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"THE WEIRD, FADED GLORY OF BLACK GIRLS:"
DE-CONSTRUCTING BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY IN THE HARLEM
RENAISSANCE, 1920-1930

by

Laila Haidarali

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
through the Department of History
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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ABSTRACT

Focusing on the period known as the Harlem Renaissance circa 1920-1930, this study explores various forms of sexual expression open to, and opened by, black women. By defining the dominant ideology which made black female sexuality both its subject and object, this thesis examines the various ways that black women either conformed to or conflicted with dominant ideological formulae, and in doing so, approached sexual self-actualization. This study examines two art forms, literature and the blues, to demonstrate the available and varied modes in which black women expressed and defined female sexuality. My thesis proves that both female novelists and blues women played important roles in defining black female sexuality.
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INTRODUCTION
"RE-EMBODYING THE BLACK FEMALE:"
SEXUALITY AND THE BLACK WOMAN IN AMERICA IN THE 1920'S

You cannot understand history unless you understand its flowings, its currents and the ways leaders move within such forces. A leader tries to perpetuate the conditions which demand his leadership. Thus, the leader requires an outsider.¹

This is a history of outsiders. It is a history of those African-American women who in the period known as the Harlem Renaissance seized the offertory of artistic license and challenged, questioned or rejected outright the conceptualizations of sexuality in which they were embodied. It is a history of sexual protest and production; the actresses in the drama of this thesis are African-American women, who as performers of the blues and writers of the period utilized the tools of the trade to create art forms which transcended the sexual discourses of pejorative stereotyping, black middle-class ideology and white domination.

In 1982, at the Barnard Conference "Towards a Politics of Sexuality," historian Hortense Spillers lamented that black women were "beached whales of the sexual universe, unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting their verb."² Spillers noted


that despite the long history of sexualizing the black woman, sexuality "touches her nowhere." Women without a verb, a history or sexuality, their sexual silences become the "interstice," the missing word, which in its absence is resonant with complexity and complicity. Identifying these "lexical gaps" existing along a continuum of symbolic manifestations, Spillers attributes the non-existence of black female sexuality as a distinct and viable form to the success of pejorative symbol-making. Symbol-making must therefore be examined in its positive form, as a powerful attempt to re-model black women's sexuality from the production tables of black women;¹ the examination of positive symbol-making of and by black women is the central goal of this thesis.

Spillers' now fifteen-year-old observation remains painfully apparent in present historical discourse. When discussed in academic scholarship the combination of race, gender and sexuality is often treated in a peripheral manner; when examined together in historical scholarship, race and gender are commonly construed as oppositional, relevant only to what is occurring in white (male) culture. Although whites often created their own image of sexuality from their perception of what blacks were not, my analysis looks at the creation of black sexuality emerging from black cultural enterprise.

¹Ibid., p.77.
Focusing on the period known as the Harlem Renaissance circa 1920-1930, this study explores the various forms of sexual expression open to, and opened by, black women. By defining the dominant ideology which made black female sexuality both its subject and object, this thesis examines the various ways that black women either conformed to or conflicted with dominant ideological formulae, and in doing so, approached sexual self-actualization.

Viewed as the origin of modern black American culture, the Harlem Renaissance has been examined by scholars and critics as an intellectual affair; they dismiss the reality that the task of defining the "New Negro" emerged through divergent forms: art, literature, the blues and dance. Limiting the range of investigation to the 1920's, I will examine two art forms, literature and the blues, to demonstrate the available and varied modes in which black women expressed and defined female sexuality. My thesis proves that both female novelists and blues women played important roles in defining black female sexuality.

"New Negroes" drawing on the Northern urban experience and seeking to amend the legacy of slavery and the ever-present effects of racism presented an ideal of the black woman, who, now emancipated from the subordination of the South, sought to free herself from her sexualized object status. The combined legacies of slavery, racial discrimination and sexual subordination imposed on the black
female psyche failed to dissipate in the rebirth of black urban culture. Many black women urgently wanting to repudiate both Southernness and submission (and its incumbent over-sexualization) accommodated the period's rigid moral coding which necessitated the surrender of their sexuality. My thesis examines how, and to what extent, the provisional licence provided to women of the decade redefined both the image and reality of black female sexuality.

Drawing on the literary works of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen and the lyrics of blues women, my approach is culturalist. To obtain a culturalist perspective one must recognize that the sexuality of black women operates within the larger formal structure of society; the "performances" of these women often reflected their assimilation of society's construction of them. The efforts of these black women thus represent not the simple acceptance or rejection of cultural construction but reflect the ways in which these constructions influenced their expressions of sexuality.

The ideology of the period assumed as its goal the redress of historically ill-constructed stereotypes, myths and manifestations of black female sexuality. Thus, it is impossible to launch into an analysis of the 1920's without some understanding of what preceded and what precipitated this ideological imperative. Chapter One thus provides a brief history--an overview--of the historical construction of black female sexuality in the nineteenth to early twentieth century,
and provides the reader with the necessary basic tools for understanding this thesis.

In Chapter Two, I examine the dominant ideology of the 1920's, and its construction of black female sexuality. Using the contemporary periodicals *The Crisis* and *The Messenger*, and the works of the male-dominated intelligentsia, I demonstrate the male domination and reformulation of all things black--including "their" women. *The Crisis* was considered to be the organ of the N.A.A.C.P. and assumed the moral responsibility for promoting black culture in a "respectable" manner to white America. Edited by W.E.B. DuBois, one of the most influential and educated black leaders, *The Crisis* articulated a much more conservative understanding of black America than did *The Messenger*. Edited by Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph, *The Messenger* reflected the duo's somewhat more radical stance on black politics. But despite its radicalism, *The Messenger* also envisioned and examined black womanhood as an adjunct to manhood, and regularly featured forums such as *The Messenger*'s Symposium "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," which ran throughout the 1920's, and which articulated the urgency to logically define (and confine) the needs of black women. As a social issue opened for debate, I illustrate that any desirous, emotive or sexual concerns of black women crystallized into tangible and logical responses. The message given to them was: there was no need for them to question; their needs (and the road to their fulfilment) were being
already ascertained by black middle-class male leaders. In their quest to redeem black women from the tripartite rule of Southernness, Subordination and Sexuality, male intellectuals dislodged sexuality from the lives of "their" women.

Often, if not always, black women's vision of their own sexuality did not parallel the vision in which they were captured. Arguably, this is a matter of perspective, but it is a crucial one; the dominant ideology and the realities of black women are checkered with inconsistency. The tension of what-should-be and what-is colours the nuances in vision, image and reality and created the space for divergent expressions (in this thesis, the blues and literary works) of black female sexuality.

Focusing on middle-class black female writers Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset, Chapter Three explains that despite the rigid moral encoding of black female sexuality, black women did not passively receive the dominant ideology. An analysis of their works will prove that despite being limited in their range of expression, Fauset and Larsen critically examined the construction of, and demands imposed upon, black women as sexual beings. For this analysis I will use Fauset's short story "The Sleeper Wakes," which appeared in the Crisis in 1920, and her third novel Plum Bun (1928), as well as Larsen's novel Quicksand which was also published in 1928. The analysis of these texts will demonstrate that by utilizing the literary conventions available to black female writers
Larsen and Fauset's works underscore the unsatisfactory (and unrealistic) established modes of sexual expression for black women. Fauset and Larsen illuminated the obscurity of female sexual desire in literary and ideological canons; their works emphasize that female sexual desire was not only considered a base display, but that its manifestation was treated as detrimental to the social status of bourgeois women.

The fourth and final chapter focuses on the sexual discourse created by the classic female blues singers of the 1920's. This analysis examines the blues as a medium through which blues women forged and fostered conceptualizations of black female sexuality. Thus, it is important to position the blues as a conduit of sexual crises and resolution and to appreciate the blues women as representational: signifiers of black women's sexual realities. The longevity (or fleeting importance) of an artist is not the story behind-the-creation—that is background—but the product of the artist in that what it expresses and inspires is what is of primary importance. One consideration which is crucial to reading the classic blues is understanding the immediacy of the interaction between blues women and their audience community. The nature of their art form was interactive, and the blues women performed for large audiences of black working-class women. The interaction of singer and audience was a symbiotic relationship: the blues women sang the blues commonly experienced by most black women of this class, and the
audience understood that though these blues of sexual crises were painfully real they were to be exorcised through the audience/performer partnership. Thus, in order to understand the cultural context of the sexual discourse of the blues—why it evolved and why it took as its main address the sexuality of black women—the subjects of attention will not only be the blues women but their black working-class female audiences.

The lyrics of classic blues singers of the 1920’s are the main primary sources for Chapter Four. By situating the classic blues lyrics within the era’s cultural and ideological imperatives, I argue that blues women responded to definite needs of black women, particularly those of the working class. In “reading the blues” as in reading any other art form, subjectivity reigns supreme. It is difficult for one to conjure, with certainty, the emotions or energies that the blues inspired at that particular moment for a particular group of people. Thus, this thesis presents a rendition and not a definitive interpretation of the emotions of its subjects.

Neither discourse is assumed to be a more authentic expression of black female sexuality. The cultural historian (or at least the personal school to which I belong) is not the arbiter of authenticity; authenticity lies only in the historical value (of an event, ideology, etc.) for what it enables the cultural historian to decipher. It is less the
historian's task to judge and pre-judge authenticity (and if it were, to whose standards do we subscribe?), than it is to accept and analyze each crooked edge of the unfinished puzzle and finally, hopefully, contribute something to the constantly evolving jigsaw of how the past was possibly experienced.

Finally, this thesis is my attempt to understand the interconnectedness of race and gender in the construction of sexuality. My personal history is a cornucopia of multiple ethnic, religious and national identities which I, as an individual, still have not fully unravelled. My quest to amend the interstice that segregates women from their coloured bodies is my effort to return black female sexuality, not only to historical scholarship, but back to its original owners.
dem eyes
dem cheeks
   all dem hips
   rollin' an' rollin'
   an' dem breasts
   jumping up
   an' dong
thighs like huge smoked ham...
talk to me
 'bout dem sweet clay-red lips
   de cat in her sigh
   de fever in her armpits

Stop it, dis woman say ah want she
for sex only

dis queen among woman is somebody's whore
what have I done to my Black Woman...en?

-Leroy Clarke
Tastes of Endless Fruit(1974)
CHAPTER ONE:
"THE PUPPETEER'S WORKSHOP:"
THE CONSTRUCTION OF BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY: 1820–1920

Resembling a puppet mastered by white ideology, patriarchal rule, material values and conflicting sexual desire, the black woman seemingly danced to the tune of many masters, each tug of the string manifesting an image more convoluted than the last. Yet her voice penetrates the centuries of well-ordered silence; she did not remain a silent marionette. Precariously balanced on the tightrope of Victorian womanhood, black respectability and pejorative stereotypes, the black woman sifted through a barrage of conflicting ideologies, societal expectations and racial imperatives, in an attempt to define her own sexuality. By examining the origins of the ideologies concerning black female sexuality, this chapter will provide an overview of the nineteenth and early twentieth century construction of black female sexuality in America.

