichotomy between her need for propriety in order to reinforce her “cultured” identity and her enjoyment of such “primitive” dancing. When Helga engages with the dancing,

She was drugged, lifted, sustained, by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. . . . She wasn’t, she told herself, a jungle creature. She cloaked herself in a faint disgust as she watched the entertainers throw themselves about to the bursts of syncopated jangle, and when the time came again for the patrons to dance, she declined. (59)

Helga becomes a part of the music and the dance, and in the process, she becomes a part of the community of dancers around her. However, she fears what acknowledging the connection to the community might mean for her identity. Similar to Irene in *Passing*, Helga struggles within the conflicting Freudian id and superego, as her constructed social identity forces her to deny her desires. At other points in the novel, Helga feels disconnected from members of the Black community due to their differing life
experiences; however, this party emphasizes a much deeper issue in Helga’s sense of identity. She “cloaked herself in faint disgust” when viewing the dancers in order to maintain a superior cultural position. She must convince herself that she is better than the “jungle creature” dancers because she sees such dancing as inferior to the identity she wants for herself.

Helga fears any part of herself that may reflect racial stereotypes—a common perspective within the New Negro movement. As an audience member during a later vaudeville performance, Helga again reacts with fear and disgust toward the Black performers perpetuating such racial stereotypes for a white audience:

Helga Crane was not amused. Instead she was filled with a fierce hatred for the cavorting Negroes on the stage. She felt shamed, betrayed, as if these pale pink and white people among whom she lived had suddenly been invited to look upon something in her which she had hidden away and wanted to forget. . . . But later, when she was alone, it became quite clear to her that all along they had divined its presence, had known that in her was something, some characteristic, different from any that they themselves possessed. Else why had they decked her out as they had? Why subtly indicated that she was different? (83)

Helga’s conflicted reaction to the dance and the vaudeville performance parallels Emma Lou’s similar internal conflict in *The Blacker the Berry*. In each case, the characters struggle between an attraction to the moment and guilt over what that attraction may mean for their senses of identity. Emotional attraction to such “primitive” music and dance threaten to fortify racial stereotypes. Thus, such “primitivism” challenges the “respectable” anti-stereotype identities put forth by the New Negro movement—a
contradiction that both Helga and Emma Lou see as dangerous. This need to maintain a hierarchy of racial identities results in Helga’s burying a part of her own identity.

Wherever she travels, Helga consistently is relegated to a defined role that she is expected to portray while her own struggles for identity contrast and interact with these social influences. While Helga hopes to blend into the Copenhagen population and allow herself to forget her race for once, instead she is viewed as a fascinating oddity and encouraged to emphasize her differences. When Helga’s aunt, Fru Dahl, sees the conservative wardrobe that Helga has brought, she exclaims that Helga’s fashion choices are much “Too sober. . . . Haven’t you found something lively, something bright? . . . You’re young. And you’re a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things” (68). In picking outfits for Helga to wear, Fru Dahl strives to sexualize and exoticize Helga, thus ensuring that Helga fulfills the role Frau Dahl and the community have assigned to her. In her new role of exotic object, “Helga herself felt like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited” (70). The community’s interest in Helga has no basis in her own sense of identity. Their interest is solely in Helga as an object—something new and different at which to marvel.

Larsen describes this focused community interest on Helga as a charming-looking (silent) object: “[Helga] had only to bow and look pleasant. Herr and Fru Dahl did the talking, and answered questions” (70). While there is a general assumption that Helga cannot speak Danish, she is silenced by much more than the language barrier. Helga can
communicate quite well, as Herr and Fru Dahl know. Therefore, their decision to speak for Helga represents a broader trend—the community has no interest in what Helga has to say. Therefore, the social gathering, while focused around Helga, seems not to miss her lack of voice at all—she is there to play her silent role of exotic object.

While Helga is admired and welcomed in Copenhagen, this admiration in fact parallels the imposed racial roles of the United States. In the U.S., whites see Helga solely as a Black woman, and through that narrow imposed role, they deny her access, equality, and respect. At the same time, U.S. Black social leaders encourage Helga and others to portray themselves through the role of the cultured, “anti-stereotype” New Negro. As Helga soon discovers, her Copenhagen role of admired sexual object is just as inaccurate and confining as the social roles imposed upon her in the United States. In fact, the buried racism of the Copenhagen community’s comments is perhaps even more painful because it is so unexpected. While Helga happily accepts compliments from her admirers at the party, she assumes that those compliments reflect true advances of friendship. Instead, she is forced to realize that she is in fact on display, being bluntly discussed among groups while never conversed with directly.

The most prominent example of this objectification is in Helga’s interaction with Axel Olsen, the artist. When Fru Dahl introduces the pair, Olsen\(^7\) never speaks directly to Helga. Instead, “He looked intently at her for what seemed to her an incredibly rude length of time from under his heavy drooping lids. At last, . . . he wagged his leonine

\(^7\) While I describe most characters using their first names, I will use last names for others, such as Axel Olsen. This is a reflection of the author’s own choices within the novel.
head approvingly. . . ‘She’s amazing. Marvelous,’ he muttered” (71). While staring at Helga and critiquing her beauty, he never speaks to her or even acknowledges her as a person. Instead, he directs his comments to Fru Dahl as he pulls Helga’s beauty apart into separate fragments to examine: “‘Superb eyes . . . color . . . neck column . . . yellow . . . hair . . . alive . . . wonderful . . .’ His speech was for Fru Dahl. For a bit longer he lingered before the silent girl, whose smile had become a fixed aching mask” (71). In his aesthetic dissection of Helga, Olsen sees solely a surface object. At the same time, Helga wants so much to be liked in this community that she plays the part of the silent, smiling object. Her “fixed aching mask,” while clearly a façade covering her true emotions, also simultaneously allows Olsen to perpetuate his offensive objectification.

Despite her complicity in this objectification, Helga is simultaneously powerless within the social role imposed upon her. She has already been labeled an exotic sexual being—a stereotype she is unable to shake, despite her strongest efforts to conduct herself with conservatism and propriety. Helga finally realizes that the community she so wants to join will never accept her as one of them. She reflects, “Here she was, a curiosity, a stunt, at which people came and gazed” (71). Yet, there does not seem to be a better option for Helga in this social framework. In order to maintain her popularity and “friendships” among the Copenhagen community, Helga soon agrees to flaunt the extravagant outfits her aunt chooses for her, and “intentionally she kept to the slow, faltering Danish” (74). If the community wants to see her as the exotic outsider, then Helga is willing to play that part in order to retain their admiration.
At each new point in her life, Helga attempts to redefine her identity in order to become part of the new community, and each time, she fails to find a place within that community. Ann E. Hostetler argues that, “In Larsen’s view, to succumb to a preexisting paradigm means to accept one pattern, one stereotype, at the expense of growth or change, cutting oneself off from identity as process and dialogue” (44). However, such a critique fails to note the distinction between Helga and Larsen. Helga consistently succumbs to a new construction of identity with each step of her journey. Her recurring feeling of isolation reflects her inability to understand her own identity as something distinct from the socially imposed identities in each context. Larsen uses Helga to highlight the problems of these social pressures, not to promote such a succumbing to stereotypes. Rather, Larsen emphasizes the difficulties in navigating such pressures in the process of developing individual identity. As Larsen shows, these social pressures upon Helga reflect an intersection of race, gender, class, sexuality, and multiple other factors, with these identities being constantly re-defined in each new social context.

Through her portrayal of Copenhagen’s subtle racism, with Helga’s internal conflicts and reluctant complicity in such socially imposed expectations, Larsen effectively expands the discussion of racism beyond the United States while simultaneously reflecting it back onto the United States. For example, Olsen’s attraction to Helga as a hypersexualized mulatta reflects both Helga’s role in Copenhagen as an exoticized object and similar trends of racial and gender stereotypes occurring in the U.S. At the same time, Helga’s experiences in Copenhagen are distinctly different from those
in the United States. Larsen emphasizes the Copenhagen community’s exoticizing of Helga without the hatred and racial segregation rampant throughout the U.S. By using Copenhagen in these two simultaneous frameworks, as both a difference from and a reflection of racism in the United States, Larsen effectively emphasizes these trends of racism while highlighting race relations as social constructions rather than absolutes.

Through her portrayal of Olsen, Larsen notes the racism inherent in such exoticizing as seen throughout Copenhagen, which underscores the social construction of both Black and white races. Olsen reflects white trends in viewing Black women as hypersexualized and primitive. In proposing to Helga, Olsen points out the many times (in his mind) that Helga has been seducing him, and yet he notes no specific actions or comments by Helga as evidence of this seduction. Instead, it seems that it is Helga herself, as a blank sexual object, that entices Olsen. As he continues his marriage proposal, Olsen describes this supposed ingrained sexuality in Helga as a Black woman: “You know, Helga, you are a contradiction. . . . You have the warm impulsive nature of the women of Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute. You sell yourself to the highest buyer. I should of course be happy that it is I” (87). Olsen’s description of Helga is grounded in his own expectations; he defined her the moment he saw her at the party, despite the fact that she had not said a word. As a white man, he has the power to impose his own definition for her onto Helga.

This labeling of Black and mulatta women as hypersexualized has a long history in the United States. Such stereotypes were used to carry slavery-era abuse of Black
women into a contemporary continuation of “excusable” sexual abuse. Because Black women were labeled sexual harlots, it was assumed that the women “brought it on themselves” when white men raped them. Mulatta women were often considered the most sexually desirable by the white men, and as a result, these women were some of the most common victims of such hypersexualization. Charles Scruggs notes the widespread popularity of these stereotypes, particularly focusing on the mulatta identity:

White writers and film makers (such as D.W. Griffith) depicted the mulatta as Jezebel, a free-floating libido that threatened white domesticity and white male virtues. . . . [Some portrayals] from popular culture [are] of mulattas whose sexuality is so excessive that it borders on insanity. (155-56)

In portraying Olsen in Quicksand, Larsen extends these racial and gender power structures beyond the United States, noting that such power structures are perpetuated through time and across countries.

Pamela S. Haag examines the male power of definition during the 1800s in the United States, noting the common opinion that girls and women “unwittingly participate in sexual assaults,” as they unknowingly entice their male pursuers (179). Olsen’s language toward Helga similarly transfers culpability to her for Olsen’s own sexual attraction. Olsen explains, “I, poor artist that I am, cannot hold out against the deliberate lure of you. . . . You creep into my brain and madden me” (86). Olsen sees Helga as having driven him to his offer of marriage against his will. Her sexuality forces him to pursue her at any cost, until he possesses her. Of course, this is a sexuality created and defined by Olsen’s own imaginings of who Helga is, with no basis in Helga’s own
actions or self-identity. Haag explores the broader gendered power structure in which Olsen’s actions exist, explaining the social acceptance of “men’s rights to interpret or appropriate female sexuality,” as opposed to women’s agency in defining their own sexuality (179). As is the case between Olsen and Helga, Helga’s self-definition has no currency in society. Larsen’s portrayal of Helga reflects the similar theme in Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*, as Emma Lou’s race, gender, and skin color restrict her ability to define herself in society. In *Quicksand*, Helga struggles with similar socially imposed classifications. As a Black woman, her gender and race deny her agency to define herself; instead, she is seen solely through the roles that others impose upon her.

Helga is greatly offended by Olsen’s perceptions of her. His observations are infused with the racial stereotypes that Helga has spent her life trying to escape. At the same time, in attempting such an escape, Helga fails to acknowledge any part of herself that is even slightly linked to the traits portrayed in such stereotypes. For example, Olsen paints a portrait of Helga that he views as a portrayal of “the true Helga Crane” (89). Helga despises the portrait, as it represents Olsen’s perspective of her as a hypersexualized creature. Helga argues, the portrait “wasn’t she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting sensual creature with her features” (89). The maid in the household agrees with her, describing the picture as “bad, wicked” (89). The painting clearly represents Olsen’s perspective rather than reality—a perspective that matches the society’s broader desires for such objectification and sexualization of Black women, as the artistic community praises Olsen for his work in capturing the sensual model.
However, while the image portrays Olsen’s desires more than Helga’s actual sensuality, Helga’s reaction to the painting highlights her inner conflict over the piece. Throughout her life, Helga is inundated by the stereotypes that the outside world uses to define her. In reaction to such external definitions, Helga strives to repudiate the validity of these stereotypes. The portrait represents the sexualized stereotype of Black women that Helga has spent her life trying to negate. As a result, she is unable to acknowledge her own sexuality because an acknowledgement of her sexual desires would mean that she represents and perpetuates the very stereotypes she is trying to fight.

This inner struggle is further emphasized in Helga’s reaction to the Black vaudeville performers and in her reaction to Olsen’s portrait of her. In each case, the focus of the portrayal is on Black stereotypes that are accepted as fact by the white audiences. Helga, on the other hand, sees the racism inherent in such stereotypes and is deeply uncomfortable among her white neighbors who accept these caricatures as representing reality.

For Helga, there is much to be desired in erasing her differences and becoming a part of the white society surrounding her. At the same time, while Helga has a strictly negative reaction toward Olsen’s portrait, her reaction to the vaudeville performers emphasizes the complex intersection of social pressures in her search for an identity:

[Helga] returned again and again to the Circus, always alone, gazing intently and solemnly at the gesticulating black figures. . . . For she knew that into her plan for her life had thrust itself a suspensive conflict in which were fused doubts, rebellion, expediency, and urgent longings. (83)
While the white audience members laugh and applaud the performers, Helga is the “intent,” “solemn” spectator who sees much more in the performers than the slapstick jokes and songs.

For Helga, these performers represent the conflict between two desires: the white society she would like to join but of which she will never be a part and the Negro race that she is forced to inhabit by white society, and to which she feels an element of kinship, but that carries with it the constant racism and assumed stereotypes that she has so longed to escape. While Helga feels a sense of “rebellion” and “urgent longings,” it is left unclear what exactly Helga is longing for. Based on Olsen’s subsequent proposal and Helga’s realization that her fantasized marriage has no connection to reality, perhaps Helga’s longings are for the fantasy that simply cannot exist for her.

Throughout the novel, Larsen emphasizes these inherent problems within the clash between social pressures and an individual’s sense of identity. While Helga addresses the social expectations for her, she is forced to bury any element of herself that does not neatly fit within those expectations. As a Black woman, Helga’s race and gender each receive distinct, at times conflicting, social expectations, while her mixed-race parentage causes even further fragmentation between the social definitions of Helga and her own self-definitions. Helga’s experiences in Denmark highlight the many social differences between the countries, but at the same time, she recognizes the pervading racism and sexism in both countries that she cannot seem to avoid. While trying to escape this prejudice, Helga remains unwilling to acknowledge the inner struggle that
allows such prejudice to affect her life so deeply. Du Bois describes this struggle of internalizing potentially conflicting social expectations as “double-consciousness” (Souls 7). Throughout the novel, Helga continually exemplifies such fragmentation of identity, as she strives to navigate these conflicting social pressures.