Steeped in the Protestant Victorian ethos, nineteenth century America created its version of (white) female sexuality in "binary opposition" to its assessment of that of...

black women: the ideology of true womanhood espoused piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity as its four main characteristics; these esteemed values were perceived as deficient in black women. Afro-American cultural critic Hazel V. Carby astutely recognizes the importance of this ideology in defining not only who were "true women," but who, through innate inferiority, were not. Despite the existence outside of the parameters of true womanhood, the "otherness" of black women was used to reinforce the definition of the true woman. Assessing the pervasive ideology as a means to define women, Carby notes that feminist historians fail to recognize these discursive elements of the ideology of true womanhood which "describ[ed] the parameters within which women were measured and declared to be, or not to be women."

Central to the concept of the "true woman" was the espousal of her "passionlessness." As historian Nancy F. Cott argues, the concept of passionlessness effectively dislodged the view of women's sexually desirous "nature;" its ideological implementation closely proscribed any manifestation of passion-filled female sexual need--

'Originally defined by Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood," American Quarterly 18 (1996): 151-174. Welter's thesis has, since its origin, been substantially developed and is considered one of the main cornerstones in women's history.

"lustfulness was simply uncharacteristic." But if passionlessness enabled true women to enforce, without effort, the proper moderation in their marital sexual affairs, black women were perceived as the opposite. Viewed as innately sexual, black women could not fulfill the mandate of true womanhood; lacking this innate passionlessness, they could not counter, control or mediate the aggressive sexual nature of men.

Fortifying the perception of black women as innately sexual were a series of pejorative myths and stereotypes. Sander Gilman argues that as early as the eighteenth century, black sexuality (both male and female) was equated with deviancy. The consolidation and expansion of this view, a century later, resulted from iconographic depictions of black women in art, literature and science. Perhaps the most sexualized and subversive image was that of Saartje Baartman, notoriously dubbed the Hottentot Venus. South African Baartman was initially displayed in England in 1810, and her "exhibition" continued for five years, until she died, at the age of twenty-five in Paris. The fascination with Baartman's physical form was the "extraordinary size and shape of her buttocks,

\begin{footnotes}

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which served as a displacement of the fascination with female genitalia at the time."⁹ After her death, the "scientific" evaluation of Baartman's genitalia and buttocks substantiated the perceived pathology of black female sexuality, its exaggerated size confirming the insatiability of black women's sexual desire. Primitive in form and function, black women were constructed as innately amoral and sexually driven, unable to control their desires due to their less evolved physical state.¹⁰ Confirming white notions of wanton sexuality, stereotypes such as the Hottentot reduced black women to objects; their main defining characteristics were their grossly exaggerated sexual parts.

As defined by Patricia Morton, a stereotype is that which tends to simplify reality, whereas a myth tends to its mystification.¹¹ Morton argues that the black female body, shrouded in stereotype and myth, simultaneously becomes an object of sexual repulsion and of eroticized mystery. Falling outside of the ideological definition of the true woman and into the stereotype of the primitive other, the veil which covered black women netted a mass of convoluted sexuality.

Developed between 1820-1850, the ideals of true womanhood automatically excluded most black women in America, who at


¹⁰Ibid., pp. 212-218.

this time were held captive in the odious institution of slavery. Confined within the ideological and physical bonds of slavery, black women were perceived as breeders (of more slaves), concubines and objects for sexual use. Early slave narratives show the origins of the sexual de-valuation of black women; exposing the sexual horror of institutionalized slavery, they simultaneously demanded the survival of black women beyond the exploitation.\(^{12}\) White society defined the strength that survival implied as a failing; a self-respecting (white) woman would rather die than survive such degradation.\(^{13}\) But the survival of black women was testament to the hardiness of their non-womanliness; their flagrant sexuality made them non-victims: black women could not be raped.

Although slavery effectively excluded the majority of black women from the sanction of true womanhood, free blacks, (theoretically) removed from the direct subordination from whites, operated within mainstream society and thus consolidated many of the same values as white society.\(^{14}\) As historian James O. Horton argues, free Northern blacks assimilated similar gender expectations as white America—


\(^{13}\)Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, p. 34.

expectations which were often difficult to live up to.\textsuperscript{15} Despite the similarities in gender expectations, the effect of racism placed an additional demand on black women. Protecting themselves from the stereotypes of the over-sexualized black woman, black women (not unlike white women) were expected to be extremely modest in the projection of their sexuality. Not only did modesty in manners, morals and attire help to fortify the image of the true black woman, but it also protected black women against unwanted attention from white men.\textsuperscript{16}

Despite the efforts of free blacks to fulfill these standards of respectability, black women were unable to completely overturn the processes which made them sexually subservient. The paucity of black women's published works and sources committed to archival holdings echo a silence which makes black women appear historically compliant with their subordination. This deafening silence has been somewhat softened by the recognition that there existed some psychological form of grappling with sexual crises. By projecting an air of openness, while actually concealing the truth about their lives, black women shielded their sexual reality in a "culture of dissemblance." Posited by Darlene Clark Hine, the "culture of dissemblance" seemingly retained sexual integrity by concealing the truth. This concealment, which Hine defines as the "cult of secrecy," offered black

\textsuperscript{15}Ibid., p. 64.

\textsuperscript{16}Ibid., p.58.
women the personal, unviolated space necessary to redefine their own sexualities. Victimized and violated, black women's sexuality became a struggle of silent reinvention. The voice of poet James Douglas Morrison expresses this struggle of internal mediation:

Urge to come to terms with the Outside, absorbing it, interiorizing it. I won't come out, you must come in to me. Into my womb-garden where I can peer out. Where I can construct a universe within the skull to rival the real.

After Reconstruction, black leaders dedicated their efforts to the "moral up-lift"-ing of the race from its sub-human categorization. Social activists, a small middle-class group, focused their efforts on "lifting" blacks to the standard of white middle-class respectability. Comprised mostly of middle-class, educated Protestant women, the National Association of Colored Women's Clubs (NACW), established in 1896, faced the ominous mission of realigning the morality of black women with the concept of "true womanhood." Although middle class in composition, the NACW's efforts for black female moral redemption were aimed at all women, "self preservation" demanding that they "go among the lowly, illiterate and even the vicious, to whom they are


bound by ties of race and sex."²²

The efforts of nineteenth-century black women reflected the cultural practice of dissemblance. Hine insists that members of the NACW, compelled to combat the negative stereotypes associated with black women, were institutionalized practitioners of the cult of secrecy. By endorsing the suppression of sexual desire, club women were complicit in the secrecy: their sexuality now became a misdemeanour, a project in erasure.²¹ Non-activist black women, also needing to fill in the silence created by a series of pejorative stereotypes, a defunct history and their sexual exploitation, reinvented their sexuality, quietly, secretly, guarding the fragile recreations with fierce determination. Despite the disparate goals of moral uplift and basic survival, the gains of club women and non-activist women were similar: both allowed the continued participation in a hostile white society. The survival of black women necessitated the employment of this secrecy, and under the veil of self-imposed invisibility they were able to function in a society which bred racial and sexual hostility.

By the turn of the century, the ideology of black female sexuality remained mostly unaltered. The efforts of black middle-class women reflected an assimilation and acceptance of

²²Mary Church Terrell, "What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of her Race?" as quoted in Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 97.

Victorian values of the white middle class; their concerns largely entered on the "moderation and control" of sexual desire. Focusing on the Social Hygiene Movement (1910-1940), historian Christina Simmons argues that in seeking to combat the perceived immorality of blacks, black social reformers endorsed the middle-class sexual values of mainstream white society. Despite this "accommodation," black social reformers did more than simply imitate the values of white society.\footnote{Christina Simmons, "African-American Sexual Victorianism in the Social Hygiene Movement, 1910-1940," Journal of the History of Sexuality, 4, n.4 (1993), p. 53.} Influenced by the same socio-economic and cultural trends as the rest of early twentieth century America, blacks were not immune from pervasive social and moral changes, though race difference did color the social aims of reformers. Situating their morality within white institutionalized racist rhetoric, social reformers worked for the material improvement of lower-class blacks; the reform impulse thus originated not merely from middle-class morality but also from a consciousness of racial obligation. Essential to the success of black women was the equation of education, community service and celibacy.\footnote{Ibid., pp. 52-61.} This "teaching by example" method guided black women to the one path to moral acceptance and racial uplift: control of sexual desire.

Responsible not only for personal virtue, black women were now guardians of the entire race. Through the display
(and internalization) of "respectability," the black middle class envisioned "right" manners and "right" behaviour as both a goal and a strategy to secure a reformed image of black morality. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues that the "politics of respectability" employed by the black Baptist women's movement (1880-1920) was not aimed merely at the projection of respectable images (to counter pejorative racist stereotypes) to white society. "The politics of respectability" was also aimed at black women in the Baptist Church, and aided in the condemnation of black women whose behaviour failed to conform to the respectable ideals which demanded "self-regulation along moral, educational and economic lines." As exemplars for the race, black Baptist women recognized the necessity for blacks to collectively construct positive images of themselves.24 This view that individual behaviour reflected the collective morality of blacks was not limited to any one church or organization; it extended into the consciousness of those blacks who had achieved some social status in America, those with the most to lose: the black middle class.

And it was from this black middle class, small in number but influential in regulating black morality, that there emerged, as one of the most vocal proponents of black culture, politics and ideology in the 1920's: the Harlem

intelligentsia. As authorities on black issues they espoused an understanding of all things black; one main focus of their concern is the subject of the following chapter: the ideological redress of the sexually distorted image of black American women.
You are the weird glory of the sphinx
Whose Negroid features, beautiful could we but see
With our father's eyes, bear testimony irrefutable
To the ancient glory of our clan.
My heart thrills to you, Black Girl, for you to me,
You are the faded glory of my struggling race,
And because I see the smouldering in your deep dark eyes
The fires, the brilliant fires, that shall light
That newer day when black beauteous Ethiopia,
Made radiant in the consuming fire of high desire,
Shall stretch her shapely hands to God!
You are black—
And I love you for your blackness.

-L. R. Stephens
Excerpt from "Black Girl" (1926)
CHAPTER TWO: "BLUE FLOWER THEORIES:"
THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE IDEOLOGY OF BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY

I have just seen a most beautiful thing
    Slim and still,
Against a gold, gold sky,
    A straight black cypress,
Sensitive,
    Exquisite,
A black finger
    Pointing upwards
Why, beautiful still finger, are you black?
And why are you pointing upwards?  