Dreaming once again of Harlem and “its dirty streets, swollen now, in the warmer weather, with dark, gay humanity,” Helga notes a sense of “incompleteness” within herself (92). She argues, “I’m homesick, not for America, but for Negroes. That’s the trouble” (92). It is this very connection to the race that caused her to flee to Denmark earlier. She has spent her entire stay in Copenhagen hoping to be seen as part of the white community rather than as Black and different. Therefore, this newfound nostalgia for the Black race seems to be grounded more in a desire to feel part of a community than in a sense of race pride or an embracing of racial identity. Larsen states, “[Helga] felt a slight pitying superiority over those Negroes who were apparently so satisfied. And she had a fine contempt for the blatantly patriotic black American” (96). Helga is very aware of the racism permeating U.S. society, so she can never fully embrace America as home while such racism exists. At the same time, Helga criticizes those like Anne who are involved in the racial equality movements. Even in wishing she could feel a part of a community, Helga stands outside, judging those who are comfortable in their lives. Her criticism seems to be less about people’s stances on race and nationalism and more about feeling ill at ease with her place in the community and her sense of self.
Continuing to grasp for some clear reason for her misery, she ignores the obvious—she is perpetuating her own misery—and instead strives for some tangible reason why her friends have found happiness while she has not. Anne is happy in her marriage to Dr. Anderson, so Helga seeks out that same happiness. Of course, when Anderson was available to marry, Helga feared what her sexual attraction to him might mean. It is only after Anderson is unavailable that Helga finally submits to her sexual desires. When Helga and Anderson kiss at a party, Helga suddenly is aware of “a long-hidden, half-understood desire [that] welled up in her with the suddenness of a dream” (104). The same evening that Helga turns down an offer of marriage from her old fiancé James Vayle, she engages in an erotic kiss with her best friend’s husband, Dr. Anderson. Helga simultaneously desires and fears what it might mean to acknowledge her sexualized self and engage in an institution like marriage.

As Haag notes, “romance” was a popular framework that women used to legitimize their physical sexual desires (556). Helga’s relationship with Anderson reflects this expected framework for women’s sexuality. She depicts Anderson as the romantic hero, though she expresses no real love for him. When Anderson rejects her and remains with his wife, Helga suffers from a bruised ego rather than a broken heart. At the same time, while Helga does not love Anderson, she uses him as significant conduit to engage with her sexual desires that she has so long repressed. In daydreaming about the kiss, “She lived over those brief seconds, thinking not so much of the man whose arms had held her as of the ecstasy which had flooded her” (105). Helga is drawn
to this newly-acknowledged sexual desire within herself. However, as her experience with Anderson shows, those desires are only socially sanctioned within the very constructs of marriage and motherhood that she has been avoiding.

After being rejected by Anderson, Helga realizes that the New Negro propriety that she has inhabited does not offer her the happiness and sense of identity that she has been seeking. Searching for some answer that will explain her sense of isolation within the world, Helga enters a church and is swept up into the religious fervor. However, as critic Michael Lackey argues in his book *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*, this scene seems to be a promotion for atheism more than any argument for religious redemption. Lackey claims that the church scene is in fact a symbolic rape of Helga, where “The gang rape highlights how believers experience a perverse gratification through their violation of the infidel” (87). Lackey’s point is valid, particularly in its exploration of the linked sex, violence, and religion in this conversion scene. However, he then goes on to contend that the primary theme in *Quicksand* is Larsen’s argument for atheism rather than her focus on racism and sexism. He claims, “Larsen’s novella demonstrates the psychological costs, not of racism and sexism . . . but of the existence of the God concept” (86). Such a contention simplifies Larsen’s work, narrowing the focus of the novel to a single point. Through this argument, Lackey does not acknowledge the intersectionality of the novel’s themes. In this single conversion scene, Larsen intertwines multiple influences, including race, gender, and religion, in order to explore how these varied themes impact each other within the single event.
While Lackey’s argument for the conversion scene to be read as a gang rape seems to be an extreme interpretation of Larsen’s intentions, throughout this scene there is a clear intertwining of the religious fervor with violence and sex. The parishioners represent all of the strong emotions and base urges that Helga has previously tried to contain in her desire to maintain the cultured social persona of the New Negro. However, while it would seemingly be positive for Helga more fully to embrace these repressed urges within herself, Helga’s decades-long repression has led to a dangerous sudden release of such desires. Just as Helga’s sexual desires come forth in an inappropriate relationship with a married man, so too do the primal urges expressed in the church portray darkness and danger rather than purity or joy.

McDowell argues that Larsen’s consistent portrayal of sexual desire as dangerous and animalistic is a reflection of Larsen’s own inability to detach herself from her own middle class moral judgments. McDowell claims,

> However much Larsen criticizes the repressive standards of sexual morality upheld by the black middle class, finally she cannot escape those values. Significantly, sexuality is linked throughout the novel to imagery of descent and animalism, suggesting moral degradation. (xxii)

McDowell assumes that this dark imagery of sexuality reflects Larsen’s own morals imposed upon the story. However, it is problematic to assume that Larsen’s goals in portraying sexuality reflect the character Helga’s own feelings about sexuality. Rather, Larsen uses Helga’s inner conflict to exemplify the social trap that is created for women, particularly Black women, highlighting Helga’s subconscious hypocrisy as a forum through which to examine broader social issues. Helga continually struggles to equate
her goals of middle class propriety with her inner “unacceptable” sexual desires. This
inner conflict between social expectations and her own desires extends far beyond
Helga’s sense of sexuality, reflecting her similar reactions in the earlier Harlem dance
party and the Copenhagen vaudeville performance.

The church conversion scene represents the breaking point for Helga, as she
separates herself from the New Negro persona she has been inhabiting. She has no desire
to proceed into the “proper,” socially acceptable marriage with the bland suitor James
Vayle. At the same time, a relationship with the married Dr. Anderson would be socially
unacceptable, and is thus a futile hope. In each case, Helga does not love the man; she is
seeking a socially-acceptable outlet for her newly-awakened, “primitive” sexual desires,
which should not exist in her “proper” middle-class ideal identity for herself. She sees no
solution in the cultured, New Negro path she has been following, so she flounders once
again in her journey, seeking out some new sense of identity that may bring her the
happiness she failed to find in any of her previous roles.

The church parishioners are vibrant, wild, and emotional—all of the traits Helga
has avoided in herself but that have been awakened through her recent sexual desires.
McDowell argues that this church scene offers Helga the ecstasy and sexual release that
has been denied her throughout the story: “The sexual desires, pent up throughout the
novel, finally explode in Helga’s primitive, passionate religious conversion, the
description of which unambiguously simulates sexual excitement and orgasmic release”
(xix-xx). However, while there is a clear parallel to sex during this church conversion
scene, McDowell does not acknowledge how the violence and grotesqueness of the scene shift the symbolism from representing Helga’s excitement and sexual orgasm to representing a far darker scenario—a nightmarish communal orgy verging on rape.

Larsen portrays the surrounding parishioners using the descriptors “grotesque” and “crazed creature,” as Helga “shrinks from” their grasp and tries to flee (112). However, she is surrounded by the dancing, shrieking parishioners who are crying out for her “Jezebel” soul. At first, Helga is amused by their performance, but,

Little by little the performance took on an almost Bacchic vehemence. . . . “This,” she whispered to herself, “is terrible. I must get out of here.” But the horror held her. She remained motionless, watching, as if she lacked the strength to leave the place—foul, vile, and terrible, with its mixture of breaths, its contact of bodies, its concerted convulsions, all in a wild appeal for a single soul. Her soul. (113)

This moment of conversion in the church shows no sign of the spirituality common to such religious scenes. Even in the seemingly sacred structure of a church, Helga sees no positive release for the feelings she has repressed. The emotional release is corrupt—twisted into a dirty, animalistic convulsion that reflects everything she has feared about the earlier dances, performances, and desires from which she has been running. While she tries once again to flee the throbbing mob around her, she realizes she is trapped. She feels herself “possessed by the same madness; she too felt a brutal desire to shout and sling herself about. Frightened at the strength of the obsession, she gathered herself for one last effort to escape, but vainly” (113). Helga falls down in her attempt to flee and is left lying on the floor, fighting back her own nausea. Larsen notes, “And in that moment she was lost—or saved. The yelling figures about her pressed forward, closing her in on
all sides” (113). Unable to escape, Helga is dragged down into the mob’s fervor. Larsen distorts the religious trope of spiritual salvation by blurring Helga’s position between “lost” and “saved.” While such spiritual salvation scenes would typically reflect the character’s own salvation and turning point within his or her life, Helga is instead dragged down into the orgiastic mob of parishioners. Her “salvation” is equated with fear and nausea.

Part of Helga’s fear, a seeming Freudian repression of the id, is that she in fact wants to join this “weird orgy.” She too is possessed by the same desires as the mob surrounding her—to join in the frenzy. McDowell’s argument that this church scene represents “sexual excitement and orgasmic release” does note the clear link between Helga’s repressed and newly discovered sexual desires and the sexuality inherent within the mob’s frenzy. However, McDowell’s focus on “sexual excitement” does not address Helga’s own disgust toward the mob and fear of these desires within herself. After years of repressing any traits within herself that may contradict the cultured New Negro persona she has developed, Helga is unable to acknowledge those traits as positive elements of herself. Instead, embracing those traits must necessarily mean giving up entirely on the cultured, middle-class life she has striven for. By the end of the “salvation” scene, Helga acknowledges these primitive desires within herself but is only able to see those desires existing within the twisted animalistic fervor expressed by the mob.
Therefore, while Larsen concludes the scene with seeming calm and Helga’s “salvation,” she emphasizes Helga’s clear self-deception within that apparent salvation: “A miraculous calm came upon her. Life seemed to expand and to become very easy. Helga Crane felt within her a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known” (114). In leaving behind the persona she has struggled to attain for so long, Helga hopes then to leave behind the “complexities” of her lives—the struggle to find her own identity amidst the social expectations pressing down on her. On the surface, this desire for a simple, happy life seems like an ideal solution for Helga’s troubles. However, Larsen is careful to frame Helga’s newfound hope within the disturbing realities that negate such a false happiness. Helga’s peace comes in the aftermath of what Lackey describes as a rape scene, and her choice for a simpler happy life of marriage and motherhood contradicts all of her earlier hopes for her life, instead leading to Helga’s own version of a living hell.

In novels about Black characters (written by both Black and white authors), there were two common portrayals of rural Black life. As the New Negro promotion emphasizes, rural Black life was often considered primitive and uncultured. The middle and upper-class culture of the urban New Negro identity was put forth as the ideal, while rural (often linked to Southern) lifestyles were placed in opposition to these cultured elite. Wallace Thurman examines these cultural judgments in his 1929 essay, “Few Know Real Harlem, the City of Surprises: Quarter Million Negroes Form a Moving, Colorful Pageant
of Life,” where he notes the differences in religious expression and church services
between the Harlem elite and the rural Southern Baptist traditions. Thurman contends,

The old frame structures in which the sisters and brothers moaned and shouted with the spirit while ministerial emotionalists shook the house with sermons on Heaven, Hell, salvation and eternal damnation have given way to stately ecclesiastical edifices in which Pentecostalism is frowned upon and where fiery sermons leveled at sinners have given way to polite religious talks. . . . Sister Brown from Shiloh Baptist Church in Birmingham is admonished by swallow-coated ushers to keep quiet during the services, for her constant ‘Amen!’ and ‘Preach it, Brother!’ disturb those around her. (4M)

Religious fervor, as Larsen hyperbolically portrays in Quicksand’s church scene, was considered uncivilized by the urban New Negro elite. Such emotional release reflected the “uncultured” “primitivism” of rural lives from which the New Negro movement strove to distinguish itself. Therefore, Larsen’s church scene must be read not only as a commentary on religion and emotion but also as a clashing of two disparate regional and class cultures. When Helga joins the church mob’s frenzy, she is contradicting the very New Negro cultural values upon which she has based her life thus far. The churchgoers’ orgiastic emotional freedom reflects the racial stereotyped primitivism of Helga’s nightmares. Of course, Larsen’s portrayal of this church is never grounded in realism. Her goal is not to create an accurate description of a Baptist church scene but rather to create the symbolic nightmare version that Helga has feared.

In contrast to this depiction of rural Black lifestyles as primitive and uncultured, these lifestyles were also commonly portrayed as idyllic and simple, safe from the corruptions of the city. In addition to her portrayal of the dangerous primitive emotions
in the church scene, Larsen engages simultaneously with the idyllic rural stereotype in Helga’s hope for a simple happiness through fleeing from the supposed ideal of her New Negro urban life. Helga’s later choice in husband, the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green, represents her desire for this fictional stereotype—the pleasant simplicity of rural life. The reverend’s occupation, as well as his name, help further emphasize this rural stereotype, particularly as it is placed in contrast with the later realities of Reverend Green’s vile persona. By engaging with both of these contrasting stereotypes of rural Negro life, Larsen problematizes both the “negative” and “positive” stereotypes by highlighting the unreality of each.

Despite Helga’s indifference toward marriage and aversion to motherhood (103), when Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green walks Helga home from the church, Helga views him as a means to an end. She wants to experience the sexual pleasure awakened through her kiss with Anderson. Like Anderson, Green has little to do with Helga’s sexual desires. Her focus is on the desire itself, not the man through whom she will be able to engage with those feelings. She realizes that it would be “easy” to seduce Green, but immediately after that thought, she pulls back: “No. She couldn’t. It would be too awful” (115). Finally, Helga makes the decision to seduce him and “deliberately stopped thinking. She had only smiled, a faint provocative smile, and pressed her fingers deep into his arms until a wild look had come into his slightly bloodshot eyes” (116). In this seduction, Helga remains in control. She decides to sleep with Green in order to satiate her own sexual desires and adeptly maneuvers Green into bed. However, Helga quickly
realizes that her role as a woman in society does not allow for her to maintain such control over her sexual expression.

As Larsen notes earlier in Helga’s relationship with Olsen, her identity as a Black woman inherently labels her as hypersexualized and promiscuous. To maintain any unmarried sexual relationship with a man would reinforce that stereotype. While marriage is unappealing, it seems to be the only option if Helga wants to continue acting upon her sexual desires. Larsen describes Helga’s inner debate:

Just for a fleeting moment Helga Crane . . . questioned her ability to retain, to bear, this happiness at such cost as she must pay for it. There was, she knew, no getting around that. The man’s agitation and sincere conviction of sin had been too evident, too illuminating. The question returned in a slightly new form. Was it worth the risk? Could she take it? Was she able? . . . And all the while she knew in one small corner of her mind that such thinking was useless. She had made her decision. Her resolution. It was a chance at stability, at permanent happiness, that she meant to take. (116-17)

Helga knows that marriage with Green will likely fail to bring her happiness. However, that “chance” at maintaining her current feelings of sexual awakening seems worth the risk. She recognizes that marriage is the only way to retain her sexual relationship with Green, as his “agitation and severe conviction of sin” emphasize his need to uphold the social and religious propriety of sex, which exists solely within the confines of marriage.

However, Helga clearly does not share Green’s opinions on sex and marriage. Her decision to seek out marriage with Green is a last resort, not a social necessity. Larsen’s embrace of such a socially “immoral” sexual stance for her character is noteworthy, particularly in its contrast with the portrayal of public morality for which
critics praised Larsen. Hazel V. Carby emphasizes this controversial stance, arguing that *Quicksand* “did not just explore the contradictory terrain of women and romance; its sexual politics tore apart the very fabric of the romance form” (168). Through Helga, Larsen effectively critiques the sexually confining roles for women, imposed by social and religious expectations. This was a highly controversial stance in the 1920s, particularly within the important New Negro fight against the hypersexualized Black woman stereotype.

Although Helga recognizes the dangers of marrying Reverend Pleasant Green, she holds out hope that, after her experience of spiritual salvation, God “would perhaps make it come out all right” (117). Such a sudden sense of religion, particularly in the service of blessing a marriage based on justifying her sexual desires and getting revenge on Anderson, clearly represents Helga’s vain hope for change in her life rather than any deeper understanding of herself. As is the case with each new journey in her life, Helga is initially excited for the new adventure of marriage. Larsen notes, “As always, at first the novelty of the thing, the change, fascinated her. There was a recurrence of the feeling that now, at last, she had found a place for herself, that she was really living” (118). Larsen’s incorporation of the key phrases “as always” and “recurrence” emphasize the futile repetition and thus falseness of such joyful feelings. Helga has not gained any deeper understanding of herself in this apparent religious transformation. Rather, she perpetuates the same flawed tendencies that have led her to consistent feelings of despair and isolation in the past. On the surface, Helga is fulfilling her social role of wife and
then mother. However, once again Helga plays a role in order to fit into the society’s expectations—a role that is disconnected from her own identity and own desires.

Larsen consistently focuses on this rift between the role Helga is attempting and her actual thoughts. However, Lackey seems to miss this layering of Helga’s conscious and subconscious thoughts, as he argues that Helga’s spiritual conversion helps her to ignore the difficulties of her exhausting new domestic roles as a wife and a mother: “While Helga may be degraded on a material level by having been reduced to a domestic drudge, she can lay claim to royalty on a spiritual level now. . . . And since only the spiritual world is legitimate, her material degradation is irrelevant” (82). Lackey’s assumption of Helga’s spiritual conversion does not address Larsen’s complex layering of Helga’s thoughts. While Helga outwardly seems to portray her conversion, Larsen continually alludes to this conversion reflecting Helga’s attempted social role rather than reality. Throughout this supposed conversion, Larsen portrays Helga as futilely trying to convince herself of her spirituality and failing to do so.

Once again, Helga takes on a new role without gaining any deeper understanding of herself. The Reverend is merely a tool for Helga to use in fleeing from her old life. She feels no love for him and in fact uses him solely as a means of escape and of satiating her own sexual desires. Larsen describes Helga’s emotions, buried under the surface of her seemingly “appropriate,” conventional life as the reverend’s wife:

For the preacher, her husband, she had a feeling of gratitude amounting almost to sin. Beyond that, she thought of him not at all. . . . What did it matter that he consumed his food, even the softest varieties, audibly? What did it matter that, though he did not work with his hands, not even in
the garden, his fingernails were always rimmed with black? What did it matter that he failed to wash his fat body, or to shift his clothing, as often as Helga herself did? . . . In the certainty of his goodness, his righteousness, his holiness, Helga somehow overcame her first disgust at the odor of sweat and stale garments. . . . She was, she told herself, proud and gratified that he belonged to her. In some strange way she was able to ignore the atmosphere of self-satisfaction which poured from him like gas from a leaking pipe. (121-22)

Helga “tells” herself that she loves this man, pushing down any hints that this may be a lie—that she may have trapped herself in a social convention, expecting the happiness promised by marriage but instead feeling simply disgust toward her husband. Helga has spent her life attempting to reach the ideals of New Negro social propriety. However, even in giving up this ideal through her choice to flee to rural life, Helga in fact embodies the New Negro expectations for womanhood: living within the roles of wife and mother, as a support for her husband and children. As Helga’s thoughts above emphasize, this new social role once again does not bring her happiness, just as all of her previous journeys have led to disillusionment and isolation. However, this new role leads to a danger Helga has avoided in all of her previous searches for identity. Just as Helga has feared, her role of wife leads inevitably to her role as mother—an identity from which she cannot simply escape as she has in the past.

This new role of motherhood leaves Helga constantly exhausted, with barely enough energy to drag herself through to the next day, much less to find a means of escape from this life. Within this social prison, Helga still continually seeks out and experiences the sexual desires that initially drew her into the marriage. Marriage is the only socially-acceptable release for those desires, and for Helga, this passion is so
appealing in her life of repressive social expectations that the marriage is worth the risk of becoming trapped. While she drags herself through the miserable days playing the role of the happy reverend’s wife, Helga still finds a release for her sexual desires at night. Larsen portrays this shift into night and its reflection of Helga’s buried, powerful desires: “And night came at the end of every day. Emotional, palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds at the tingling thought of night, with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason” (122). For Helga, the joyous excitement of night’s sexual release is the one point in her day where she truly lives. She is able to feel all of the vibrant emotions that are nonexistent in her feelings toward her husband. He serves as a tool for Helga to reach these feelings within herself.

Lackey, on the other hand, argues that Reverend Pleasant Green’s sexual desires drive the relationship, while Helga misinterprets those desires as spiritual. He contends, “Specifically, what materially motivates Green is sex . . . But Helga cannot understand Green’s physical desires, for in internalizing a spiritual epistemology, she interprets Green’s actions as symbolic of spiritual harmony, not as a ploy to satisfy sexual desire” (82). Green is clearly sexually attracted to Helga; however, to argue that it is Green’s sexual desires that control their relationship is to exclude Helga’s own powerful sexual desires. As Larsen portrays in the moment the couple first meet, Helga seduces Green in order to satiate her own sexual desires. Similarly, she chooses to marry him because she realizes that his own social morality will not allow them to continue their sexual trysts without the religious sanction of marriage. In emphasizing Green’s “physical desires” as
something Helga “cannot understand,” and in erasing the controlling power of Helga’s own physical desires, Lackey overlooks Helga’s agency in their sexual relationship, ignoring the intersection Larsen develops among religion, race, gender, and sexuality in Helga’s decisions.

Lackey’s assumption reflects the difference in how each character interacts with his or her sexual desires. While Green can freely give in to his desires without repercussions, Helga’s own relationship with her sexual desires is portrayed as far more complex. As Larsen emphasizes, Helga’s feelings of sexual joy are directly intertwined with her unhappy role as a mother—the inevitable result of her sexual experiences. While she loves her children, they have “used her up;” she is physically exhausted, losing touch with any part of herself outside of her role as constantly pregnant mother (123). Now, her body exists solely as a vessel for her children and her husband.

When Helga questions whether her miserable, sickly existence of constant pregnancy is a logical choice for their marriage, her husband berates her for her “stupendous ingratitude” against God after He has given them the gift of so many children (124). As a wife, Helga’s role in life is to be a mother. It is unacceptable for her to question the sagacity of such a socially idealized role for herself. Throughout this section of the novel, Larsen focuses on dispelling this notion of motherhood as the ideal goal for all women. Helga serves as a lens through which to examine the hardships in women’s assumed roles.
Helga’s misery and physical exhaustion extend beyond the pregnancies themselves and into every element of her life. Her husband, the Reverend, chooses to spend time with his women parishioners rather than return home to the scattered reminders of motherhood’s difficulties. Helga does not blame him for avoiding the home—she too longs to escape. However, as a woman, a mother, that option is denied to her. Larsen describes Helga as she gazes over what should, in theory, be a comfortable, happy home of children:

Helga, looking about in helpless dismay and sick disgust at the disorder around her. . . . How, she wondered, did other women, other mothers, manage? Could it be possible that, while presenting such smiling and contented faces, they were always on the edge of health? . . . Or was it only she, a poor weak city-bred thing, who felt that the strain of what the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green had so often gently and patiently reminded her was a natural thing, an act of God, was almost unendurable? (124-25)

Through such descriptions, Larsen disputes the motherhood role promoted by social structures like the New Negro movement as the idyllic sole purpose for all women to pursue. For Helga, there is nothing idyllic about her experience as a mother, and she has a haunting suspicion that she is not alone in her misery.

Helga does show a strong love for her children. However, that love does not erase the difficulties she must endure as a mother. While Reverend Green berates Helga for lamenting these difficulties, “God’s gift” to their family, Helga recognizes that maintaining this role of motherhood is slowly killing her. Larsen notes Helga’s “growing yearning” for her previous life, free from the exhaustive pressures of motherhood, as “she longed for the great ordinary things of life, hunger, sleep, freedom from pain” (126).
Throughout her life, Helga has sought out an identity for herself, failing every time because each identity she attempts to inhabit reflects the surrounding social expectations rather than any deeper understanding of herself. While the role of motherhood is socially promoted as the highest goal for a New Negro woman in the struggle for racial equality, Helga once again realizes that this role is not a part of her own identity. However, as Larsen depicts through Helga’s quandary, Helga’s expression of her own sexual desires is directly linked to her subsequent painful motherhood. She will not be socially allowed to inhabit one role without the other.

After the birth of her fourth child, Helga can no longer reconcile such pain with the gracious God her husband keeps describing to her. Larsen states,

> In that period of racking pain and calamitous fright Helga had learned what passion and credulity could do to one. In her was born angry bitterness and enormous disgust. The cruel, unrelieved suffering had beaten down her protective wall of artificial faith in the infinite wisdom, in the mercy, of God. . . . With the obscurring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself. She couldn’t, she thought ironically, even blame God for it, now that she knew that He didn’t exist. (130)

Helga’s faith turns to “angry bitterness” at the realization that God is not there to protect her. She is alone in her pain, just as she has been throughout the rest of her experiences. Because she is alone, this means that she has done this “to herself”—she can no longer believe in a higher being, and thus cannot hold him responsible for the miserable life (and imminent death) in which she has trapped herself. “Now that she knew that He didn’t exist,” Helga is forced to recognize what has resulted from that easy, unquestioning faith in the roles society has held forth for her. In this moment within the story, Larsen makes
her most explicit atheist statement—a position she tends to equivocate in the rest of the
novel. Much like her discussion of same sex desires in *Passing*, Larsen explores
controversial themes involving religion, race, gender, and sexuality while simultaneously
evading explicit discussion of the issues. Such techniques enable her audience members
to ignore the novels’ topics with which they would be uncomfortable engaging.

Larsen’s engagement with controversial topics throughout her novels helps to
challenge the New Negro construct and question assumed social norms. Her exploration
of hypocrisies in religious faith, in conjunction with her exploration of gender roles and
women’s sexual desires, all serve to broaden the discussion of the New Negro identity in
its engagement with the diverse interrelationships among race, class, gender, religion, and
the multitudinous other factors in identity constructions.
Chapter Three: “The eye which must know by now that she knew”: Intersections of Rhetoric, Perspective and Audience in Zora Neale Hurston’s “Sweat” and “Muttsy”

Within her literature, Zora Neale Hurston developed a distinct voice that explored identity intersections and cultural contexts often underrepresented in the Harlem Renaissance. Incorporating issues of race, class, region, and gender, among many other themes, Hurston blended tradition with subversion to create a style uniquely her own. In this project, I focus on two short stories often overlooked in Hurston criticism, “Sweat” (1926) and “Muttsy” (1926), and place them in dialogue with two of her more critically prominent texts. Although Hurston’s writing career began during the Harlem Renaissance, her literary and anthropological work continued through the 1950s. As a result, many critics focus on her later works, such as the widely famous novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) and the folklore study *Mules and Men* (1935). Hurston fell out of critical favor late in her career, resulting in an almost complete disappearance before Alice Walker “discovered” Hurston again in the early 1970s.⁸ After Hurston’s critical rebirth in the 1970s, her works have gained critical appreciation and popularity. However, the criticism still tends to focus predominantly on her works from the 1930s. This chapter examines the broader significance of her under-recognized short stories.

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⁸ In Alice Walker’s famous 1975 essay “In Search of Zora Neale Hurston,” she describes her journey to Hurston’s home town to learn about Hurston’s life and to find her unmarked grave. This essay initiated a significant shift toward Hurston’s renewed popularity. Walker is cited for rediscovering Hurston, bringing her works back into academic discourse.
“Sweat” and “Muttsy,” examining their thematic and rhetorical dialogue with two of her most critically examined texts, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Mules and Men*. In grounding the chapter’s analysis in the short stories “Sweat” and “Muttsy,” I concentrate on Hurston’s role within the context of the 1920s Harlem Renaissance as well as within the broader New Negro movement. As my analysis shows, the literary themes and stylistic techniques that I explore within her works are not isolated to these two texts; rather, the overlapping of such themes across her works encourages an exploration of thematic and textual dialogue among her works. Throughout both “Sweat” and “Muttsy,” Hurston explores the power of voice and silencing, as she highlights often unacknowledged perspectives in the New Negro movement and American society. This chapter particularly focuses on Hurston’s examination of the constructed nature of gender roles, as she explores gender through race, religious, regional, community, and class contexts.

Hurston’s goal in her writing was to expand literary portrayals of Black Americans to encompass the diversity of lives that went ignored in mainstream literature. This goal, similar to Thurman’s own goals of portraying such unacknowledged diversity through literature, enabled Hurston to become one of the few Harlem Renaissance artists to explore characters in Southern, rural, lower class contexts. While Thurman focused on colorism, classism, gender, and sexuality through a primarily urban, Northern context, Hurston extended her storytelling beyond the environments commonly portrayed by Harlem Renaissance artists. Even in stories like “Muttsy,” which takes place in Harlem,
Hurston uses skillful rhetorical techniques to extend the themes beyond the expected storytelling framework.