Pointing upwards, the 1920's ideology of the New Negro woman resulted from cumulative efforts to elevate black women from their long over-sexualized history. In an effort to secure social parity with whites, black intellectuals "amended" the sexuality of black women in hopes of heralding the sexual amelioration of the entire race. Black women faced the litmus test of racial solidarity; diversion from the ideal of New Negro womanhood did not merely tarnish the individual but created new chasms in the campaign for racial respectability.

By the 1920's, new self-definitions of blackness heralded a period of effervescent, evolutionary racial pride and

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25For my title, I borrow Marita O. Bonner's phrase "blue flower theories," which in her article "On Being Young - And a Woman - And Colored," she utilizes to metaphorically describe the impracticality of internalized female ideology. See "On Being Young - And a Woman - And Colored," The Crisis 31, n.2 (December, 1925), pp.63-65.


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promise. Within burgeoning urban centres, blacks discovered the promise of the North: money, freedom and job opportunities unattainable in the increasingly hostile, segregated South. Harlem, the mecca of black urban culture, boasted brownstones that testified to the social mobility of the United States. Once inhabited by Dutch settlers, Harlem now housed and honed the modern definition of the "New Negro." But amidst the glory of this modern blackness, the definition of black women's sexuality eventuated into a collaborative, ideological endeavour.

Black women of the 1920's were "breaking out of the hard-edged chrysalis of a stereotyped past," but their breakthrough was not unequivocal: new encroachments of racial pride and purpose impeded the sexual self-definition of black women. Having merely cracked the mould of racist and sexist stereotyping, black women were now newly yoked, becoming "more of a formula than a human being—a something to be argued about, condemned or defended."\(^4\)

Identifying "sexual immorality" as "the greatest single plague spot among Negro Americans," the Harlem intellengentisia situated black womanhood as a crucial site

\(^{27}\)Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, p. 185.

\(^{28}\)Alain Locke, *The New Negro*, p. 3. Here Locke is describing the "old Negro," but I use his words to demonstrate the irony, the contradictions in the ideology which surrounded the New Negro Woman.

for its redress. W.E.B. DuBois, undoubtedly one of the period's most influential black thinkers, politicized, unequivocally, the sexuality of black women. DuBois stated, "To no modern race do its women mean so much as to the Negro nor come so near to its fulfilment of its meaning." Articulating the concern for the historical recovery and reconfiguration of black women, much of DuBois' work situated black female sexuality at its core. Although his attempts to repudiate negative black female images are laudable, DuBois was nonetheless inclined to moral judgements which revealed his "sexual puritanism." In citing the crisis of female "unchastity" as the "duty of Negroes," DuBois stigmatized black female sexual expression outside of marriage.

The "duty of Negroes" thus licensed the "Talented Tenth," Harlem's intelligentsia, artists and novelists, to collectively reinvent the image and reality of "its" women. Extensive ideological debates and the divergent forms they assumed substantiate the perceived urgency of the task. The ideological formulae of New Negro womanhood, designed to guarantee successful social parity with whites, included and underscored the reformulation of black women's sexuality. The historical definition of black women as over-sexual beasts of


burden detracted from the tenuous respectability of the black bourgeoisie. This inherent fear of losing class leverage precipitated the evolution of the "black woman question" into an ideological task "to save from the past the shreds and vestiges of self-respect."  

Defining the "New Negro," the pride-filled task of the Harlem intelligentsia, included a separate and unique ideological formula for "its" women. Because the degradation and defamation of black women usurped the relationship of the black man to his wife/sister/mother/daughter, the recovery of black women's sexuality was viewed as a collaborative, cathartic effort of the entire race. And it was the "withholding from...mother and wife and daughter those signs and appellations of courtesy and respect...elsewhere [withheld] only from bawds and courtesans" against which the ideology of New Negro womanhood rooted itself. New Negro Women, no longer (legally) the white man's conquest or concubine, were given a new ideology which them provided with new "masters;" the ideology demanded deference to their genteel black husbands.

The ideology of the period sought to re-define black womanhood within the white value system, granting to them retroactive respectability: the ideological formula attached to black women a set of values previously never discerned by

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33 Ibid., p.72.
whites as fitting black women. Despite good intentions, male black leaders and intellectuals effectively dislodged black women from the process of sexual re-definition, rendering them once more passive receptacles of male-constructed ideology. The construction of black womanhood and sexuality by black men seemingly absolved all transgression.

By the 1910's, discourses on sexuality began to alter, trumpeting in a period of "revolutionary" sexuality, the conservatism of the Victorian era eclipsed by a somewhat more liberal vision of sex and sexuality. The popularity of Freudian psychology and the ensuing philosophy of companionate love, overturned the sexual moderation of the earlier age. Modern America now commonly viewed sex as a more central form of marital affection; no longer would intercourse be valued merely as a fulfilment of conjugal duties and procreative power. Rather it was now supposedly integrated as a larger part of a happy and healthy marriage.\(^3\) The progression from "true woman" (sexually passionless) to "real woman" (sexually unmediated), perceived or real, was nonetheless an advance for white women. Whether white women lived sexually "free" lives or not is less the question than whether the ideology of their class/culture endorsed such an un-Victorian ideal.

\(^3\)Christina Simmons, "Modern Sexuality and the Myth of Victorian Repression," in Kathy Feiss' and Christina Simmons, eds., Passion and Power: Sexuality in History, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1989), pp. 158-162. Simmons argues that the concept of a repressed Victorian sexuality was a myth created "a cultural adjustment of male power to women's departure from the Victorian order."
Adopting the now (ideologically) cast-off (though modified) model of the Victorian middle-class lady, black women, having never held the position of "true woman," articulated retroactive respectability. Whereas the respectability of white women was long established (and upheld by the opposite social position of black women), black women, surrogates of a new-fangled version of true womanhood, were compelled to be "doubly un-libidinous:" the ideology mandated a two-pronged amendment of black female sexuality. Needing to repudiate their long over-sexualized history plus their exclusion from true womanhood, black women needed to amend the breach in the continuum of sexuality; and blacks "could not afford to abandon traditional morality even if many young whites were doing so."\(^{35}\) The conflated ideology of the New Negro Woman mandated their elevation not merely to the status of their white sisters but demanded sexual morality above the white standard.

Though white women theoretically cast off the sexual Victorianism of the earlier age, many still supported and enacted a modified version of the ideology: the ideal woman was a less pure, less domestic, less submissive and less pious female than her nineteenth century predecessor. The less sexually driven nature of the true woman and her ability to balance the sexual aggression of her husband were infused into

\(^{35}\)Simmons, "African-American Sexual Victorianism and the Social Hygiene Movement," p. 61. Here Simmons documents Mary Church Terrell's 1925 warning to black male students at Howard University.
the ideological evaluation of New Negro womanhood.

The Victorian values of true womanhood were not transferred whole onto the modern identity of the New Negro Woman; modification in its attachment to the modern black woman acknowledged sexual activity, not as an expression of female desire, but rather as a social value. Construed as one of "our greatest social forces," female sexuality, if correctly harnessed, was viewed as "a dynamic factor in improving [the] race."36 Quoting Lester F. Ward, "our great American sociologist," John Baddy, writing in The Messenger, locates the value of conjugal love in "the ethical and aesthetic development of the race," the "principal stimulus [of] providing for the family...naturally grows out of this relation." 37 The tempered, racially adjusted concept of "true womanhood" thus mandated the containment of black female sexuality within marriage where its real value was seen to lie in its creation and sustaining of family life.

The ideology of the period espoused the value of black female sexuality not as its sexual energy/identity, but as in its practical value of reproduction. Motherhood was not only discussed in the pages of periodicals but also took a more practical form. The Harlem YWCA, established in 1905, reiterated the middle-class ideology of the New Negro woman.


37Baddy, "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," p. 44.
The YWCA supported the home as the mainstay of black women's duty to their community, family and race and focused on teaching young black women how to be good home-makers.\(^3\)

Conspicuously absent in these discursive efforts is any discussion of female pleasure, desire and sexual self-definition, independent of striving for racial and social parity. The over-riding concerns about respectability marginalized the agency of black women, rendering them as incidental, strangers, to the interpretation of their own sexualities. The race, especially its male contingent, anxious to preserve racial respectability, effectively imposed a sexual identity and ideology onto "its" women.

The rise of primitivism presented a further rationale for the rigid respectability of the New Negro Woman. Developing in the 1910's, the cult of primitivism seemingly cured the chaos of the modern age. In a period when the "insidious disease of Western culture" was "the overabundance of civilization,"\(^3\) Americans looked to a simpler people/culture, which, in its aesthetic purity and passion, could ease modern angst and despair. So in looking to Harlem, white Americans envisioned the black woman/man made not by her/his societal configurations, but rather by her/his "innate," unmediated

\(^3\)Judith Weisenfeld, "The Harlem YWCA and the Secular City, 1904-1945," *Journal of Women's History*, 6, n.3 (Fall, 1994), pp.67-68.

proclivities. Locke, DuBois, and other ideologues rejected all forms of primitive commodification of black people; the conceptualization of the New Negro (allegedly) rejected all manifestations of white construction. It was the Old Negro who, as Harlem writer J.A. Rogers stated in The Messenger, fell "glibly for all agencies used by white friends to sidetrack the mind of the Negro group from its real problems such as over-stressing of Negro art, spirituals, piffling poetry, jazz, and cabaret life." And it was the astute New Negro who "relegate[d] these to their proper place."\footnote{J.A. Rogers, "Who is the New Negro, and Why?" The Messenger, 9, n.2 (February 1927), p. 68.}

The ideology of New Negro womanhood strove to avert further fortification of sexualized stereotypes. In effecting a grandiose celebration of white bourgeois values, New Negro women hoped to overturn the conceptualization of "the erotic, the exotic, and the innocent" other.\footnote{Ann DuCille, "Blues Notes on Black Sexuality: Sex and Texts of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen," Journal of History of Sexuality, 3, n.3 (1993), p. 426.} Merely espousing respectable womanhood was insufficient for the retention of social and moral parity; the ideology demanded that "our young women must have unblemished character and untarnished names...[for] without character [the New Negro woman] is a rose without a scent."\footnote{"Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," The Messenger, 9, n.5 (May 1927), p. 150.} In a response to the Daughters of the Confederacy's
published request to Congress to erect a statue in honour of black Mammies, Chandler Owen, co-editor of The Messenger, expressed the dominant ideological need, not merely to repudiate the stereotypical past of black women, but also to elevate them to a revered (almost unattainable) mythic status. He responded, almost evangelical in tone:

We favor erecting a monument to the Negro women who have risen above the insult, assault, debauchery, prostitution, and abuse to which these unfortunate "black mammies" were subjected...Let this "mammy" statue go. Let it fade away...and when it rises again, let its white shaft point like a lofty mountain peak to a New Negro Mother, no longer a "white man's woman," no longer the sex-enslaved "black mammy" of Dixie—but the apotheosis of triumphant Negro Womanhood.43

The race pride of Harlem converted black women from stereotypical "mammies" to the "face of the race." Its symbol-making task absorbed the effort for black women's retroactive respectability and class fortification. Both The Messenger and The Crisis used women's faces as a national identification of racial pride and culture, constructing the image of black women as "a point of general access to a national circuit of desire."44 Nina Miller argues that black middle-class women were utilized as icons of racial achievement because their very existence contradicted the

44Nina Miller, "Femininity, Publicity and the Class Division of Labour: Jessie Fauset's There is Confusion," African American Review, 30, no.2, pp. 206-207.
beliefs of a prejudiced society; their achievement of class and respectability, collusive with their blackness, triumphed over all possible odds. Thus, in an effort to restore beauty and pride to the black women (while demonstrating social parity), Black Harlem effectively commodified and sexualized the image of black women.