Hurston argued for the importance of portraying folk stories, regional idioms, and dialect through literature, in order to highlight Black Americans’ diverse experiences as integral to broader American culture. In her anthropological essay, “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston examines the Negro’s great influence in developing American culture: “The American Negro has done wonders to the English language. . . . He has made over a great part of the tongue to his liking and has his revision accepted by the ruling class. No one listening to a Southern white man talk could deny this” (39-40).

By incorporating nuanced, regionally unique dialect in her own works, Hurston emphasizes language as a significant reflection of Negro culture and of broader American culture.

Hurston’s incorporation of dialect and folk traditions into her works highlights significant but often underrepresented perspectives and experiences among Black Americans. At the same time, these literary techniques also reflect white desires for such “folk” portrayals of Negroes. As a result, some Black critics criticized Hurston for such depictions, claiming that her folk portrayals and use of dialect catered to white readers’ stereotypes (Locke, “Jingo” 10; Winslow 20). In his famous critique of Hurston’s novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Richard Wright argues that Hurston “voluntarily continues in her novel the tradition which was forced upon the Negro in the theater, that is, the minstrel technique that makes the ‘white folks’ laugh” (23). For Wright, Hurston’s
thematic and stylistic techniques reflect a focus on “a white audience whose chauvinistic tastes she knows how to satisfy” (23). As many critics have previously noted, such a critique ignores Hurston’s rhetorical skills and strong social themes (Hemenway 241; Lamouth 168; Story 28).

At the same time, Wright’s critique reflects a broader social struggle to maintain a “Negro” voice outside of negative white influences. In his 1931 preface to The Book of American Negro Poetry, James Weldon Johnson notes the problems inherent in utilizing techniques like dialect within Negro art, as he highlights the relationship between “conventional dialect” and the permeation of that performative dialect with “artificial sentiment” (4). However, he is careful to draw a distinction between such conventional dialect and the dialectical techniques being utilized by artists such as Langston Hughes and Sterling A. Brown (and, arguably, Zora Neale Hurston), which “is not the dialect of the comic minstrel tradition or of the sentimental plantation tradition; it is the common, racy, living, authentic speech of the Negro in certain phases of real life” (4). Although Johnson is criticized by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. for his apparent argument for the end of dialect (“Dis and Dat” 103), Johnson is in fact highlighting the same need for authentic portrayals of life that Hurston attempts in her own works. Hurston strives to maintain authentic portrayals of dialect, community, and culture, through both her anthropological work and her fiction. Of course, “authenticity” is inherently problematic when all identity is grounded in social construction. Hurston acknowledges this contradiction,
continually struggling between these desires to explore both racial authenticity and the nature of race as a socially constructed identity.

This conflict between authenticity and social construction permeates Hurston’s themes and rhetorical choices throughout her works. For instance, Hurston portrays authentic regional and class dialect in her anthropological and fictional works, coupled with her own external narrative, creating what Mikhail Bakhtin describes as a “double-voiced” text (324). Hurston develops layers of dialogue among author, narrator, and characters, each influenced by and refracting the heteroglot social influences (Bakhtin 315). In *The Signifying Monkey*, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. argues that “the black tradition is double-voiced” (xxv), noting the multiple conflicting social influences and audiences that the authors engage through their texts. As Larsen explores in her thematic layering of storylines through *Passing*, these double-voices do not necessarily address a strictly racial audience dichotomy. Both Larsen and Hurston use double-voiced rhetoric to explore various internal/external social power structures as well as perspectives subversive to promoted “norms.”

For instance, in “Sweat,” Hurston uses double-voiced rhetoric to respond not only to varied Black and white audience perspectives, but also to the class, regional, gender, and New Negro cultural expectations brought to the text by her readers. She engages in such intersections between the multi-layered textual voices and the surrounding social heteroglossia (Bakhtin 272) through scenes in “Sweat” such as the townspeople gossiping about Delia and Sykes. Hurston begins the scene with an external narrative description:
“It was a hot, hot day near the end of July. The village men on Joe Clarke’s porch even chewed cane listlessly. They did not hurl the cane-knots as usual. They let them dribble over the edge of the porch. Even conversation had collapsed under the heat” (76). Such narrative descriptions effectively develop the regional, class, and community setting, encouraging the reader to feel the heat of the Florida summer day and see the village men gathered on the porch chewing sugar cane, dropping down the knots when they are finished. However, this narrative voice separates itself from the village, maintaining formal literary word-choice throughout the scene.

In contrast, Hurston relies on dialect for the village men’s conversations. For example, one of the village men, Walter Thomas, discusses Sykes’s mistreatment of Delia by noting, “He ain’t fit tuh carry guts tuh a bear” (77). Both the narrative voice and the men’s dialogue incorporate region-specific references, as the narrator notes the men’s sugar cane-knots and Thomas relies on a colloquialism to describe Sykes’s personality. At the same time, Hurston maintains a clear distinction between the narrator’s versus the characters’ voices. The characters’ dialect effectively develops a regional and cultural perspective that not only distinguishes the setting from the common urban settings of other New Negro literature but also specifically grounds the characters in a distinct, specific community. Through these techniques, Hurston builds the same complexity into the community setting as she develops in the characters themselves.

Such settings and characters portray regional and class perspectives often underrepresented within the New Negro movement. At the same time, by maintaining a
formal narrative voice, Hurston develops an intersection among such dialect and perspectives with the more formal, expected writing styles among most New Negro literature. While authors such as Jean Toomer push the boundaries of rhetorical styles in *Cane*, Hurston tends to restrict rhetorical experimentation to the characters’ dialogue. This may reflect a desire to maintain a broad audience, much like Thurman’s and Larsen’s choices to submerge potentially controversial themes into more broadly accepted language. In addition, Hurston needed to maintain a specific literary persona in order to build monetary support and publishing opportunities for her work (Walker, Foreword xiv-xvi).

However, such distinctions between character and narrator are further complicated in Hurston’s collection of folk tales, *Mules and Men*. Hurston incorporates herself as a narrator/character within the stories as she describes interactions with the storytellers. This character, “Zora,” speaks in dialect, with the text shifting between her narrative thoughts in standard English and her conversations with the community in dialect. In these interactions, Zora strives to make a connection with the community based on commonalities—a frequent technique used in anthropological fieldwork. These attempts are clear in scenes such as Zora’s realization that she is overdressed for the community. The community members assume that she is rich, and Zora attempts to dispel that assumption—a label of “rich” would reinforce her role as an outsider. Zora narrates, “I looked about and noted the number of bungalow aprons and even the rolled down paper bags on the heads of several women. I did look different and resolved to fix
all that no later than the next morning” (90). Zora develops a persona to maintain in front of the community members, distinct from her narrative voice and from Hurston’s external authorial presence.

Hurston further builds on this Zora persona for the community by utilizing dialect in Zora’s speech. She attempts to refute her assumed wealth by saying, “Oh, Ah ain’t got doodley squat. . . . Mah man brought me dis dress de las’ time he went to Jacksonville. We wuz sellin’ plenty stuff den and makin’ good money. Wisht Ah had dat money now” (90). She relies on the community’s own colloquialisms and dialect in order to develop a connection with them. At the same time, Zora’s shift between spoken and narrative language, along with the authorial Hurston’s manipulation of these language layers, simultaneously shows respect for the authenticity of dialect while emphasizing the constructed nature of this very dialect, as her character moves among these various voices. Such multi-language layered moments emphasize Gates’s argument for Black tradition as “double-voiced.” At the same time, Hurston further expands this double-voiced lens through not only creating an external (white) and internal (Black) layering of voices, but also through giving voice to the intersectionality of the cultural, class, and regional interactions that are part of the New Negro experience and yet underrepresented and, as Wright’s review shows, highly controversial.

Hurston’s development of multi-layered voices among author, narrator, and community personae in *Mules and Men* parallels similar trends within her fiction. One such focus toward authenticity (and her exploration of social context and constructions
through language) is in Hurston’s reliance on dialect for the dialogue of all characters within the short stories “Sweat” and “Muttsy.” This use of dialect enables Hurston to unify her fictional community through race, class, and region, and thus focus more directly on the intra-community relationships and conflicts. Several writers, including Thurman, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, also incorporated dialect and slang into their characters’ dialogue, with Carl Van Vechten even including a slang “Glossary of Negro Words and Phrases” at the end of his novel *Nigger Heaven*. Hurston’s own use of dialect is noteworthy for its heavy emphasis within her works, often incorporated into all of the characters’ dialogue. As an anthropologist, Hurston was fascinated by dialect, seeing the complexity of communities within each dialectical nuance. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Hurston contends, “There are so many quirks that belong only to certain localities that nothing less than a volume would be adequate” fully to explore each community’s dialectical uniqueness (68). Throughout each of her literary and anthropological works, Hurston is careful to ground such dialectical portrayals in regional, community, and class contexts, depicting nuances of dialect often unaddressed by other Harlem Renaissance writers.

Despite many authors’ incorporation of dialect into their works, its use within literature remained controversial. Dialect in literature and performance had a history of negative connotations. For instance, it was often used by white writers and in blackface minstrel performances to reinforce racial stereotypes. Gavin Jones examines the complex social significance of literary dialect in *Strange Talk: The Politics of Dialect Literature in*
Jones notes the increased popularity in dialect literature during the late 1800s, observing that such popularity was often linked to racist portrayals and a reinforcement of racial hierarchies. He explains that dialect in popular culture was used as “a claim to authority, not just over the quality of another’s speech but over the nature of a dominant reality. . . . The misrepresentation of African-American dialect, for example, was a popular means of encoding racist beliefs in black intellectual inferiority” (10). Through such social and artistic portrayals, dialect was often linked to negative racial stereotypes and thus tended to be avoided by New Negro writers.

Hurston was a noteworthy exception to this trend. In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” she critiques white and minstrel misusage of dialect, noting the writers’ and performers’ inaccuracies. Noting that this dialect has no connection to reality, she argues that “If we are to believe the majority of writers of Negro dialect and burnt-cork artists, Negro speech is a weird thing, full of ‘ams’ and ‘Ises.’ Fortunately, we don’t have to believe them. We may go directly to the Negro and let him speak for himself” (67). While many writers and performers relied on stereotypes, Hurston strove to portray community nuances and realism within her incorporation of dialect. As Jones notes, the trends in caricatured dialect existed in conjunction with the works of artists like Hurston, who utilized dialect as a form of realism (6). His claim that “dialect can be a form of political resistance in itself” is exemplified in Hurston’s works (213). Through such incorporation of dialect, Hurston portrays the power of Gates’s “double-voiced” text in giving voice to Black experiences. At the same time, much of her social “resistance” was
not focused on interracial tensions but was instead directed against opposing perspectives in the New Negro movement. Gates notes such opposing perspectives between Hurston and Wright, describing the authors’ positions as “a problematic of representation, . . . opposed notions of . . . the very sign of blackness” (Signifying 182). Hurston’s thematic choices and rhetorical styles placed her in direct opposition to other Black artists and race leaders of the time. At the same time, in portraying such themes and styles, she encourages a re-reading of the New Negro, extending the social dialogue to incorporate other, often underrepresented, voices.

Hurston’s strongest arguments arise through her ability to deconstruct assumed identity norms. These techniques arise not only through her fiction, but also through her non-fiction work, as she addresses trends in the New Negro movement toward unified portrayals of “the Negro.” In “Seeing the World as It Is,” Hurston’s controversial eliminated chapter from her autobiography Dust Tracks on a Road, Hurston argues, “Anybody who goes before a body and purports to plead for what ‘The Negro’ wants, is a liar and knows it. Negroes want a variety of things and many of them diametrically opposed” (251). She notes that there is “no single Negro nor no single organization” who can speak for the race because it is impossible singularly to encompass such varied perspectives (251). Hurston’s own work focuses on giving voice to perspectives often silenced, through class, region, and gender. To this aim, Hurston focused many of her

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9 “Seeing the World as It Is” was the intended final chapter of Hurston’s autobiography. However, at the last moment it was deemed too controversial and was removed from the original 1942 edition of Dust Tracks on a Road (Bordelon 20).
fictional works on lower-class characters, often from rural settings. Unlike other prominent women authors such as Larsen and Jessie Fauset, who focused on women’s issues through middle-class perspectives, Hurston highlights the significance of class and regional contexts in her exploration of gender constructs. Like many writers, Hurston struggles to reconcile her views promoting folk heritage with the constructed nature and diversity of identities such as race, class, and gender. However, these struggles lead to impressive storytelling techniques in works like “Sweat” and “Muttsy,” which encourage a deeper questioning of the social frameworks upon which the stories and characters are built.

Similar to Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Hurston uses her short stories “Sweat” and “Muttsy” as forums through which to examine marriage as a (potentially flawed) social convention rather than an assumed role for women. While the New Woman feminist trend in the 1920s opened opportunities for women to work outside the home and remain single for a longer period of time, the enforced social expectation was for women to marry and for that role as wife to then become the epitome of their identity. Much like the cult of true womanhood, the New Woman role and the social acceptability for these women joining the work force was also grounded distinctly in the middle-class. Lower class women had been in the work force for centuries, obliged to work in order to survive. Yet, these same gendered expectations were imposed upon their lives. Lower class women and women of color were held to the “true womanhood” standard of femininity, though the very definition made it impossible for these women to achieve that
social label of “true” womanhood. As the New Negro movement took up these same social definitions of femininity, the definitions were then framed as the “ideal” New Negro woman, resulting in the same social exclusion of some women’s experiences.

In her own novels, Larsen focuses on middle-class experiences for Black women and examines the ways in which those women’s identities are forced into socially-defined roles through such social expectations as the promoted New Negro identity. Within this New Negro identity, women, when mentioned, were expected to fulfill the role of wifely supporter for their husbands’ “true” racial work. As is described by New Negro leaders such as Paul Laurence Dunbar, Katherine Tillman, and Alice Dunbar Nelson, this role of wife was idealized as the most effective way for New Negro women to support the race work of the men, as these men fought for racial equality. Historically, Black women were stereotyped as unfeminine and incapable of fulfilling the standard (white) ideals of true womanhood. In reaction to these historic stereotypes, the New Negro movement encouraged very traditional roles for Black women (based on the cult of true womanhood’s definition of an ideal woman) in order to negate these racial stereotypes.

Of course, as was consistently a problem with the New Negro identity, defining women’s gender roles in essence restricted women to those roles and silenced the experiences of those women who did not fit within such definitions. In *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Larsen explores the ways in which women’s sexuality and identity exists beyond the confines of their expected roles as wives. In her own works, Hurston goes a step further, highlighting lower class women’s lives which tend to be almost entirely
erased from the New Negro conversation. These women’s voices are silenced from the
debate, much as they tend to be silenced within the gendered power structures of
marriage. Through “Sweat” and “Muttsy,” Hurston explores this social silencing and
gives voice to this often unacknowledged gap in the New Negro portrayal of women.