Exclusive not only to the pens and podiums of male black intellectuals, debates about the status of the New Negro Woman generated considerable interest among black middle-class society; so great was the concern that, throughout the 1920's, The Messenger ran, as a regular feature, A Symposium entitled "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs." Open to a wide range of interpretation, submissions from those outside of the "Talented Tenth" reiterated the dominant ideology with such conviction that it is impossible to overlook the range of influence black intellectuals had. Articles in the Symposium included among the New Negro woman's needs all things respectable: education, home-making, and sexual morality—and urged their return to "timidity and modesty peculiar to pure womanhood of yesterday." Far from deviating from the dominant ideology, the views expressed by both amateur and professional critics maintained the ideology which claimed black women as moral guardians of racial integrity.

"Miller, p. 205.

Collectively constructed, the concept of womanhood and sexuality belonged to the race, but the enactment of that ideology—the obstacle course of its implementation—was most definitely returned to the individual woman.

...sex immorality is yet a serious problem confronting our womanhood and one which they must grapple courageously if we are to approach a solution."

The interchangeability of us and them places black women at the nexus of the "black sexual problem:" a collective grievance with a single cause and an individually executed solution.

Mistress of their own sexual containment, black women were also appointed as guardians over their men and children. Domesticity, as a characteristic of the old "true womanhood," manifested itself in the New Negro Woman: a woman who failed as a "good home-making" New Negro woman was charged with the responsibility for the failing morality of her family. Mrs. Ella Philips Stewart, a contributor to the symposium on "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," voiced the importance of the domesticity of the New Negro woman: she writes: "The greatest need of our womanhood of today is to train them to make intelligent and efficient home-makers...making the home attractive and pleasant...members of [the] household [would]...

"John W. Baddy, "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," The Messenger, 10, no.2 (Feb. 1928), p. 44. The italics here are mine, used to underscore the inconsistency (or maybe consistency), with the ideology of the New Negro Woman.
prefer spending their evenings at home rather than on the street corners, pool rooms, dance halls or other unsavoury hangouts." Charged with the moral responsibility of their entire families, black women inflicted damaging consequences on the entire race if they neglected their duties; this sense of moral guardianship pervaded all discussion of black female sexuality.

Despite the laudatory claims of New Negro Womanhood, the ideology of the period was delineated by class status and structure. Black middle-class women—those who could afford domesticity and respectability—were a small percentage of the race who fell within the physical parameters of middle-class ideology. Urban centres like Harlem were home not only to middle-class blacks, but also, by 1915 and continuing into the late 1920's, to a stream of black migrants from the South who significantly altered the class and race structure of New York.

Plagued by disenfranchisement, segregation and lynchings, blacks found themselves non-citizens, sub-human human legacies of a hateful, hostile New South; these forces prompted the mass migration of blacks to the North and urban Midwest. By analyzing census counts, historian Paula Giddings found the ratio of black women as compared to black men to be greater in this period of mass migration. The mass migration of black

women to the North did not merely alter American demography but generated what Hazel Carby describes as "a series of moral panics." As early as 1911, one New York black newspaper, The Age, expressed concern for the changing face (and underlying morality) of the city which was becoming "infested with dance hall harlots and the diamond decked lover," and implicitly tied the problem to the mass migration of blacks.

Carby insists that the migration of black women was not merely a physical movement but a danger identified as "a social and political problem,...that had to be rectified to restore a moral social order." The increased visibility and viability of working-class blacks in America undermined the efforts of the black middle class to achieve social parity with whites. But the concern for the moral protection of young migrant black women was widespread and transcended the black middle class: agents of moral guardianship also included both black and white social activists and religious groups.

The rise of Negro entertainment--dance halls and cabarets--represented one source of concern for these moralists, for there "half-naked girls dance shameless dances with men...The whole atmosphere is one of unrestrained


Ibid., p.740.
animality..." Although the new forms of black entertainment seemingly represented the source of moral degeneracy, the efforts of activists stressed that the real danger lay within the black female body. The nexus of the danger was not the environment, but rather the intrinsic "degeneracy" of black women who were unprotected in this new untamed, urban jungle. Their alleged aversion to "hard work," coupled with limited job opportunities posed the threat of black women working in "questionable house[s]." Considering black women unable to protect themselves, due to their innate moral deficiency, white social reformer Frances Kellor espoused what Carby defines as the "policing" of black women's bodies. Kellor played a prominent role in the establishment of the National League for the Protection of Colored Women (1905), which provided the perceived necessary "protection" for black migrant women. The League assessed the 44 employment agencies which brought black women to the North and found 17 of them to be "doubtful and unsafe." Not only did the League attempt to assess the credibility of the agencies, but it also prepared lists of "suitable" accommodations to new migrant women.

Needing protection from themselves (and not the urban environment), new working-class black female migrants, needed

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to attain respectability, to buffer their innate weakness.\textsuperscript{54} This stigmatization of black working-class women deeply entrenched itself into the psyche of some victims. One black would-be migrant, clamouring for "protection," writes: "I would like a position where I could live on places because it is very trying for a good girl to be out in a large city by self among strangers is why I would like a good home with good people."\textsuperscript{55}

Class-differentiated conceptualizations of black female sexuality are thus evident, for it was the same black middle class who determined that "the rather large amount of sex-immorality is...due more to ignorance and environment than to any inherent inclination on the part of our womanhood,"\textsuperscript{56} who also feared the erosion of their class respectability and racial progress.\textsuperscript{57} Thus, the middle-class respectability of New Negro womanhood was not applicable to working-class female migrants, a seemingly less evolved en-gendered class.

In defining the New Negro, philosopher Alain Locke espoused a philosophy of race pride, celebratory in tone, elitist in effect and artistically manufactured. Locke's

\textsuperscript{54}Carby, "Policing," p. 741.


\textsuperscript{56}John Baddy, "Negro Womanhood's Greatest Needs," p.44. Of course, I do recognize that this is merely Baddy's opinion, but by the evidence so far provided here in this chapter, I conclude that this was the predominantly held view among middle-class blacks.

\textsuperscript{57}Carby, "Policing," p. 741.
outlook is somewhat contradictory, for although posing the question "Why should our minds remain sectionalized, when the problem itself no longer is?" Locke nonetheless sectionalized the efforts to construct the ideology of the New Negro: Locke assigned the task of "group expression and self-determination" to the artists, intellectuals and writers of the Renaissance. Years later, when the Renaissance was a mere memory, Locke acknowledged this "sectioning off" as one of the movement's primary weaknesses: a weakness which severely limited its range of impact: Locke says:

...no emerging elite - can suspend itself over the abyss of a mass of unemployed [people] stranded in the over-expansive, disease and crime-ridden slum...for there is no cure or saving magic in poetry and art,...for unemployment, for high rents, high mortality rates, civic neglect, capitalistic exploitation.

Within the period of the Harlem Renaissance black middle-class women grappled with an ideology which, in its endowment of respectability and its endorsement of Victorian ideology, usurped all ownership of their physical needs and desires. The ideology of New Negro Womanhood christened black middle-class women as moral guardians and representatives of their race: failure to maintain respectable standards of sexual conduct tarnished not only the individual, but the entire

"Locke, The New Negro, p.5.

"Ibid., p. 7.

race. Responsible not only for the morality of their husbands and children, black middle-class women were also seen as morally stronger than their working-class sisters, who through their innate weakness, needed even greater guidance and protection. Possessing little control over the ideologies which defined their sexuality, black women in the 1920's encountered a construction of black womanhood which they were not allowed to ratify.

But amidst the dogma of New Negro Womanhood, the Harlem Renaissance presented an opportunity for female writers and poets to enunciate their own understanding of womanhood. However tenuously or timidly issues of sexuality were broached, we now have the work of black middle-class female writers who recognized the limited and limiting nature of the period's ideological imperative. One such voice of literary courage and poetic purity is Marita O. Bonner, who contemplates "On Being a Woman - and Young - and Colored:"

...being a woman.
...You decide that something is wrong with a world that stifles and chokes; that cuts off and stunts; Why do they see a colored woman only as a gross collection of desires, all uncontrollable... An empty imitation of an empty invitation. A mime; a sham; a copy-cat. A hollow re-echo... What you had thought tangible and practical has turned out to be a collection of "blue-flower" theories. Standing alone, waiting for someone to really want her....So - being a woman - you can wait. But quiet; quiet. Like Buddha--; motionless and knowing..., Motionless on the outside. But inside?" "Marita O. Bonner, "On Being Young - And a Woman - And Colored," The Crisis, 31, n.2 (December, 1925), pp.63-65.
And from the inside, black female novelists like Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen retrieved their silenced sexualities, motioning them to the pages of female-authored Harlem Renaissance literature.
women who write
are not afraid
of seeing their hearts
typed out
in black & white.

not afraid
of being called
crude
or crazy
or cold.

not afraid
of drawing a woman's body
that men can read
& never penetrate.

not afraid
of their lover's accusations
that they (women) spend more time
making love to their writing
than to their men.

but these women
who write
are terrified
that without their writing
they would be

nothing.

-Laila Haidarali
"Women Who Write"(1988)
Decidedly middle-class in voice and vision, the works of Nella Larsen and Jessie Fauset represent black women at the core of an era intent on celebrating the black experience. Of questionable heroism, their black female protagonists represent the development of female literary characters from passive, universal-object to individual-subject status. Core female characters sing their own mournful dirge of the "bourgeois blues"; not a swan song, nor a self-indulgent exposé, these blues are incisive cultural commentaries on the sexual lives of black middle-class women.

Both Larsen and Fauset are considered to be forerunners in black female authorship: "black women's realities are virtually suppressed until the Harlem Renaissance and later. Essentially the black woman as artist, as intellectual spokesperson for her own cultural apprenticeship, had not existed before, for anyone." As with any pioneer work, the

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6Arguing that middle-class novelists deserve as much as blues women in their literary expression of sexuality, duCille coins the phrase "bourgeois blues" to emphasize the validity of their expression to those critics who assume the only authentic black experience arrives from the blues and folk tradition. Ann duCille, The Coupling Convention : Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 67.

literary expression of black female sexuality presented difficulties of creating in the absence of tradition. Writing without the guidance of a black female literary tradition, both Larsen and Fauset struggled not only to meet the aims of the Renaissance, but also to fulfil their personal creative impulses and ambitions.

Recognizing the intrinsic value of these works as representational forms of black female sexual crisis, historian and literary critic Hazel Carby cautions readers not to accept these works as monolithic realities of all black women. Carby continues: "Black feminist criticism has too frequently been reduced to an experiential relationship that exists between black women as critics and black women as writers who represent black women's reality. Theoretically this reliance on a common, or shared experience is essentialist and ahistorical." Carby's cautionary note taken, the acceptance of Larsen and Fauset's works as class specific is the foundation of this analysis.

As defined by E. Franklin Frazier, the black bourgeoisie of the 1920's was "uprooted from its 'racial' tradition and as a consequence ha[d] no cultural roots in either the Negro or


"Hazel V. Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood, p.16.
white world." Frazier and other black cultural critics assessed the black middle class as charged with a fabricated sense of importance, engaging in "conniving game-playing with white America for ego rewards that have false values peculiar to the black middle class." Dependent more upon achievement, ancestry and education than upon money, the black middle and upper classes are stereotyped as "one continuous middle-income group with middle-class or aristocratic values." By the late 1950's and 1960's, class and race in American society was finally acknowledged to be an interwoven reality; Frazier's early assessment of the black bourgeoisie contributed to a further critical examination of the historical role, status and activities of the black middle class.

The failure of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement to radically transform the economic and social realities of working-class black Americans precipitated a greater militancy in black politics and the second black cultural

"Though more recent work has been done on the black middle class in America, Frazier's analysis is a crucial work because of its assessment of the black bourgeoisie in this particular period. The bourgeoisie, as described by Frazier, is charged with certain characteristics and concerns which are intensely relevant to the roles undertaken by the Harlem intelligentsia. See E. Franklin Frazier's The Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of The Black Middle Class, (New York: The Free Press, 1957). This quotation on p.112.

"Jeffers, p.37.


"By "greater militancy" I am suggesting that black movements in the 1970's such as Black Power became more the norm than a fringe movement. Certainly militant, nationalistic black movements such as Garveyism and Pan-Africanism existed as early as the 1910's, and continued well into the
renaissance of the late 1960's and 1970's continued to examine the racial divide in America. If the Harlem Renaissance is viewed as largely a "middle-class affair" charged with the intellectual task of defining the New Negro, then the 1970's, predominantly grass-roots Black movement focused on working-class blacks and their immense poverty. Supporters were quick to denounce "Uncle Tom's" and "bougie" blacks who "strut into the white bourgeois world and perform the task of keeping the bulk of the working class blacks down." 70 Their efforts were an early version of what is now termed "Afro-centrism," which aims to define the "true" black, who both "acted" black and accepted her/his "authentic black culture." 71 In such an atmosphere of renewed and militant cultural pride, novelists such as Larsen and Fausett were condemned as conservative sell-outs, who instead of wielding their influence to effect real change simply aped the values of the white middle class.

By the 1970's, the combined awareness of the feminization of poverty, exclusion from white feminist middle-class efforts, and continued racism in America heightened the

1960's. My understanding of the Civil Rights Movement is that despite the participation of groups such as the Black Panthers, the SNCC and the Nation of Islam, it was the more moderate voices of Civil Rights activists that successfully negotiated the passage of Civil Rights legislation in 1964 and 1965.


71 Although extremely different in voice and vision, I see the aims of the Harlem literati and the Black Power movement as being similar. In a quest to define a "black culture," blacks in the 1920's and 1970's struggled to find a culture unique and "authentically" black; I would also argue that this continues today in 1997.
critical assessment of the secondary status of Afro-American women. The interconnectedness of race, class and gender moved to the forefront of black feminist strife, and from that perspective, the race efforts of earlier black women came into focus. The Nationalist Black Feminist Organization (NBFO), established in 1973, identified the importance of reconstructing a positive, black female image and rejected images such as "grinning Beulahs, castrating Sapphires and pan-cake box Jeminas." Recognizing that no positive images existed for black women, the NBFO also refused to adopt the white female image of being "placed on a pedestal which even white women were rejecting,"\(^7\) and searched for a positive female representation, unique to black women. Assessing the creation of black female representations by their predecessors, black feminists concurred with black cultural critics: writers such as Larsen and Fauset were indeed apologists for white society—conservatives who whitewashed the blackness of black women.

Thus, the "rear-guard" status attributed to Larsen and Fauset is indicative not of the intrinsic conservatism of middle-class writers, but rather of the retrospective rigidity of 1970's black cultural critics. Implicit in relegating Harlem middle-class writers to a subordinate "rear-guard" position is the assessment of their work as somewhat less

urgent, real, and "black" than other female expressions. Denouncing Fauset and Larsen's works as less important, due to the minority status of the middle class and material comfort, not only imposes a false monolithic identity on all black women, but further applies a false concept of blackness. If the so-called "conservatism" of Larsen and Fauset represents the apologist version of black literature, then contemporary critics in their unforgiving assessment seek to make these works antithetical to "real" blacks. Debilitating in its vision, this view relegates the black experience to one linear model demanding shared experience from slavery to freedom. Blackness as an all-encompassing identity effectively denies that blacks throughout history were not all performing the same duties, living the same lives or ideologically preserving the same moral standards. Thus, defining blackness in a monolithic fashion ironically supports racist rhetoric, classifying all people of one race as identical. The "rear-guard" status applied to black middle-class writings bases its charge on the belief that their literary efforts accepted and promoted white, middle-class cultural values and norms; this charge is executed "without interrogating the role of ideology in shaping the period."3

Without acknowledging the creative and social parameters erected around female Harlemite novelists, or the ideological imperatives imposed upon the identity of "black female middle-

3DuCille, p. 69.
class novelists," any discussion of Larsen and Fauset's work loses its historical relevance in the field of black female sexuality. Thus, recognition of their works as distinctively black female voices from the Harlem Renaissance is crucial. Larsen and Fauset's work cannot be interpreted as transhistorical, elastic expressions, stretching beyond the period; it is this rooting within the Renaissance period which makes their work a palpable, viable form for the historical discussion of black female sexuality.

Writers of the Renaissance lacked the "luxury" to broadcast multiple messages to white America,7 and despite some disparity in the forms which creative expression should assume (among male writers), there was consensus on the objective of black literature. The agenda of the Harlem literati was not the social uplift of nineteenth century reformers, but rather the assertion of the fundamental commonality of blacks and whites. Functioning as a "racial ameliorative,"7 black writers adopted the responsibility of attaining social parity with whites. Despite the political rationale behind such thinking, black writers, spurred on by the "magic of the era,"7 struggled to legitimize their

7Giddings, When and Where I Enter, p. 190.


7Gloria Hull states that historians, in analyzing the political and social forces behind the Renaissance, have "de-emphasized the magic of the era." See Gloria T. Hull's Color, Sex and Poetry in the Harlem
blackness, infusing into their work proud acceptance of their race. ⁷⁷

For female writers to be accepted into the elite, literary circle they had to adhere to certain expectations. Participation of female writers in the crusade for race-proud literature required their rejection of primitivist depictions of black female sexuality. While male novelists were free to explore issues of sexuality, their novels easily accessing the erotic and sensational,⁷⁸ the novels of Larsen and Fauset broach sexual issues with greater trepidation and significantly less latitude. Harlem writer and poet Langston Hughes' "Bodies in the Moonlight," which appeared in The Messenger in 1927 reflects this male primitivist privilege.⁷⁹ Its subtitle, "Two Men and a Girl Under the African Stars," and its illustration depicting a half-dressed "native" woman, casual and relaxed in her undress, summarizes the story's


⁷⁸The most well-known and explicit examples of "primitive" black sexuality in the literature of the period are Carl Van Vechten's Nigger Heaven (1926) and Claude McKay's Home to Harlem (1928).

⁷⁹By the end of World War I, Americans seeking to escape the increasingly complex lifestyle of modern technology and urbanization looked to different cultures for simplicity and spirituality. This "cult of primitivism" has been discussed extensively in historical analyses of the 1920's. See Chapter I of this thesis, which discusses the "primitivist" influence on the shaping and execution of New Negro ideology.
text. Nunuma, an African eighteen-year-old, whose lips were like "flower petals," is a "slender dark young girl, ripe breasts bare, a single strip of cloth about her body." In this short story, whose publication can be attributed to The Messenger's more radical editorial position (as compared to DuBois's Crisis), Hughes' work represents male freedom to explore sexuality in its most "primitive" form. W.E.B. DuBois, one of the period's most authoritative spokespersons of black culture and politics, described Claude McKay's Home to Harlem (1928), one of the period's most overtly "primitivist" novels, as so "nauseating" that it made it him "feel...like taking a bath." Despite the reproof of DuBois and other influential Renaissance thinkers, male writers did employ this "primitivism."

The "primitive" urge of the period effectively commodified the black experience, and publishing houses scrambled to fulfil the desires of its white reading public for black subject matter. Literary critic Thadious M. Davis argues that due to the driving imperative for black literature in the publishing world, black writers during the Renaissance

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period were "just as often made as born." Although the question of "what is art?" is rank with philosophical complexity, there is no doubt that the open market for "all things black" resulted in the 1920's in a proliferation of black literature previously unwitnessed. Analyzing the "prurient demand" of publishers and the reading public, W.E.B. DuBois assessed this primitivist passion as a "decadent return of the white American world" to a belief in the "lascivious sexual promiscuity" of black characters in literature.

Depictions of blacks that diverted from this primitivism and articulated the "higher emotions and love life of upper-class Negroes" were often received in a "cool" manner, for "it is assumed that all non Anglo-Saxons are uncomplicated stereotypes." The lukewarm reception reflected not only the white reading public's atavistic appetite but also its need to amplify the other-ness of the Negro race. Jessie Fauset, whose work faced heavy attack from blacks for its "whiteness" and perceived de-racialization of black literary representations, consciously refused to perpetuate the "idée fixe" of white publishers and readers, whom she criticized for not being "better sports about work that did not succumb to

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current fashion."35

The practicality of appealing to publishing houses and the desire for acceptance into the Harlem literati were two separate but interconnecting necessities for a writer's success. Larsen and Fauset recognized these inimical imperatives, and as black women, they found themselves in a familiar position; the "double jeopardy"36 was certainly realized and articulated within their works. Battling the contradictory ideological demands of both the publishing houses and the "Talented Tenth," Larsen and Fauset faced an ominous (and almost impossible) task in depicting black women from a complex intertwining of social, political and ideological imperatives: expectations that Barbara Christian describes as a "heavy cloak of theological terror."37

Addressing "The Last Taboo", historian Paula Giddings attributes the relative silence of black women about black female sexuality to the "brutal concept of binary opposition," a conceptualization that served the purpose of controlling the new social fluidity of the Northern post-segregation early


twentieth century urban world. By creating polarities of black and white, male and female, public and private, society erected barriers to public discourse. Thus, in limiting the "primitive" expression of sexuality to black men, the Harlem literati advocated a dichotomized discourse of black sexuality.