In contrast to New Negro writers’ common focus on interracial conflicts within
their writing, Hurston often shifted thematic focus away from such conflicts. Hurston’s
texts highlight a strong understanding of and engagement with race issues; however,
shifting textual focus away from these issues enabled Hurston to highlight often under-
acknowledged themes within the New Negro movement. One technique to accomplish
this shift in focus away from race conflict is Hurston’s emphasis on intraracial story
structures. While race was a clear focus within her works, her decision often to erase
whites from the stories or note them only in minor roles enabled Hurston to explore her
characters’ many other struggles, shifting interracial conflict to a background issue.
While this thematic technique contrasts with many New Negro writers’ prominent
focuses on race conflict, Hurston was not alone in deciding to focus on intraracial rather
than interracial storylines in her texts. Among many other writers, Thurman shows a
similar thematic decision in *The Blacker the Berry*, as he explores intraracial gender,
class, and color bias through his portrayal of Emma Lou.

At the same time, Hurston’s intraracial techniques in stories like “Sweat” are
particularly noteworthy, as she removes white characters from the storyline while
maintaining white influence through their symbolic representation in the laundry Delia is
forced constantly to wash. Bakhtin discusses these multiple dialogic meanings within language as a “verbal-ideological” force (272), reflecting both the unified language definitions and the heteroglossia. Hurston relies on this heteroglossia to subvert readers’ expectations for the textual language, imposing new meaning onto the reader’s “verbal-ideological” world. She relegates white characters to vaguely referenced roles external to the story, de-emphasizing the Black-white race relations that were consistently a prominent theme within the works of other Harlem Renaissance writers. At the same time, Hurston utilizes objects within the story as heteroglot symbols encompassing multiple meanings in order to reference white influence over the characters’ lives. As Bakhtin explains, “The dialectics of the object are interwoven with the social dialogue surrounding it” (278). By emphasizing the power the piles of white laundry hold over Delia’s exhausting days, Hurston interweaves social implications into that object. Through this technique, Hurston denies the reader a unified “verbal-ideological” world to rely upon. Instead, she encourages a destabilizing, multi-layered reading of the objects and language throughout the text.

In addition to Hurston’s subtle references to the white world’s influence through the laundry in the story, she occasionally incorporates more direct references to the characters’ relationship with external white communities. However, these white characters remain nameless and faceless, strictly alluded to in the story without a direct presence. Through such decisions, Hurston emphasizes the racial and class divisions that isolate the communities from each other, while the race and class social hierarchy ensures
that this external white community maintains a presence of power over Delia’s and Sykes’s lives. While this power is clear in Delia’s own continuous, exhausting laundering of white clothes, she also relies on this same external power as a threat to use against her husband. For instance, when Sykes threatens Delia, she retaliates, “Ah’m goin’ tuh de white folks bout you, mah young man, de very nex’ time you lay yo’ han’s on me” (43). The “white folks” represent an external power—an authority with which Delia can threaten Sykes. However, it is unlikely that Delia would actually go to the whites for help. The “white folks” serve as an effective threat, reflecting the racial hierarchies under which Sykes has no power to protect himself. At the same time, such a threat is not an actual viable option for Delia to carry out. These same racial power hierarchies deny Delia any voice or agency in gaining help from the external white society.

These vague, external white characters are never portrayed showing support for Delia in her troubles. Rather, they are the cause of much of her exhaustion, as she describes her life as “Sweat, sweat, sweat! Work and sweat, cry and sweat, pray and sweat!” (40). Sharon L. Jones notes the social significance of these racial and gender relationships: “The representation of Delia in ‘Sweat’ illustrates Hurston’s deft portrayal of a black woman whose sweat remains unappreciated by the ones she labors for—her husband and the whites in her community” (84). Delia’s social position is reinforced throughout the story by the piles of laundry surrounding her. They represent her racial
and class position as subordinate to the neighboring white community and provide ammunition for Sykes to reinforce Delia’s subordinate role to him as his wife.

These social relationships are significant influences on Delia’s perspective and actions throughout the story. In his analysis of “Sweat,” Myles Raymond Hurd argues that Delia’s passivity is a consistent theme in the story, claiming that Delia should have gone to white authorities for help in her abusive marriage. However, Hurd does not address the white world’s role in Delia’s life. While Delia threatens Sykes with retaliation through the “white folks,” it is a baseless threat—Delia will receive no support from the white world that relates to her solely through her washing white laundry. Hurd’s evidence for Delia’s passivity does not address Delia’s own social position: “She could have alternatively demanded that Sykes leave her home, sued him for divorce, or notified white authorities in adjacent Maitland of his being a spousal abuser” (9). Such a reading ignores the emotional manipulation inherent in domestic abuse and disregards the gendered, class, and racial realities of the time. As a lower class Black woman, Delia has no social power. Delia can no more go to the white folks for help than she can receive help from her surrounding community, as I discuss later.

The white folks are a faceless, external force, represented solely through their white laundry surrounding Delia—the “sweat” of Delia’s days. Suzanne D. Green examines this role for whites outside the storyline. Whites are the “higher power” Delia evokes against Sykes but who “also illustrates that when Delia transcends the Otherness that her relationship with Sykes implies, she will still be in a marginalized position which
she will have to address” (Green 114). These external power structures are vague reminders of the racial hierarchies influencing the characters’ everyday lives; however, Hurston is careful to relegate these structures to background symbolism, concentrating on Delia, Sykes, and their surrounding community as the central focus of the story.

Hurston’s decision to utilize laundry rather than characters to represent the white folks enables her to maintain a symbolic representation of external racial forces while emphasizing the separation between such forces and the everyday lives within the Black community. In describing Delia’s washing, Hurston consistently describes the clothing through specific references to the “white things” (40, 44). Ostensibly referring to the color of the washing, these choices of description carry a more complex racial and class symbolism within the text. The white characters’ lives are entirely separate from those of the Black community, which underscore that Delia going to the white folks for help is a mere symbolic threat. Instead, racial and class lines are reinforced through the existence of the white laundry, as it permeates Delia’s daily routine and stands as a central topic in Delia’s and Sykes’s relationship.

Many critics argue that Delia’s work as a laundress for whites is the reason for Sykes’s anger toward her. Robert E. Hemenway and Kathryn Lee Seidel describe Sykes as “emasculated,” while Wilfred D. Samuels argues that Sykes’s “manhood . . . [is] debased” by Delia’s job as a laundress for whites (Hemenway 71; Seidel 112; Samuels 247). These critics use Sykes’s destruction of Delia’s laundry and the couple’s consistent fights as evidence for this claim. However, such an assumption does not fully address
Sykes’s pleasure gained through continual emotional and physical abuse of Delia or his comfort in claiming Delia’s work for his own benefit.

Seidel argues that Sykes feels emasculated yet then uses Sykes’s assumption of ownership over Delia’s belongings as evidence of such emasculation. Seidel claims, 

[Sykes] is rebellious against Delia whom he feels controls him by denying him the house he feels ought to be his; his only reason for this assertion is that he is a man and Delia is his wife. Thus, the economics of slavery in “Sweat” becomes a meditation on marriage as an institution that perpetuates the possession of women for profit. Indeed, Sykes is the slaveholder here; he does not work, he is sustained by the harsh physical labor of a black woman, he relies on the work of another person to obtain his own pleasure . . . He regards Delia’s property and her body as his possessions to be disposed of as he pleases. (113)

However, such an argument for Sykes as the symbolic slaveholder, profiting from Delia’s work, opposes Seidel’s earlier argument that Sykes reacts against Delia due to his emasculation by her work. Lillie P. Howard similarly makes a problematic leap in judgment from Sykes’s apparent racial emasculation via the white folks’ laundry to his desire to find a more “dependent” woman. Howard argues, “Whether [Delia] needs Sykes at all is questionable, and perhaps he senses this and looks elsewhere for someone who does need him” (67). In each case, the critic seeks out a motivation behind Sykes’s abuse of Delia and his relationship with his mistress. Understandably, these critics want to find the emotional reasons for Sykes’s behavior. However, as the story shows, Sykes’s choices cannot be easily explained as racial and gendered emasculation through Delia’s work as a laundress. Rather, Hurston portrays Sykes as manipulating Delia through her work, not as Sykes himself being affected by her work.
Sykes is skilled in emotional manipulation—he recognizes what techniques will most effectively harm Delia. For example, in the scene often quoted by critics as evidence of Sykes’s “emasculating” tactics, Sykes tells Delia, “Ah done tole you time and again to keep them white folks’ clothes outa dis house” (40). However, immediately before this comment, Sykes attempts to goad Delia into a reaction, scaring her with a bull whip. He then tells her, “You sho is one aggravatin’ nigger woman!” (40). Delia refuses to respond to his taunts, turning her back on him to do the laundry. Sykes “picked up a whip and glared down at her” (40). Only then, when Delia refuses to give Sykes the reaction he desires, does Sykes focus in on the “white folks’ clothes” as an apparent reason for his anger. Sykes takes out his rage on the clothes, kicking them, “and now stood in her way truculently, his whole manner hoping, praying, for an argument” (40). Such evidence does not exemplify Sykes’s emasculation. While Sykes’s anger and bravado could reflect emasculation, they could also reflect narcissism and abusive tendencies. Hurston offers no evidence for deeper psychological insight into Sykes’s actions. As the scene above exemplifies, critics’ apparent evidence for this reading of Sykes does not acknowledge the characters’ surrounding conversation. Such scenes instead highlight Sykes’s persona as an abusive husband as he gains pleasure in inflicting misery on his wife. Throughout the short story, Hurston remains focused on Delia’s own inner struggles with the abusive relationship. She never incorporates an examination of Sykes’s actions; instead, she portrays him as the evil counterpart to Delia’s goodness.
Through her portrayal of Delia’s and Sykes’s relationship, Hurston creates a subversive text that forces a re-evaluation of gender roles in marriage, religion, and broader society. Sykes takes advantage of the social power given to him as Delia’s husband. As his use of the bullwhip highlights, Sykes uses Delia’s fear of snakes constantly to torture her, deriving a sadistic joy from his ability to control Delia’s emotions. When Sykes can elicit the desired reaction from her (fear, anger, misery), then he has won. He clearly does not love her, and he consistently beats her and sleeps with other women. However, their initial courtship reflects a traditional romance, with Sykes bringing “flowers” and Delia fulfilling her role in the romance by “[bringing] love to the union” (41). Both Delia and Sykes play their expected role within gendered courtship, leading to marriage. In portraying the pair’s miserable, abusive marriage, Hurston highlights the constructedness of such an assumed “natural” gendered relationship in their marriage. In their courtship, Delia and Sykes fulfilled their socially sanctioned roles. However, as Hurston notes, the idealized romance that Delia and Sykes portray has no relationship to the realities of their marriage.

Hurston uses the townspeople’s gossip as a lens through which to examine the devolution of Sykes’s and Delia’s relationship, from the traditional romantic courtship to the abusive marriage. One townsperson notes the extreme change in Sykes since the couple’s early courtship: “He useter eat some mighty big hunks uh humble pie tuh git dat lil’ ‘oman he got. She wuz ez pretty ez a speckled pup! He useter be so skeered uh losin’ huh, she could make him do some parts of a husband’s duty” (41). Through their
storytelling, the townspeople offer the reader an insightful perspective on the history of the couple’s relationship.

Hurston portrays the community itself as having a central role within the storytelling, if not the story, of Delia’s and Sykes’s relationship. Hurd describes these townspeople as a Greek chorus within the story who offer background information and “analyze Sykes’s faults in vituperative moral terms” (12). While she disputes the label of Greek chorus, Seidel agrees with Hurd’s analysis of the townspeople, viewing them as the moral judgment of Sykes’s actions (115). The townspeople stand as this moral judgment through their storytelling, as they gossip about Delia’s and Sykes’s lives.

Elijah Moseley, a neighbor, notes Sykes’s abuse of Delia: “Too much knockin’ will ruin any ‘oman. He done beat huh ‘nough tuh kill three women” (41). Within the marriage, Sykes maintains power and control through his role of husband; through this portrayal, Hurston reflects gender hierarchies while subverting the assumed “natural” role of such hierarchies. Continuing the gossip over Delia’s and Sykes’ marriage, Joe Clarke attempts to define the downfall that has occurred within the couple’s marriage. He notes,

Taint no law on earth dat kin make a man be decent if it aint in ‘im. There’s plenty men dat takes a wife lak dey do a joint uh sugar-cane. It’s round, juicy, an’ sweet when dey gits it. But dey squeeze an’ grind, squeeze an’ grind an’ wring every drop uh pleasure dat’s in ‘em out. When dey’s satisfied dat dey is wrung dry, dey treats ‘em jes lak dey do a cane-chew. Dey throws ‘em away. (42)

Delia has fulfilled the roles set out for her by society. She had a traditional courtship romance, and she now faithfully supports her husband through their marriage. However,
the dysfunction that exists within that marriage helps Hurston highlight the flaws in promoting such a marriage role for women as an idealized, enforced social expectation.

While the townspeople serve as moral judgment against Sykes’s actions, their role extends beyond that of a Greek chorus, which remains passively external to the storyline. Instead, the community is much more dynamically involved in the characters’ lives. Seidel notes, the townspeople serve as an additional lens through which to view Delia’s and Sykes’s relationship, creating a “dialogue between the narrator and the townspeople, the result of which is a double focus upon central characters” (115). However, Hurston’s layering of perspective moves well beyond the integration of the townspeople as a storytelling frame. She effectively creates multilayered perspectives within the storytelling, with each layer offering new insights into the characters.

Such distinctions are clear through both the perspectives and the language used at the different narrative levels. Hurston develops her characters through the use of dialect in their dialogue, while she distinguishes the narrative voice from that dialect. Hurston’s narrative voices, both within her non-fiction and fiction, reflect traditional academic and literary rhetoric. These layered character, community, narrator, and authorial voices create a Bakhtinian heteroglot dialogue, with various social influences portrayed through each perspective. Mae Gwendolyn Henderson examines this technique of layering voices common among Black women writers in her article “Speaking in Tongues.” Henderson expands on Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia to describe the levels of mediation and varied contexts encompassed in the writers’ rhetorical choices. She explains,
“Heteroglossia describes the ability to speak in multiple languages of public discourse. If glossolalia suggests private, nonmediated, nondifferentiated univocality, heteroglossia connotes public, differentiated, social, mediated, dialogic discourse” (22). Henderson argues that Black women authors navigate this race and gender social mediation through such heteroglossia techniques, creating this “dialogic discourse” as a response to and subversion of these social influences. Hurston incorporates varied perspectives and rhetorical techniques within her text, acknowledging the social mediation in which she must work and simultaneously subverting those mediated expectations through these layering techniques.