Boundaries in place, Jessie Fauset, literary editor of The Crisis from 1919-1926, knew the intimate aspects of acquired respectability, acknowledged the necessity of male approval, and recognized the parameters within which her work must operate. Born into an old distinguished Philadelphia family, and part of "the aristocracy of the Negro population in education, wealth and general social efficiency," Fauset exemplified the ideal of the black bourgeois woman. More educated than most women, white or black, Fauset was an ideal candidate for the position of literary editor, a position she successfully held from 1919-1926. Looming large over Fauset was the presence of W.E.B. DuBois, who undoubtedly was the period's most influential thinker. Often dubbed the "midwife" of the Harlem literati, who performed "a yeoman's work for the


Negro Renaissance,"³ Fauset did not go unrecognized. Her consistent work, her support of upcoming writers, and her many short stories and articles ultimately assured the endorsement of her novels by those with whom she so intimately worked.

Reflective of both her class position and the agenda of the Renaissance to depict black social parity with whites, Fauset's short stories and novels depict black women in the class which she lived in and knew. Alain Locke's review of Fauset's first novel There is Confusion (1924) endorses and encourages her presentation of the black female middle-class experience. Locke says:

But here in refreshing contrast with the bulk of fiction about the Negro, we have a novel of the educated and aspiring classes. Miss Fauset had, however, not made the error of growing rootless flowers...it is essentially a novel of blood and ancestry.... ⁴

By contrast, Nella Larsen was herself somewhat of a "rootless flower;" her bourgeois status was an acquisition rather than a birthright. The child of a black West Indian father and a white Danish mother, Larsen spent her childhood in urban, working-class Chicago. Larsen's movement to New York positioned her as a psychological outsider in the close-knit literary circle of Harlem, for Larsen was "deprived...of


specificity and status among bourgeois African Americans who valued family background as a mainstay of identity."33 Unlike Fauset, Larsen desired recognition and placement and was driven to attain that which she had never personally known; "[she] manifested a desire for access to power connected to wealth, to middle-class comfort, to public life, to male privilege, to white people and to artistic communities."34

Striving for acceptance into the circle of the Harlem literati35 did not thwart Larsen's integrity as a writer. Although Larsen's work remained within the established parameters of proper black female literary discourse, she envisioned herself "as an artist, not a propagandist of the race."36 Despite being both financially and socially less secure than Fauset, Larsen reflected in her writing a somewhat more critical and daring expose of the sexuality of black middle-class women. Perhaps Larsen's willingness to explore the contradictions and limitations of the black bourgeoisie is attributable to her "foreign origins," to her movement from working class to middle class, or to her individual spirit.


34Davis, Nella Larsen, p.6.


36Davis, Nella Larsen, p. 245. Davis maintains that although Larsen certainly made great efforts to be accepted into the literary circle, she adhered to her sensibility as a writer and was consequently deemed a "racial renegade." p. 12.
Whatever the reason, Larsen augmented traditional expressions and expectations of female sexuality within her novels, demonstrating her need to surpass "tangible rewards and practical results....Her desire was to create art that would courageously function to control the self and nature, that would simultaneously express herself and transcend self." 

Larsen and Fauset not only articulated the concerns of the race but also used these concerns to address the obscured sexual identity of black women. Their characters are wracked with the problem that persists well into the late twentieth century; freedom for women and their sexuality is not compatible with the progress of the race. Both women created their main characters in roles not dissimilar from their own realities or that of other black middle-class women. Although their works are not autobiographical, Larsen and Fauset infused into their characters' psyche their understanding of the crisis of being black and female and sexual in white America in the 1920's.

Published in three instalments, "The Sleeper Wakes" (1920) is one of Fauset's earliest short stories; its heroine is Amy—a very light-skinned adolescent foster child of the Boldins, a black family of moderate income. Literary critic Deborah E. McDowell notes the importance of Amy's being introduced as an adolescent, in "a stage of becoming, of

'Davis, Nella Larsen, p. 243.'
maturing," a stage that is often viewed as a period of possibility and promise. Through Amy's adolescent character Fauset elucidates the possibilities for black women in the 1920's, possibilities that are circumscribed by "both how she [Amy] perceives herself, based on socialization, as well as how society perceives her." Enthralled by the whiteness of her external beauty and her internalization of its worth, Amy escapes to New York propelled by an intangible sense that there "something wonderful" awaited her. For two years, Amy passes as white and remains "unspoiled, untouched," and Fauset, articulating the dominant ideology of the respectable black woman, attributes her chastity not to the external influences of "morality or religion," but to Amy's "unfired" nature. Passing as white, Amy meets and marries Stuart Wynne, an wealthy middle-aged white man. Unaware that Amy is colored, the marriage progresses smoothly. But when sickened by Wynne's racist attitudes, Amy reveals that she too is colored, the perfect marriage ends abruptly and Amy is forced to re-evaluate much of what she had believed to be real. When Amy decides to return home to her black foster family, her resolution is not a sleep-walker's stroll, but the conscious decision of a mature woman who recognizes her personal worth


in opposition to white society's stereotypes.

Considered her best work, Fauset's second novel *Plum Bun* (1928) addresses the complexities of being black and female in America in the 1920's.°° *Plum Bun's* heroine Angela Murray is a mulatto woman with "no high purpose in life," who after her parents' death, leaves behind her dark-skinned sister and heads to New York to acquire the life of which she has always dreamed. There Angela passes for white, and despite her intentions to remain chaste, she becomes intimately involved with wealthy and white Roger Fielding. When Roger discards Angela, chastising her for her weak moral standards, Angela begins to rebuild her life. By the end of the novel, Angela—jeopardizing her future as an artist—reveals that she is black and is "rewarded" by securing the opportunity to study in Paris and the love of the sensitive (and black) Anthony Cross.

In *Quicksand* (1928),°°° the first of her two novels, Larsen chronicles the emotional disintegration of Helga Crane, a young mulatto woman of great sensitivity and limited options

°°°Fauset's other novels are *There is Confusion* (1924), *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931), and *Comedy, American Style* (1933).

°° Although Larsen wrote several short stories including "The Wrong Man" (1926) and "Freedom" (1926), she published only two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929). Larsen's last published work, a short story entitled "Sanctuary" (1930) was charged as being plagiarized. Although the charge was overturned, that defamation plus her divorce in 1933 effectively discouraged Larsen's activity as a writer. She returned to her career as a nurse and died alone in her New York apartment in 1964.
to whom the reader is introduced at Naxos, a Southern educational institution. Despite "s[eking] psychological refuge in the world of the black bourgeoisie,...[Larsen] vacillated in her attitudes toward that very class,"\textsuperscript{122} and it is through Helga Crane that Larsen voices her protest. Despite the practicality of economic security, Helga quits her teaching job at Naxos, which she finds to be "a place of shame, lies, hypocrisies, cruelty, servility and snobbishness."\textsuperscript{103} Abandoning the South, Helga travels to "gray Chicago" with little money or job prospects, but is nonetheless happy to be freed from the "cage" of Naxos. Helga's departure from the South and migration to the North initiate a series of physical journeys that intimate her struggle for psychological and sexual self-identity. Although Larsen allows Helga sufficient opportunity to travel and explore various cultural and physical environments, Helga's quest is ultimately unfulfilling. In each new setting—Chicago, Harlem, Copenhagen and back to Harlem—Larsen demonstrates that society (both black and white) allowed no space for the individual black woman to independently create her identity—sexual, emotional or racial: despite Helga's itinerant excursions her body is locked in a male-dominated ideological prison.

When Helga finally tries to address her sexual desires,

\textsuperscript{122}Davis, Nella Larsen, p.8.

\textsuperscript{103}Ibid., p.14.
she is rejected and she seeks final refuge in religious conversion; the scene of her conversion signifies both sexual and emotional sanctuary. Quicksand concludes with Helga's marriage to a preacher, her return to the South and her fall into the fatalistic quicksand of her black female body. Thus, Larsen demonstrates the ideological sexual terrorism that sheathed black women; the 1920's ideology of black female sexuality liquidated into a quicksand which, despite the efforts or struggles of black women, engulfed them whole into a bottomless mire of over-mediated sexual identity.

As creative outputs of the Harlem Renaissance—a movement whose politics and purpose strove to amend the legacy of an over-sexualized past—"The Sleeper Wakes," Plum Bun and Quicksand's representations of black female sexuality are products of the authors' blending innovation with tradition. Without male intellectual endorsement Larsen and Fauset could not freely invent ways to explore issues of sexuality: they needed to remain within the closely laid-out parameters of sexual expression in literature. But Larsen and Fauset faced an additional problem which also required their reliance on literary traditions: merging black female sexuality into their works, they—as black women writers—had no literary example to follow. Thus Larsen and Fauset employed traditional literary modes of expression; they utilized the readily recognizable and approved conventions to traverse the taboo
discourse of black female sexuality. Their innovation created nuanced versions of the tragic mulatta, the fairy tale heroine and the passing prodigal which choreographed the sexual limbo of middle-class black women.

When represented by whites in literature black women were stereotypically depicted as either the Mammy, the Jezebel or the Tragic Mulatta; these depictions manipulated the sexuality of black women by either negating or over-sexualizing black women. An easily recognized literary convention, the mulatta woman was the least reprehensible literary image of black women. Nineteenth-century black writers used the "tragic mulatta" as a mode of enlisting white sympathy; the character's partial whiteness somehow eradicated or at the very least minimized her blackness, hence making her more acceptable. But despite this sympathetic reception, the mulatta remained throughout the nineteenth century a tragic creature whose traditional function was to characterize the sin of miscegenation and its failure to produce a sexually restrained and rational woman; the supposed innate lasciviousness of blacks was portrayed as impervious even to the superior strain of white blood. Ironically, the mulatta figure reinforced the differences between the races while simultaneously acting as a constant reminder that she

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"Priscilla Ramsay, "Freeze the Day: A Feminist Reading of Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Passing," p. 38."
was the defective product of black and white sexual union.\textsuperscript{105}

One inherent danger of using a figure as well-known as the mulatta is identified by literary critic, Nathan Huggins, who argues that in making her characters both mulatta and female, Larsen lost all licence to creatively develop her characters\textsuperscript{106}: pre-conditioned, the (often white) audience was unable to see beyond the convention to perceive any true depth of character.\textsuperscript{107} But Huggins too is limited in his understanding of Larsen’s mulatta; he fails to recognize that despite using the convention to explore the dilemmas facing black bourgeois women, Larsen inverts its traditional employment. The downfall of Larsen’s mulatta women results not from their innate sexual weakness, but from society, which imposes new strains of infection to which they have not yet developed immunity.\textsuperscript{108} Most readers accepted the mulatta’s sexual turmoil as part of the literary tradition; by using the mulatta figure Larsen and Fauset were able to create sexual black female characters without violating the Renaissance’s mandate to avoid all primitive depictions. The familiarity of the mulatta figure desensitized readers to the crises of

\textsuperscript{105}Carby, Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist, p.91.