Through developing multi-layered rhetorical voices of characters, townspeople, narrator, and author, Hurston develops a complex dialogue among the levels of narrative. For example, in the laundry scene described above, Sykes’s comments to Delia focus on his anger toward racial and class roles that force Delia to work as a washerwoman for white folks. The townspeople offer further context, describing Sykes’s own connection to white communities through previous jobs and his gambling habit. The narrator highlights Sykes’s abusive desires and his use of the white laundry as a method for evoking a reaction from Delia. Hurston places these contextual perspectives in dialogue with each other, encouraging a complex reading of the characters and the overarching gender, race, and class contexts influencing the characters’ perspectives.

Through such layering techniques, Hurston develops Du Bois’s concept of “double-consciousness,” as potentially opposing social pressures are placed in dialogue
within a single framework (*Souls 7*). At the same time, Hurston extends this multi-consciousness beyond the American and Negro experiences that Du Bois examines in *Souls of Black Folk*. As can be seen in “Sweat,” social contexts like gender, region, and class are all in dialogue with racial and national identities. By developing this dialogue among multiple social contexts in dialogue, Hurston effectively creates a framework of intersection between Du Bois’s double-consciousness and Bakhtin’s double-voice. In *The Signifying Monkey*, Gates applies Bakhtin’s theory of double-voice to Black writers who purposefully engage with both white expectations and Black traditions within their works (110-13). While Du Bois’s double-consciousness focuses on the inner struggle for identity within opposing social influences, Hurston’s own double-voicedness, through her thematic and rhetorical structuring of the text, helps her develop a response to and subversion of these social influences.

Hurston uses her literature to develop these moments of intersectionality among the text’s multiple voices as well as the multiple cultural, racial, class, and regional contexts in which she is engaging. She skillfully maneuvers through these distinct voices, exploring and giving voice to rural Southern experiences as well as individual, diverse perspectives through the characters. At the same time, she is writing within the New Negro movement, with much of her audience viewing her work through a Northern, urban, middle and upper class context. The narrator and authorial layers of the text enable Hurston to distance herself from the dialect and experiences portrayed through the characters, as she simultaneously portrays traditional literary tone and style throughout
the text. Hurston’s multi-layered narrative voices, dialects, and rhetorical choices enable her to highlight her characters’ experiences while effectively contextualizing those experiences for a culturally external audience.

Hurston highlights such dialogue between the text and external social contexts through her portrayal of Delia, forced constantly to work as a washwoman in order to support herself and her husband. Her job washing clothes for white families reflects the dual position within race and class that enforces her social role. In addition, Delia’s gender and marriage to an abusive husband forces her into a subordinate, powerless position despite the fact that she funds Sykes’s life and owns their house. Her supposed monetary power is negated through such imposed social hierarchies, as Delia’s husband claims all of her belongings for his own. Sykes promises Delia’s house to his mistress, Bertha, claiming: “Sho’ you kin have dat lil’ ole house soon’s Ah kin git dat ‘oman outa dere. Everything b’longs tuh me an’ you sho’ kin have it” (42). Without power through money or property, Sykes instead utilizes his gendered social power to claim Delia’s property as his own.

These contextual layers are furthered in Hurston’s portrayal of the townspeople. This portrayal extends well beyond the role assumed by critics as solely an external Greek chorus or moral judgment. Rather, the townspeople’s very inaction highlights significant gendered issues within the story. The townspeople spend their time discussing Delia and Sykes, lamenting the abuse they know occurs, but they do so from a distance, refusing to step in to help stop the abuse. Green notes this inaction, arguing:
“Delia is no more of a woman to the men at the store than she is to her husband. She is an object to pass the time talking about, nothing more. No meaningful interaction takes place between the two, and Delia is in no way part of their community” (116). Green highlights this significant distancing between Delia and the community. As the object of their storytelling, Delia is often discussed, which offers the reader the townspeople’s moral judgments of her marriage, yet she is never helped. When Hurd emphasizes Delia’s passivity and lists the escapes from marriage that Delia “could have” taken, he does not acknowledge this lack of support in her surrounding life (9). The townspeople stand as storytellers and voyeurs intrigued by Delia’s life, but they do not step in as a support system for her.

However, Green’s point that Delia has lost her role as “a woman” is problematic. She cites Delia’s apparent loss of sexual desirability, as the town men note, “It’s too bad” that Delia is not the pretty girl she was before she married Sykes (77). However, Delia’s gender is a primary social force imprisoning her within this abusive relationship. The town men view Delia through her body, using the body’s deterioration over Delia’s hard years as a text that portrays Delia’s abuse. At the same time, such focus on the body is a gendered lens, reflecting the common social tendency to label a woman’s physicality as her identity. As Delia moves past the town men on the porch, they discuss her fading looks: “She wuz a right pretty li’l trick when [Sykes] got huh” (41). However, the men engage in no conversation with Delia herself, only nodding to her in passing; they prefer to integrate Delia as a subject in their storytelling rather than interact with Delia as a
person. Such reactions parallel a similar community distancing and gossip that Helga experiences in Copenhagen in Larsen’s *Quicksand*. Both Helga and Delia serve as objects of interest for the community. While the women serve as intriguing points of discussion and storytelling, the community members use such storytelling to maintain a voyeuristic distancing, never discussing the subjects with the women directly.

Hurston develops similar community/character relationships in her other works, including *Mules and Men* and *Their Eyes were Watching God*. In each of these texts, the community serves as a forum for storytelling, offering a new perspective on the stories being told that is similar to the perspective-layering in “Sweat.” While the community storytelling in *Mules and Men* reflects the importance of building tradition and connections through such communal sharing, the community in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* uses their storytelling as a form of judgment against other characters, similar to the communal judgment in “Sweat.” In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston begins the novel through her portrayal of this community gossip, as the townspeople comment, “What she doin’ coming back here in dem overhalls?” and “She’s ‘way too old for a boy like Tea Cake... She de one bee in doin’ wrong” (2, 3). Similar to the townspeople’s focus on Delia’s body in “Sweat,” the men focus on Janie’s “firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets... [and] her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt,” while the women note Janie’s faded, dirty clothes as “a weapon against her strength... a hope that she might fall to their level some day” (2). The community’s judgment and storytelling become one more external force the
protagonists must navigate. At the same time, Janie eventually finds strength through joining such storytelling, giving voice to her identity by sharing her story with Pheoby.

Similarly, in “Sweat,” Hurston does not distinguish the community storytelling as specifically negative or positive, but instead solely as a powerful social force. For instance, the community does not isolate Delia as the object of such communal gossip. The town men are perhaps even more interested in Sykes as a topic in their storytelling. Unlike Larsen in *Quicksand*, who utilizes the community gaze to highlight racial and gendered voyeurism through Helga’s imposed role as the exotic object, Hurston instead portrays the community gaze as both positive and negative. The community gaze stands in moral judgment of Sykes—a powerful influence within the town, as Sykes struggles find a house that will accept his mistress. Simultaneously, this communal gaze lends a powerful perspective to the storytelling itself, as the town men’s descriptions of Sykes directly influence the reader’s impression of him.

However, this same communal power is never used to help Delia. The townspeople remain impassive observers, leaving Delia to fend for herself. In using all men to represent the townspeople’s direct voice, Hurston encourages a gendered reading of this dynamic between the townspeople and Delia. Although the town men recognize the abuse Delia is trying to survive, they view it as a domestic issue between husband and his wife as his property. At one point, the men consider taking “Sykes an’ dat stray ‘oman uh his’n down in Lake Howell swamp an’ lay on de rawhide till they cain’t say ‘Lawk a’ mussy” (42). However, such talk becomes another form of storytelling,
detached from taking any action in reality. A moment later, Hurston emphasizes, “But the heat was melting their civic virtue,” so they decide to eat a watermelon instead (42). Even the discussion of action serves to highlight the town men’s inaction—their moral judgment against Sykes will not result in their supporting Delia.

At the same time, in highlighting such socially imposed roles and power structures, Hurston then emphasizes Delia’s ability to survive within that structure, celebrating the character’s strength and perseverance. Delia has faithfully played her socially expected role within her marriage, her religion, and her community. However, her life has devolved into one of daily survival. Hurston’s celebration within the story is in Delia’s ability to survive. Although Sykes “done beat huh ‘nough tuh kill three women,” Delia is still standing (41). In learning to survive, Delia has discovered a subtle form of resistance that enables her to maintain a sense of power over the situation. When Sykes initiates a fight, Delia attempts quietly, calmly, to ignore his instigations. Such calm denies Sykes the satisfaction of the fight he so desires. This is clear in the early scene in which Sykes destroys Delia’s washing, while Sykes “stood in here way truculently, his whole manner hoping, praying, for an argument. But she walked calmly around him and commenced to re-sort the things” (40). Delia recognizes Sykes’ attempt to torment her and maintains the strength needed to ignore him. In maintaining her silent calm, Delia in effect wins the battle.

Hurd uses the later bedroom scene to emphasize Delia’s passivity, when Sykes kicks Delia and threatens to beat her if she will not move over on the bed. However,
Hurd misreads the significance of the scene, focusing solely on Delia’s passivity rather than her strength, and contends that “instead of accusing him of cheating on her or engaging him in an argument, she reticently falls back to sleep” (11). Hurd does not address Delia’s “reticence” as in fact a force of resistance. Hurston emphasizes, “Delia went clear to the rail without answering [Sykes]. A triumphant indifference to all that he was or did” (41). Delia has discovered a form of power and resistance within her restrictive, powerless social role. This “triumphant indifference,” the ability to detach from the pain and fear Sykes inflicts upon her, enables Delia to define herself through something separate from her miserable marriage and her role as Sykes’s wife.

Considering Delia’s isolation from any external help during her struggles, it is surprising that critics often note Delia as a passive observer to the actions in the story rather than an agent in creating her own freedom. In analyzing Sykes’s death at the end of the story, both Howard and Hurd emphasize Delia’s passivity and instead argue for Sykes as the agent of his own demise (Zora 68; 13). Hurd further stresses Delia’s passivity throughout the story, particularly in her reaction to Sykes’s abuse. However, such apparent passivity must be read in the context of Delia’s social role, as race, class, gender, and religion all influence Delia’s position within the community and within the marriage.

Delia’s power and agency are perhaps most evident in the moments of Sykes’s death. While Howard gives agency to Sykes, arguing that “Sykes obviously deserves and brings about his fate,” Samuels and Green highlight Delia’s empowerment in the story,
with Samuels noting that Delia “kills” Sykes through her decisions (Howard, Zora 68; Samuels 247). Delia’s empowered resistance is clear in the death scene, as she silently watches Sykes walk to his death and then remains waiting, listening to him die. Hurd argues that Delia maintains Christian mercy and passivity throughout the story and explains this death scene as Delia waiting for Sykes to die because she is unable to help him: “Without a guiding light Delia has to wait until dawn to approach the window to look for him and Old Scratch. . . . Therefore, she is rendered powerless to rescue Sykes lest she jeopardize herself” (13). However, such an interpretation does not address Delia’s decision to initiate and then wait to observe Sykes’s death.

After Delia flees from the snake, she calms herself and begins to think. Hurston notes, “With this, stalked through her a cold, bloody rage. Hours of this. A period of introspection, a space of retrospection, then a mixture of both. Out of this an awful calm” (44). Delia’s “cold bloody rage” and “awful calm” emphasize her conscious choice to remain at home, waiting for Sykes to enter her trap. She watches Sykes enter the treacherous house, then descends her hiding place “without fear” and “crouched beneath the low bedroom window” to await Sykes’s death (44). Delia muses, “Dat ol’ scratch is woke up now!” and waits for the scream that will come when the snake strikes (44). Although Delia clearly uses religion to try and find strength to survive her life, that religion does not leave her a passive, merciful victim of circumstances. Delia shows agency (a subjectivity denied to her by some critics) in her decision to let Sykes walk into the house and in her decision to stay and listen to him slowly die instead of going for
help. Rosalie Murphy Baum notes this contradiction: “In turning her back on Sykes, Delia denies the folk belief that one must alleviate the suffering of those who die hard or be haunted by the person’s spirit and denies the Christian belief in mercy” (101). Hurd and Baum maintain opposing stances on Hurston’s portrayal of Christian passivity and mercy. However, the story’s significance does not necessarily lie in Delia’s belief structures.

Instead, the religious significance seems based in the story’s gendered reinterpretation of Christian mythology. Much of New Negro fiction is grounded in realism. However, unlike many of her contemporaries, Hurston relies on folk realism within her works, incorporating the mythic and symbolic into this realism through her use of folktale thematic and rhetorical techniques. She develops “Sweat” as an intriguing intersection of these differing styles. Hurston layers the story’s surface realism with mythic and symbolic elements, using Delia’s relationship symbolically to represent the Adam and Eve myth. Paralleling Delia’s abusive marriage with this symbolic twist on the traditional Adam and Eve narrative enables Hurston subtly to expand her discussion beyond the surface narrative and into a broader analysis of women’s imposed social roles. The recurring snake symbolism draws an intriguing connection between the long-suffering Delia and the sinful Eve of mythology, encouraging a re-reading of Eve’s supposedly sinful actions.

Through her descriptions of folk narratives, such as those collected in *Mules and Men*, Hurston notes these folk tales’ tradition of re-interpreting the Bible and in the
process subverting the racial and gender hierarchies traditionally imposed by religious structures at the time. One such folk tale in *Mules and Men* re-inscribes the religious origins of men’s and women’s power. The storyteller narrates that when God gives man strength to overpower woman, woman goes to the Devil to learn how to control man (52). In this story, the Devil and the woman are smarter than God and the man, resulting in the woman’s control over the man’s life. Similarly, in John de Conquer stories, John often outsmarts the Devil and John’s white master. Folk tales like these destabilize social power hierarchies and assumed “natural” racial and gender roles through a re-reading of religion. Hurston utilizes this same folktale style of destabilization in her portrayal of Delia’s marriage as a re-reading of the Adam and Eve mythology.

Delia’s idyllic Garden of Eden, the home and garden that she has created for herself, is the setting of her marital abuse. Delia has no hope for her marriage, ruminating that it is “too late for everything except her little home. She had built it for her old days, and planted one by one the trees and flowers there. It was lovely to her, lovely” (41). This home that Delia has built and dotingly tended exists outside of the pain of her marriage. It is a single piece of loveliness that represents the identity she still maintains outside of the “dutiful wife” role abused and exploited by Sykes. Yet, it is this same house that Sykes deems his own and promises as a gift to his mistress. Delia is willing to suffer great abuses from Sykes, but she will fight to the death to protect her home from him. It is in this protection of her Eden that Delia shows strong physical resistance against Sykes. Delia yells, “Looka heah, Sykes, you done gone too fur...
Mah sweat is done paid for this house and Ah reckon Ah kin keep on sweatin’ in it” (40). Delia then seizes an iron skillet and prepares to fight Sykes. Her sudden aggression “cowed [Sykes] and he did not strike her as he usually did” (40). Unprepared for Delia’s empowerment, Sykes quickly backs down.