\textsuperscript{108}Christian, p. 53.
racial, gender and sexual ideology; the ready recognition of the mulatta as a literary symbol made her one-dimensional in representation. Perhaps this failure to see beyond the convention was understood by Larsen and Fauset, and they chose the mulatta figure deliberately for this reason. The mulatta "mask" and the conditioned narrowness of audience analysis, permitted them and their black female readers—experienced practitioners of sexual re-invention within a "cult of secrecy"—to express, to analyze and to re-invent their sexualities. In using and playing on the existing conventions, Larsen made a subtle statement on the obscured sexual crises of black women.

At first glance, it appears that the use of the mulatta in race-proud Renaissance literature—a period when "white ancestry and Caucasian features became less crucial in determining members of the social elite"—is paradoxical. But despite the period's theoretical downplaying of whiteness, lightness of skin and the texture of hair remained important determinants of beauty, femininity and ultimately respectability. So pervasive was the white aesthetic that the wealthiest black woman of the period, A'Leila Walker, had amassed her wealth by inheriting her mother's lucrative business in hair-straightening products.

The white female aesthetic ideal impinges upon the


110 Davis, Nella Larsen, p. 5.
realities of Larsen and Fauset's characters, and demonstrates that black women in America possess no ideal black image of womanhood. Amy, Fauset's protagonist of "The Sleeper Wakes," recognizes this marginalization of black female beauty, for Amy "[g]rowing up as the average colored American girl does grow up, surrounded by types of every hue, color and facial configuration had no absolute ideal. She was not even aware there was one."\textsuperscript{11} Far from being a standardized (and accepted) concept, black female beauty remained undefined in the 1920's. In a movement which valued both blackness and womanhood, the two never merged to create an image—distinct from the white model—of women who were both black and beautiful.

The ideology of New Negro womanhood championed the historically denied femininity of black women; as historian Paula Giddings notes, it was "femininity, not feminism [that] was the talk of the twenties."\textsuperscript{12} Historically constructed as white, the femininity of Larsen and Fauset's black characters was imperative to making them attractive and acceptable representations of black women. Thus, Larsen and Fauset in keeping with the ideology of the period emphasized (somewhat overly-so) the "femininity" of their black female characters: they are delicate, almost to the point of fragility. They are


\textsuperscript{12}Giddings, \textit{When and Where I Enter}, pp. 184–185.
not dark-skinned mammies (unattractive and non-sexual to white readers) but dainty creatures with "biscuit-colored feet."\(^{12}\)

Larsen and Fauset's characters' being light-skinned beauties in the "high tide of youth"\(^{14}\) serves a practical purpose: they are able to "pass". Formulated as a literary convention in the nineteenth century, passing for white permitted the characters to move and position themselves as commentators on both the black and white worlds. Although both Larsen and Fauset's characters are able to pass for white, it is Fauset who uses the device of passing much more consistently: her characters utilize their ability to "pass" and it is a passage which is ultimately disastrous. Passing as white Amy ("The Sleeper Wakes") meets and marries Stuart James Wynne, a wealthy middle-aged white man; the smooth progression of the marriage is based on Amy's passing. Fauset's depiction of Amy as a wealthy white woman underscores the limitation of the gender roles available to respectable women; Amy is "content to let her days pass by," being treated "like a well-cared for, sleek, house-pet, delicately nurtured, velvety."\(^{15}\) When Amy reveals that she too is colored, Wynne's love for her ceases promptly; he later returns with an offer

\(^{12}\) Nella Larsen, Quicksand, (1928; rpt. with introduction by Deborah E. McDowell, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1986), p.11


to make the now-colored Amy his mistress. Amy, who until this point still believes that it is she the woman who is loved and desired, finally awakens to the reality that her colored beauty is futile: she is merely a sexual object, one that is both despised and wanted.  

Fauset demonstrates that the internalization of race and gender ideology occur early in the lives of Americans. The benefits of "passing" for white are learned early by Plum Bun's Angela Murray who, as a child, knows that "colour or rather the lack of it seemed...the one absolute prerequisite to the life which she was always dreaming." It is from her white mother that Angela learns to manipulate her fairness of skin, and to employ "the winning usages of smile and voice to obtain indulgences." Fauset indicates that passing for white is one way for mulatta women to obtain economic security and material comfort: necessities essential to the survival of both black and white women.

Although passing is utilized as a thematic device, Fauset's works transcend the moralistic tale of the passing prodigal and indicate the limited options available to black women. The apparent ease which with a mulatta could "pass" off

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"Ibid., p.15.
her blackness elucidates her necessity to escape the austere realities of being black and female in the 1920's. If she did not use the "privilege" of being able to access the world of white America, the mulatta woman remained yoked to the same harsh realities as all black women; she differed only in her ability to attain economic security through passing as white. This need for economic protection and security lies as a fundamental base upon which the sexual and emotional crises of the literary characters are developed. Plum Bun's Angela Murray attracts a pool of suitors from which two men emerge with relative promise: Anthony Cross, a portrait painter of limited wealth and infinite sensitivity, and Roger Fielding, whose wealth offers the status and economic security of marriage. Subtitled A Novel Without A Moral, Fauset's Plum Bun addresses the hard economics of sexual politics in the 1920's. Deciding that "she was no sentimentalist," and "wanted none of Anthony's poverty and privation and secret vows," Angela choose to receive Roger's courtship knowing that "his wealth and his golden recklessness" were "golden keys which could open the doors to beauty and ease and decency." Thus, Fauset uses this convention to elucidate that passing is one way mulatta women attempt to overcome their limited economic possibilities.

The fairy tale is another traditional literary device

\(^{13}Ibid, p.143.\)

\(^{12}Ibid., p.142.\)
crucial to understanding Fauset's work. In its conventional application, the fairy tale assumes and defends the gender roles prescribed and instituted by white culture: roles historically used (by whites) to underscore the difference of blacks, while simultaneously denying them ownership of approved gender identities. Fauset's story, "The Sleeper Wakes," employs and comments critically on the fairy-tale mode of story telling—a pattern to which Fauset consistently returns.121 Fauset does not simply overlay the stencil of the fairy tale onto the black experience; Fauset's fairy-like tales underscore the crises of identification beleaguering black women in the 1920's; in Fauset's fairy tales there are no black Cinderellas, and Snow White is not a mulatta. Instead of merely reiterating the fairy-tale of love, marriage and womanhood, Fauset augments the convention to include and critically assess the crises of the contemporary black woman. Fauset emphasizes the impracticality and insufficiency of the options opened to black women by demonstrating that her sleeping beauties are awakened not by the kiss of some Prince Charming but instead must revive themselves from their stultifying slumber. Amy, the romantic and beautiful protagonist of Fauset's "The Sleeper Wakes," fails to heed the warning that "pretty girl pictures...are not always true to

having internalized the romanticized goal of marriage
she believes that her only value is "her beauty...[that] could
stir men."

Throughout the first two parts of Fauset's *Plum Bun*,
entitled "Home" and "To Market," protagonist Angela
respectively receives, consolidates and then executes the
ideology of the period. Seeking to attain the "fairy tale" of
"father, mother, children, well-dressed, well-fed, united,
going to church on a beautiful Sunday morning," Angela sees
"an immense cosmic rightness about all of this that she sensed
rather than realized." Again, Fauset proves the
infiltration of an ideology that demands passivity of women:
Angela's desires are not consciously constructed but
internalized under societal anaesthesia. When rudely
awakened, Angela realizes that her prince is not that charming
and that the fairy-tale ideals passed on to black women are
destructive and unsatisfying.

Although the sleeper does wake, Fauset's characters
regain consciousness when their newly-revealed blackness
underscores the reality that black women cannot live-happily-
ever-after in the picture book of white America. This is
Fauset's way of working in the enigmatic position of black
womanhood, but it also demonstrates that the fairy-tale

122 Jessie Fauset, "The Sleeper Wakes," *The Crisis* 20, n.4 (August

ideology--defective when applied to black womanhood--may be more easily attained by white women. So perhaps Snow White must be white: her serene slumber and handsome prince, by Fauset's intimation, may be successfully internalized and enacted by white women. By employing the fairy tale to examine race and sexuality, Fauset essentially dictates that black women cannot adopt the white woman's dream; and a Snow White existence may not be as romantic as it appears.

In addition to using traditional literary conventions, Fauset and Larsen struggled to develop ways to explore their characters' sexual crises. Lacking the legacy of tradition or example, both writers faced their own "symbol-making task." Cleverly, Fauset and Larsen adopted traditional symbols re-inventing them to create a unique discourse on black female sexuality, a discourse which critically examined the ideology of respectable sexuality. Larsen and Fauset's representation of black female sexuality was anything but laudatory: their depictions of sexuality demonstrate that society denied black women any right to self-definition. But the final section of this chapter contends that their critical assessment of the sexual and racial ideology is positive in the sense that for the first time in history black women--using traditional metaphors and themes--re-modelled the range of black women's

sexual expression from their own production tables. I will examine the use of metaphoric devices of sexuality as food/appetite and as clothes/beauty, as well as the categorizations of sexuality as power, as love and as motherhood/biological entrapment; by studying their use of metaphors and categorizations this section examines how Larsen and Fauset critically defined black female sexuality.
When we live outside ourselves, ...on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's.\textsuperscript{125}

Living "outside" of themselves, the female characters in the works of Fauset and Larsen are reticent to embrace the erotic as a resource of power, for they have "been taught to suspect this resource, vilified, abused, and devalued within western society," and have been "made to suffer and to feel both contemptible and suspect by virtue of its existence."\textsuperscript{125} Having neither recognized nor embraced the power of their sexuality, these literary characters internalize society's ideology of black women's sexuality, and hence, they accept (and reflect) distorted versions of power.