Seidel notes the significance of Delia’s home as a symbolic Eden, emphasizing “the archetypal undertone of the story, that of the Edenic place. Hurston presents Delia’s portion of Eden/Eatonville as a female-created place, ordered and beautiful because of the efforts of a woman” (116). By creating Delia’s home as a symbolic Eden, Hurston generates a thematic and rhetorical layering, as a real space, Eatonville, layers over a fictional space, Delia’s home, which layers over a symbolic space, Eden. Such layering blurs the boundaries between realism and the mythic, while imbuing the mythic symbolism with more social significance through its interconnections with reality.

At the same time, Hurston further complicates the mythology through this interconnection with reality. As Seidel notes, Delia’s Edenic home represents a “female-created place.” However, this Eden exists in a social context in which the female-created place is under the ownership of men. Although Delia built the house and her work pays for the house, Sykes’s role as her husband entitles him to ownership. Yet, Delia, who accepts all of his other abuses, refuses to acknowledge the power he claims over her own precious house—the one part of her life uncorrupted by Sykes. She stands firm, arguing, “That ole snaggle-toothed black woman you runnin’ with aint comin’ heah to pile up on mah sweat and blood. You aint paid for nothin’ on this place, and Ah’m gointer stay
right heah till Ah’m toted out foot foremost” (41). Delia’s hard work and sweat have helped her achieve this single piece of happiness within her life, and she is willing to fight to the death to keep it.

Significantly, Sykes’s attempt to take the house from Delia by killing her (reflective of her claim to stay until “toted out foot foremost”) as well as Delia’s retaliation all revolve around the snake—a symbolic connection to the Garden of Eden. Samuels focuses on the snake’s significance within the story, noting, “The serpent is identified with Sykes’s evil ways, and throughout the story the imagery associated with the man evokes sinuosity” (72). Hemenway further expands upon this relationship among the snake, Sykes, and evil, incorporating a Freudian reading of the snake as phallus. Noting Hurston’s portrayal of Sykes’s snake and bullwhip, Hemenway argues, “The phallic resonates in this imagery, and the imagistic tension illustrates how Hurston’s best writing assumes meaning at a variety of levels. Delia is frightened of Sykes not only because of his cruelty; he also represents male sexuality ominous in its desire” (73). While the phallic imagery is valid, Hemenway’s argument that this phallic symbolism represents male sexuality as “ominous” downplays Delia’s own sexuality. Delia desires the love and sexuality that is missing from their marriage. Alone in bed, Delia “drew herself up in to an unhappy little ball in the middle of the big feather bed,” telling herself that it is too late “to hope for [the] love” that he offers his mistresses (41). Rather than fear Sykes’s sexuality, she misses it. Similar to Helga’s desires in Larsen’s *Quicksand*, Delia’s own sexual and romantic desires are unfulfilled.
To read the snake solely as a symbol of Sykes and a reflection of evil is to negate the dual purpose of the snake within the story. At first, the snake represents Delia’s fears and Sykes’s abuse. However, by the end of the tale, the snake represents Delia’s own power rather than Sykes’s. At the moment Delia embraces her own agency and power when she plots Sykes’s death, the snake’s role within the story shifts to represent this feminine power. Green notes this symbolic shift, from Sykes’s original intentions to Delia embracing and re-appropriating the very source of power that Sykes previously attempted to use against her. Green argues that while Sykes relies on the snake as a tool “to bring about [Delia’s] death just as the serpent in Eden brings about the fall and subsequent death of Adam and Eve[, in] ‘Sweat,’ the snake is simultaneously a positive, empowering symbol, as it brings about justice rather than undermining it” (111). This “justice,” the death of Sykes, is debated among Howard, Hurd, Seidel, and many other critics, as Delia’s culpability in the murder forces the reader to question Delia’s apparent saintliness. However, the tale’s morality is perhaps not as significant as Delia’s own transition into empowerment and her subsequent freedom.

Initially, Delia fears the snake and does her best to remove its presence from her life. She deems it “ol’ satan,” simultaneously denoting her fear of this reptilian tormenter while highlighting the snake’s role as a symbolic representation of Satan within the Adam and Eve myth. The snake is a danger to both Sykes and Delia, and yet unlike the mythology, it is Sykes who is seduced by the snake’s promises—the removal of Delia from Sykes’s life so he can claim her house, Eden, for his own. However, Delia foils
Sykes’ plans, as she evades the snake and then utilizes this same weapon against Sykes himself. Samuels argues that “Only when Sykes brings the snake into her private Garden of Eden does Delia’s love turn to hate” (248). However, there is no love in their marriage long before the snake arrives, if the love ever actually existed. The snake is not the cause of their troubles, merely the catalyst that initiates the relationship’s end.

This re-reading of roles within the Adam and Eve myth interrogates the gendered portrayal of Eve as the original sinner. In “Sweat,” Sykes is the sinner, while Delia is the victim-turned-avenger. The couple’s marriage is flawed from the start, not corrupted by the serpent. Such a re-reading of the myth extends Hurston’s social commentary well beyond the couple’s abusive relationship, addressing broader power structures and imposed identity roles. By creating a re-evaluation of the gender roles in original sin, along with the racial and gender power structures that Christian doctrine was commonly used to reinforce, Hurston uses the storyline effectively to subvert these assumed social “norms.”

Like Delia, imprisoned in her abusive relationship, Pinkie in the short story “Muttsy” cannot seem to escape her gender role’s fate of marriage. However, while Delia empowers herself in “Sweat” and seems to find freedom from her imprisoning relationship by the end of the story, Hurston does not allow Pinkie such an escape. Very few critics have analyzed Hurston’s short story “Muttsy,” and those who have tend to view the story strictly as a courtship between the characters Pinkie and Muttsy (Hemenway 30; Howard, Zora 66; Samuels 251). Most often, critics focus on Muttsy
winning Pinkie’s love and then returning to gambling after their marriage. However, such an analysis does not acknowledge Hurston’s clear critique of gender power structures through her rhetorical development of the story.

The title of the story, “Muttsy,” is an early hint to readers that Hurston will be subverting expectations. Although the majority of the story focuses on Pinkie’s thoughts, actions, and fears, Hurston names the story after the male character who pursues (and eventually claims) Pinkie. This rhetorical decision foreshadows Hurston’s critiques of gender power structures throughout the story. Although the plot focuses on Pinkie, the young woman is constantly being controlled by Muttsy, who attempts to claim ownership of her. Hurston’s title choice highlights the male voice controlling the story, and through this technique, Hurston emphasizes the constructed, problematic nature of such gender hierarchies, in both literature and society.

While contemporary critics such as Hemenway and Samuels view the story as a courtship between Muttsy and Pinkie, such critiques seem to be based solely in Muttsy’s thoughts and actions rather than Pinkie’s. Throughout the story, Pinkie shows no love for Muttsy. Instead, other characters impose that emotion onto her. Ma Turner tells Pinkie, “Chile, he’s lousy wid money an’ diamon’s an’ everything—Yuh better grab him quick. Some folks has all de luck” (249). Later, Muttsy gets engaged to Pinkie by slipping a ring on her finger while she is sleeping. Muttsy assumes that this action equates to his possession of Pinkie, exclaiming, “She’s mine! . . . All mine!” (250). Pinkie consistently attempts to flee from Muttsy and Ma Turner, faking illness so she can hide in her room.
However, time and again, her own actions are ignored while the pair imposes their own desires onto her. Hurston skillfully depicts this social silencing of Pinkie, through portraying the characters as they consistently ignore Pinkie’s own perspective and through rhetorically imposing that same gender veil for the reader of the text. Du Bois describes the “veil” as a symbolic racial separation, “othering” the Black perspective from the white gaze (Souls 8). Hurston explores this same social “othering” in gender and class perspectives throughout “Muttsy.” As a poverty-stricken Black woman, Pinkie has no social power. Her voice is consistently ignored, and she is viewed through her role in service to the other characters rather than as an individual with her own perspective.

Hurston hints at a similar silencing of Janie in Their Eyes Were Watching God through the early community gossip and the court scene at the end. However, while critics such as Robert Stepto and Mary Helen Washington (166; 33) have argued that the novel reflects this gendered silencing, many other critics, including Gates, Carla Kaplan, Dolan Hubbard, and Nellie McKay argue that the thematic significance within the novel lies in Janie’s ability to voice her story, not in these moments of silencing (Signifying 214; 118; 168; 62). Kaplan claims, “The number of times when Janie is violently silenced by others testifies to the power, both potential and real, of her voice” (118). This interaction between Janie’s voice and social pressures creates a significant dialogue between Their Eyes Were Watching God and Hurston’s similar exploration of social themes but differing rhetorical decisions in “Muttsy.” While Hurston emphasizes the
social power gained through Janie’s voice in telling her story to Pheoby, she denies Pinkie this same social power in “Muttsy.” The surrounding characters speak for Pinkie, imposing their own expectations over Pinkie’s desires.

Hurston’s social and rhetorical silencing of Pinkie opens a space for Pinkie’s voice to exist within that external silencing. This technique reflects a broader cultural storytelling style, as Hurston explores in *Mules and Men*. As the narrator in *Mules and Men* discusses the difficulty in gaining access to communities’ folktales and storytelling, she notes communities’ common silencing and layering of texts when engaging with outsiders. Such social silencing reflects a Bakhtinian double-voicedness, as race, class, and community frameworks open a possibility for an internal and external storytelling to occur simultaneously within a single voice or text.

Hurston explains this double-voicedness in Black community interactions with outsiders, particularly white society: “We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn’t know what he is missing. . . . He can read my writing but he sho’ can’t read my mind” (18-19). In *Mules and Men*, Hurston utilizes lenses of race, class, and community as she explores this double-voicedness within a seeming external silencing. In “Muttsy,” she moves beyond a strictly critical exploration of the technique; instead, she rhetorically applies this layering as she incorporates both a surface text and a subversive text within the single storyline. While Hurston primarily focuses on interracial interactions through such double-voicedness in *Mules and Men*, she shifts the thematic focus in “Muttsy” to an intraracial
critique of gender, race, and class roles. Hurston’s layered storytelling technique speaks to various audiences through multiple potential frameworks, enabling simultaneous, conflicting readings of the storyline.

Hurston creates this layering of internal and external voices within “Muttsy” by developing a separation between Pinkie’s thoughts and other characters’ interpretations of her. This complex interaction between Pinkie and surrounding characters parallels Thurman’s portrayal of the external community’s social judgment over Emma Lou in The Blacker the Berry as well as Larsen’s portrayal of Helga in Quicksand, as Axel Olsen imposes his own reading onto Helga’s identity. In “Muttsy” Hurston emphasizes the significance of such social silencing of Pinkie, as Pinkie’s own perspective is ignored in favor of external views being imposed onto her. For example, Pinkie desires a job, which would offer her monetary “freedom” from her “imprisoned” position at Ma Turner’s (249). She continually asks Muttsy if he has set up the job opportunity that he promised her, reminding him of the importance of this job for her. Hurston portraits Pinkie as half-sobbing, crying out to Muttsy, “Ah wantsa job now!” (249). Muttsy dismisses Pinkie’s perspective, responding, “Ahm crazy ‘bout yuh—money no objeck” (249). Ignoring Pinkie’s own voice, Muttsy projects his own perspective onto her in assuming that Pinkie will want to be his kept woman. Further reflected in the engagement he attempts to force upon her, Muttsy creates Pinkie in his own idealized image for her—as a happy, loving, future wife; however, to emphasize Muttsy’s own controlling hand, Hurston offers the
reader no evidence of Pinkie’s attraction toward Muttsy or acceptance of his presumed future for them as a couple.

Instead, Hurston portrays Muttsy’s presumptions as an emotional and physical violation against Pinkie. When Muttsy goes upstairs to Pinkie’s room, he knows that she is “dead drunk an’ sleepin’ lak she’s buried” (249). His goal is not to speak to Pinkie, knowing that she will not wake up. Pinkie as a person is once again silenced, as she serves solely as a physical, unconscious body for Muttsy to fondle. Hurston states, “[Muttsy] blew out the match he had struck and kissed her full in the mouth, kissed her several times and passed his hand over her neck and throat and then hungrily down upon her breast. But here he drew back” (249). Hurston stops Muttsy from committing “real” rape, which may be why critics assume that Pinkie and Muttsy are in “love” (Samuels 251). However, in place of an explicit rape, Hurston portrays a symbolic rape that exemplifies Muttsy’s violation of Pinkie. Muttsy leans over Pinkie and “knelt there holding her hands so fiercely that she groaned without waking” (249-50). Pinkie’s groan of pain alludes to this symbolic rape as an undertone throughout the scene. After this violation of Pinkie’s unconscious body, Muttsy then slips a ring onto the finger of her hand, where he had just been inflicting pain, to claim Pinkie as “mine!” (250).

Pinkie’s reaction to such a violation is clear when she awakes in the morning. Realizing what Muttsy has done, Pinkie “hurled the ring across the room and leaped out of bed” (250). She then flees the house, leaving her last three dollars in the room. Pinkie is willing to live in poverty on the street rather than be obligated to Muttsy for anything.
Hemenway views this interaction as, “A gambler named Muttsy is much taken with the innocent girl, but her resistance causes him to avoid seducing her,” noting Muttsy’s decision to leave gambling as the turning point in their relationship (30). In describing the pair’s relationship as Muttsy avoiding “seducing her,” Hemenway does not address the significance of this disturbing bedroom scene and Pinkie’s subsequent flight. Pinkie’s resistance never stops Muttsy. Instead, that resistance is ignored throughout the story, as Muttsy continues with his one-sided courtship, imposing onto Pinkie her role as the betrothed.

After Pinkie flees from Muttsy, Hurston makes a rhetorical shift further to emphasize the double-voice of the text and the external silencing of Pinkie’s perspective. Previous to this moment, the reader has been privy to Pinkie’s thoughts and dialogue. By incorporating both Pinkie’s voice and Muttsy’s and Ma Turner’s interpretations of Pinkie, Hurston highlights the gender and class power structures that effectively silence Pinkie and enable Muttsy and Ma Turner to impose their own perspectives onto her. After Pinkie flees the house, Hurston extends that silencing to implicate the reader as well as the characters, as Pinkie’s own perspective is erased from the final pages of the tale.

Two weeks after Pinkie flees the house, Muttsy finds her and “seized her,” pleading his case (267). Pinkie continues walking, while Muttsy “turned and followed her; took the employment office slip from her hand and destroyed it, took her arm and held it” (267). Hurston’s description emphasizes the physical force Muttsy used to control Pinkie and to remove once again the financial freedom she so desires, as he
“destroyed” the employment office slip. Pinkie is simultaneously confined by both class and gender, while her attempt to escape from this confinement is thwarted by Muttsy. Muttsy, on the other hand, reinforces gender roles, as he expects Pinkie to assume the role as his wife.

Unlike her emphasis on Janie gaining a voice through her journey in Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston denies Pinkie that voice throughout the final scenes of “Muttsy” as she utilizes Pinkie’s enforced silence as a commentary in itself. Immediately after Muttsy “took [Pinkie’s] arm and held it,” Hurston notes, “He must have been very convincing for at 125th Street they entered a taxi that headed uptown again” (267). This single sentence encompasses Muttsy’s apparent entreaty, the couple’s re-engagement, and their marriage. Hurston confines these significant events into the brief, vague sentence, denying the reader any understanding of how or why the events occurred. Instead, she enforces a narrative distancing, offering the reader only the assumption that Muttsy “must have been very convincing.” In ignoring all of Pinkie’s previous reactions to Muttsy and in silencing Pinkie’s voice throughout the events, Hurston effectively highlights the gendered silencing that occurs through the story.

Critics of “Muttsy” seem to have entirely missed the significance of this rhetorical technique and of the earlier character interactions. Samuels, for instance, notes the characters’ relationship as a courtship where “Muttsy succeeds in winning Pinkie’s love after he promises to give up his life of gambling” (251). Both Samuels and Hemenway highlight Muttsy’s return to gambling at the end of the story as the prominent theme of
the novel, noting that marriage has failed to reform Muttsy (251; 30). However, such an interpretation erases Pinkie’s role within the novel, perpetuating the same gendered erasure that Hurston highlights in her silencing of Pinkie in the final pages. Howard focuses on the same gambling theme that Samuels and Hemenway highlight, noting: “Pinkie has, obviously, and credibly, been unable to change her husband’s ways” (Zora 66). Unlike Samuels and Hemenway, Howard does incorporate Pinkie into her own analysis of the story, but that inclusion is once again not grounded in Pinkie’s perspective as portrayed throughout the storyline. Howard argues, “That Muttsy has returned to his gambling does not particularly bode ill. Pinkie will probably have to modify her ‘likes,’ but a happy marriage between Muttsy and Pinkie still seems possible” (Zora 66). At no point in the storyline has Pinkie ever shown interest in Muttsy. The only time she manages to smile at him is when she believes he is bringing her information about a job (the one thing she desires throughout the story) (249). Therefore, it is unclear as to what evidence Howard is grounding this assumption for “a happy marriage.” None of the critics offer any evidence for their conclusions, with their entire analysis of the story typically contained within a few sentences.

Hurston’s rhetorical techniques within this short story have seemingly failed on some level, as they pass unnoticed by critics and readers. However, like her discussion of such multi-voiced storytelling in Mules and Men highlights, this layering of meaning may in fact be Hurston’s goal. Leslie W. Lewis addresses the significance of such purposeful silencing within the works of Black women writers in Telling Narratives: Secrets in
Lewis argues, “Between groups of people disparate in social status, the dominant group may hear nothing and assume silence when, in fact, members of the subordinate group are quietly whispering to one another” (13). Hurston is known for creating strong women characters whose voices are their most powerful tools. Her purposeful silencing of Pinkie stands out as an anomaly within her works. However, Hurston’s incorporation of such silencing in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, coupled with the protagonist’s resistance to this silencing, encourages a deeper exploration of Hurston’s rhetorical choices in “Muttsy.” Rachel Blau DuPlessis explores Hurston’s use of silencing in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, arguing that “The novel constructs the female hero as narrating her own silences; she is unsilencing them in the specific context of testifying to Pheoby” (107). Janie gains power over her identity by voicing her experiences, refuting the imposed social silencing. Unlike Janie, Pinkie is not allowed to address the social silencing imposed upon her. Hurston purposefully enforces this silencing through her rhetorical choices. However, that rhetorically-imposed silencing of Pinkie becomes in itself a form of social resistance—an authorial voice subverting the surface silencing by emphasizing the social power structures that create such silencing.

Through her rhetorical silencing, Hurston addresses the social biases that leave such gender, class, and racial silencing unacknowledged within the assumed “norms” of social hierarchies. Lewis addresses such social influences within the works of African American authors:
We might say that the textual keeping and telling of secrets is a way for African American authors to mark the existence of (and respond to) societal, racially inflected structures that guarantee unreliable readers who will have difficulty hearing what they are being told. (*Telling* 4)

Hurston’s rhetorical manipulation of the “Muttsy” storyline shows her clear awareness of her varied audiences. The surface courtship serves as a socially acceptable storyline for some audiences, while the subversive exploration of social silencing gives voice, and thus power, to other audiences’ experiences. In order effectively to address these multiple audiences, each carrying its own biases, Hurston skillfully subverts the surface storyline of Muttsy’s and Pinkie’s courtship through Pinkie’s opposing dialogue and the later erasure of her voice from the text. Pinkie’s gender, race, and class all impose a further social silencing upon her, as her voice is buried under the characters and narrator re-scripting her identity.

In both “Sweat” and “Muttsy,” Hurston integrates layered storytelling techniques, opening the possibility for multiple interpretations of the stories. Similar to Thurman’s portrayal of Raymond’s and Stephen’s relationship in *Infants of the Spring* and Larsen’s portrayal of Irene’s desires in *Passing*, Hurston utilizes both “Sweat” and “Muttsy” to subvert readers’ expectations, and through that, to subvert assumed social norms. While Thurman offers his protagonist a glimpse at a happy ending at the end of *The Blacker the Berry*, his pessimism at the end of *Infants of the Spring* parallels the dark conclusions to Larsen’s and Hurston’s works. Even in “Sweat,” as Delia is freed from her husband’s abuse, she remains confined by the race, class, and gender social pressures that define her difficult life of “cry and sweat” (40). In both “Sweat” and “Muttsy,” Hurston does not
offer the reader a clear solution to the social problems addressed in the stories. Instead, she uses the texts to underscore the existence of such social silencing and attempts to give voice to those perspectives often silenced. She writes against the assumption that the “ideal” New Negro woman is the upper class wife and mother commonly promoted. These New Negro constructions, through such assumptions about women’s roles, are inherently silencing women’s voices. The ambiguities and multiple potential interpretations that Hurston allows for in her texts effectively challenge that silencing.
Conclusion

As they critique and explore the overlapping social structures influencing the lives of their characters, Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston destabilize the assumed “norms” of their surrounding society, uncovering the constructed nature of such seeming absolutes of race, gender, sexuality, and other social roles. The New Negro construct, though defined differently by each member of the movement, held great social influence in encouraging Black Americans to portray the “right” kind of Negro to the outside white world. These influences are clear throughout the works of Harlem Renaissance writers. Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston show a strong awareness of such influences and develop an often antagonistic dialogue between their texts and the New Negro movement. Through this textual and social dialogue, these authors explore the constructed nature of the New Negro identity, examining the social influences being embraced, opposed, and ignored through that promoted identity.

Women’s roles within the New Negro identity clearly represent these conflicting social pressures. In an effort to oppose racial and gender stereotypes, the New Negro construct promotes women’s roles through the definition of “true” womanhood as piety, purity, submissiveness, and domesticity. Though the initial cult of true womanhood in the mid-1800s expressed racist and classist restrictions, denying “true womanhood” to women of color and women of lower classes, the New Negro movement redefined this
“feminine” framework to represent the purity and morality of New Negro women—an opposition to the pervasive racial and gender stereotypes of the time.

Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston each utilize their texts effectively to navigate among the gender and racial stereotypes of Black women’s hypersexualization as well as the New Negro movement’s opposing reinforcement of the cult of true womanhood’s “feminine” framework. Similar to his portrayal of Paul’s sexual and gender boundary-crossing in *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman unapologetically explores his female characters’ sexual desires in both *Infants* and *The Blacker the Berry*. Likely due to the increased moral expectations on their works as Black women writers, Larsen and Hurston focus more on the complexities of intersecting social pressures influencing their female characters’ sense of gender roles and sexual desires. Both Hurston and Larsen highlight the social restrictions and power hierarchies imposed upon their women characters; through an exploration of the social structures, these authors effectively destabilize such assumed “norms.” Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston give voice to these often socially silenced perspectives, and in doing so, they encourage complex analysis of both their own works and the social contexts with which the stories are in dialogue.

In *Passing*, Larsen effectively portrays sexual desires challenging social boundaries, as Irene struggles between her attraction to Clare and her attempt to maintain her class and cultural persona as a New Negro woman. Thurman similarly challenges social roles through Paul in *Infants of the Spring*, though he seems more hesitant in his subtle portrayal of Raymond’s and Stephen’s relationship. Throughout his works,
Thurman explicitly courts controversy, while Larsen and Hurston rely on far more subtle techniques in their engagement with controversial topics. At the same time, Thurman’s portrayal of Raymond and Stephen in *Infants of the Spring* hints toward subtlety similar to that employed by Larsen and Hurston. In developing a character that so closely parallels his own life, Thurman does not seem free to explore the character’s sexuality to the extent he portrays in *The Blacker the Berry*’s Alva and *Infants of the Spring*’s Paul. Such explicit portrayals of Raymond could be publicly dangerous for Thurman and may conflict with his own internalized identity—similar to the social and internal intersectionality that Thurman examines in fictional characters like Emma Lou and that Larsen portrays in Irene and Helga.

While Thurman navigates between his typical stance of courting controversy with his works and his more troubled, subtle portrayal of his own doppelgänger, Raymond, in their own works Larsen and Hurston effectively utilize the subtle rhetorical techniques that Thurman struggles with in *Infants of the Spring*. In exploring the constructed nature of social roles, Larsen’s and Hurston’s stylistic techniques help further to develop the themes with which these authors engage. In *Passing* and “Muttsy,” Larsen and Hurston use the audience’s own biases and expectations rhetorically to layer a thematic subversion of those expectations within the expected surface storylines. Each author uses the text to queer audience expectations and to highlight the constructed nature of socially imposed gender, race, and class roles. Larsen disrupts gender “norms” through her portrayal of unhappy marriage and motherhood in *Quicksand* and *Passing*. Hurston also
portrays Delia’s marriage in “Sweat” as a similar painful relationship that is slowly killing her character. Such portrayals subvert the social expectations of marriage and motherhood as women’s “natural” roles.

In *Passing* and “Muttsy,” Larsen and Hurston further destabilize these social expectations. Through her portrayal of Irene’s unacknowledged sexual desires, Larsen responds to the New Negro movement’s restrictive promotion of women’s purity while furthering her argument to explore sexuality beyond the boundaries of heterosexual desire. Through her rhetorical style in “Muttsy,” Hurston extends Larsen’s *Quicksand* argument of imposed gender objectification and power structures by using the very story structure to reflect those same social powers. By narratively silencing Pinkie, Hurston implicates the external reader in this same process of gender silencing. Through these rhetorical and thematic choices, Larsen and Hurston give voice to those perspectives being socially silenced.

Thurman and Larsen further explore these social constructions in *The Blacker the Berry* and *Quicksand*, as each author highlights intraracial social issues often left unexplored by other authors. Thurman and Larsen focus not only on social bias, but also on the characters’ internalization of those biases. While Du Bois highlighted these identity conflicts in his 1903 discussion of racial double-consciousness, Thurman and Larsen extend this theory of double-consciousness to explore varied points of contextual and identity intersectionality. Through their novels, Thurman and Larsen examine not only the conflict of racial identity addressed by Du Bois, but also the multitudinous other
identity conflicts embedded within the single identity of race. Gender, race, color, class, and region are only a few of the social contexts with which these authors are engaging, as they explore such complex contextual intersection points within their works.

While Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry* and Larsen’s *Quicksand* explore intraracial problems through the double-consciousness of their protagonists, in “Sweat,” Hurston does not imbue her protagonist Delia with that same internal racial struggle. However, while Delia does not inhabit a racial double-consciousness, she does struggle with her internalized gender and religious roles. These roles conflict with Delia’s daily survival through domestic abuse and her eventual hand in killing her husband. Unlike Larsen’s protagonist Helga at the end of *Quicksand*, Delia seems to find a sense of freedom at the end of the story, as she reconciles her internal struggles with her external destruction of both Sykes and her social role as a wife. Like Thurman’s Emma Lou at the end of *Blacker the Berry*, Delia’s freedom will likely lead to further struggles, as she is still a poor Black woman in a culture where class, race, and gender all imbue or remove social power. However, these stories’ optimistic endings are a noteworthy contrast to the cynicism in “Muttsy,” *Quicksand, Passing*, and *Infants of the Spring*, where the authors note the social problems without offering solutions or even hope for happy endings within such social structures.

Thurman’s *Infants of the Spring* seems the most explicit text in its cynical commentary about the New Negro movement. Perhaps because he structured the novel as a critique of the movement’s flaws, Thurman highlights the New Negro movement’s
downfall as a prominent theme within the story. Throughout *Infants of the Spring*, Thurman effectively critiques the varied perspectives within the New Negro movement. He highlights the problems inherent in promoting unified social and artistic ideals through the framework of such a movement. However, in developing this critique, Thurman simplifies the stances of the opposition. He criticizes the strategic essentialism being employed by New Negro leaders, while unintentionally falling into similar essentialism in his portrayals of these leaders.

Larsen and Hurston struggle with these same issues of essentialism, as they attempt to underscore the constructed nature of social roles while simultaneously structuring their characters and themes through those roles. This exploration of social constructions in dialogue with the need for communal voices and experiences leads to a fruitful point of opposition and intersection in which to focus further literary analysis.

While Thurman, Larsen, and Hurston are significant authors in the Harlem Renaissance for their exploration of the social construction of assumed identity “norms,” they are not isolated or unique from their contemporaries. In this project, they have served as exemplars for the broader social debates and subversion of identity constructs within the Harlem Renaissance. This project has expanded critical engagement with texts through a recognition of the contextual dialogues that intersect within these authors’ complex themes and artistic choices as they develop a response to and subversion of the social contexts in which they are writing. The Harlem Renaissance was the center of a confluence of social pressures, while the writers of this project engaged with these
intersecting pressures and conflicts through their works. More than other analytical frameworks have been able to accomplish, the theoretical lens privileged in this project ensures a fuller exploration of these complex connections.
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