Buying into the fairy-tale dream of marriage as a woman's goal, Fauset's Angela Murray in Plum Bun sells what she believes is her only asset—her sexuality—to attain her goal; and her price tag for the trade-off is marriage. Fauset lifts the title "Plum Bun" replete with sexual innuendo from the nursery rhyme:


\textsuperscript{124}Ibid., p. 53.
To Market, To Market,
To Buy a Plum Bun;
Home Again, Home Again
Market is Done

The simplicity of the rhyme is eclipsed by the gravity of Angela’s commodification of her own sexuality. Thinking herself the subject and believing she wields power in the marketplace, Angela essentially commodifies her sexuality, making herself the object.\textsuperscript{127} Recognizing the commercial realities of trade, Angela knows that despite the cryptic nature of the negotiation it is still “a game, and the hardest game in the world for a woman...; the hardest in which to strike a happy medium,” and success at the “game” requires a woman’s care “not to withhold too much and yet to give very little.”\textsuperscript{128} Despite how attractively Angela presents her “goods,” she awakes to the reality that she has no real power, that black women do not sell in the market, but are mere buyers of insidious ideologies.\textsuperscript{129} By elucidating the bargain of sexuality for marriage as a reality for women, Fauset presents a sombre view of the pervasive ideology of the period, an ideology that denies black women any sexual ownership or integrity.

Believing that “power, greatness, authority,” are

\textsuperscript{127}Deborah E. McDowell, introduction to Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun, p. xxix

\textsuperscript{128}Fauset, Plum Bun, p.131

\textsuperscript{129}Deborah E. McDowell, introduction to Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun, p. xix.
attributes fitting only for men, Angela envisions "sweeter, more beautiful gifts for women, and power of a certain kind too."\textsuperscript{130} Here, Fauset implies that the power available to women is attainable only in "gift" form and that the receptor must, through her beauty and sexual complicity, be "worthy" of its endowment: the gift form is marriage or the promise of it and the power a woman holds is attained only then; she no longer needs to barter sexual favours for economic security--she now holds the power of distributing sexual favors. Thus, "power" is not independently executed, but mandates women's manipulation of their sexuality to convert it into any effective form. The qualification of that power as of a "certain kind" essentially deflates its impact and limits the range of its effectiveness.

"Swimming in the flood of excitement created by her unique position"\textsuperscript{131} of bartering her sexuality for marriage, Angela does not anticipate the possibility of falling in love, for she envisions love as an "enemy with whom she had never thought to reckon."\textsuperscript{132} As Angela's commitment to retain her virginity weakens, Fauset demonstrates that in defence of chastity, society arms women with an armoury of sexual respectability. These weapons do not satisfy the needs of black women for unmediated, loving, sexual expression. The

\textsuperscript{130}Fauset, \textit{Plum Bun}, p. 88

\textsuperscript{131}Ibid., p. 123.

\textsuperscript{132}Ibid., p. 198.
treatment of marriage as a business deal supports the ideology of Victorian bourgeois ladyhood and allows no leeway for sexual expression based on non-pragmatic, non-goal oriented sexual intimacy. Successfully disarmed, Angela is seduced by Roger's expression of love and relinquishes her virginity in the belief that she has attained the internalized ideal of love, sex and marriage.

Helga Crane, Nella Larsen's protagonist in *Quicksand* is also aware that her sexual power is "queer, indefinite" and fills her with "a sensation amounting almost to shame." 133 Helga's ability to render her fiancé James Vayle into "mute helplessness" emanates solely from the "ancient appeal" of her sexuality.134 Larsen demonstrates that the apparent "power" imbedded in black female sexuality is based on the cultural over-sexualization of black women; thus its use, real or perceived, becomes ineffective.

"Incited," Helga arrives in Copenhagen prepared to "inflame attention and admiration," 135 and believes the "performance" 136 of her blackness and sexuality is a

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135 I use the word "performance" here, because I believe Helga's actions in Copenhagen reflect her inner desire to re-construct herself and her sexuality. But without having arrived at a true sense of what that encompasses, she "performs", acting out a persona, which in its difference from her previous life in Harlem can only be seen as an outward manipulation of her own sexuality.
celebration of sorts. Whereas Harlem ideology demanded Helga's respectable "ladyhood," Copenhagen quickly makes Helga into "some new and strange species of pet dog" to be "proudly exhibited," thus reducing her to the most extreme form of "primitive other." No longer "powerful," Helga realizes that her sexual and racial identity are inextricably interwoven. By Helga's oscillation between Harlem and Copenhagen, Larsen demonstrates that the competing ideologies of black female sexuality, while ensuring "social survival," allow no room for sexual self-definition; and the inevitable outcome of this rigidity is "psychological suicide" for black women. Lacking the power to define themselves sexually, black women's sexual identities relied on external manifestations; Larsen and Fauset demonstrated various metaphoric forms of sexual expression society made available to black women.

Great, almost exaggerated attention is paid to the character's mode of dress. While the desensitized reader may interpret this adornment as a mere affectation of bourgeois women, a feminist reader interprets the expression or repression of sexuality through the clothing in which the characters adorn themselves. As the sole outward, visible expression of a woman's sexuality, modes of dress demand the meticulous attention of the characters.

137Larsen, Quicksand, p.70.
138Cheryl A. Wall, "Passing for What?", p.103.
139Ibid., p.98.
Fauset draws the reader's attention to the materialistic, fractured sense of beauty facing middle-class black women of the period. One scene meets Angela wearing a dress of "flame-colour," "intense and opaque;" it performs its duty to simultaneously en-flame both herself and Roger, suggesting that female sexuality is both consumable and extinguishable. Her dress, deliberately selected, produces a seemingly unexpected reaction for "her appearance excited herself." By draping herself in that which would incite the desire of a man, Angela internalizes this created illusion, and this commodified version of sexuality seeps deeper into her psyche, further objectifying her reality.

Larsen's use of clothing as a mode of sexual expression is crafted with great detail. Helga Crane's journey into the quicksand is intimated by her progressive stages of dress. At the beginning of the novel, we find Helga is at Naxos, a southern black institution that apes the values of white society. Larsen's antipathy for the South and institutions like Tuskegee is brutally apparent in the opening chapter of Quicksand, where Helga's "gaze wandered contemptuously over the dull attire of the women...Fragments of a speech...floated

\footnote{Larsen, Quicksand, p.122.}

\footnote{Established by Booker T. Washington in 1881, the Tuskegee Institute promoted industrial and agricultural education for blacks. Based on the philosophy of self-help, Tuskegee appealed to both blacks and whites; the appeal to whites being the continuing black execution of subservient roles which would benefit the New South. Larsen, who attended Fisk, an all black Southern university, and later acted as a head nurse at Tuskegee, abhorred the subservient roles which blacks insisted upon perpetuating.}
through her thoughts - 'Bright colours are vulgar-'." Helga's voice conveys, of course, Larsen's own contempt for the bourgeois rejection of all "primitive" depictions of black-ness. As historian Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham argues, the ideology of respectable black womanhood demanded that "each individual assume responsibility for behavioural self-regulation;" the immodesty of brightly colored clothing and the attention they called forth "dissipated the high ideals of young women." The alleged "vulgarity" of bright colours on dark bodies supports the ideological imperative to achieve social parity with whites, and inspires Helga's mental composition--"A Plea for Color."

After the reunion with Robert Anderson, the former principal of Naxos, Helga "tried to jeer at herself for being so moved." Desire-filled, she decides that "she was about to fly," and carefully adorns herself in a "cobwebby black net" that was "too décolleté, and too outré." Seemingly risqué and ripe, Helga nonetheless traps her sexuality, contains it within the net; the crisscrossing mesh reflective of her own sexual confusion. The scene of her religious conversion meets Helga in a "red clinging dress;" she is, to

142Larsen, Quicksand, p.18.
144Larsen, Quicksand, p.49.
145Ibid., p.56.
the congregation, the scarlet woman incarnate. Laden with unfulfilled sexual desire, Helga "Goes to Jesus," her red dress and orgiastic conversion symbolizing the urgency of her desires and her ensuing panic for its containment. Larsen's use of clothing cleverly chronicles Helga's formidable quest for sexual expression.

Supporting the ideal of passive female sexuality, the ideology of the period extends into the relation between sex and appetite. Appetite as a physiological form is represented as an en-gendered form of consumption, mandating what women must consume. Implicit in the discussion of appetite is the parallelism of sexuality as a consuming force. Fauset's character Angela Murray is amazed at the appetite of her sexually unchaste friend Paulette, who eats "a meal more for a working-man than a woman...of the faery quality of Paulette." 146 Despite Paulette's dainty demeanour, her consumption of huge meals underscores her sexual appetite, which in its abundance betrays her "ladyhood." Fauset cleverly uses this scene to emphasize the narrowness of the ideology that relegates women to a desire-less existence; the appetite for food and that for sex are construed as interchangeable and representative modes of expression.

Unlike Fauset, Larsen does not rely on physiological appetite as a metaphoric device. She writes more directly

146 Fauset, Plum Bun, p.104. It is interesting to note that the meal is assumed for a "working-man," suggesting that a man who earns a living, is entitled to a larger, more substantial meal than a woman who does not.
appetite as a metaphoric device. She writes more directly about sex and her characters attempt to contain their appetite for sex. Throughout the novel Quicksand, Helga Crane battles with her own sexual desire, a desire which is not in keeping with the dominant ideology of female sexuality. Unable to validate her sexual desire in a society that construes black female desire as "primitive," Helga, in catching a glimpse of desire on the face of a friend, finds it "fascinating, but fearful too." Helga fears her own sexual desires which society takes as "a sign of female inferiority." 147 Consequently, she becomes consumed, not only by her desires, but also by her guilt for failing at her proscribed role of a "lady."

Unable to act upon her desires, Helga converts her sexual needs into sensual pleasure. Dancing at a Harlem night club. Helga feels "drugged, lifted, sustained, ...blown out, ripped out, beaten out;" and any pleasure attained is negated by "a shameful certainty that not only told her that she had been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it." 148 Here Larsen demonstrates the crippling effects of the dominant ideology, which positions black sexual desire as existing only in the pit of primitivism. 149

147Audre Lorde, p.53.
148Larsen, Quicksand, p.59.
Converting sexual desire into love, she translates a passion-filled kiss with Robert Anderson into a promise of something more (marriage). Helga, unable to easily reconcile her passions with her position, sinks deeper into the "quicksand" by buying further into the romantic ideals presented to women. Finally, Helga is willing to concede to "a long-hidden, half-understood desire," which "burned in her flesh with uncontrollable desire." Throughout the novel, Helga's need to control her desires is based on her internalization of a "lady's sexuality;" she was always the object of desire and never found a subject to whom she could express her own physical needs. As the object of desire Helga experienced "acute nausea...r(ising) in her as she recalled the slight quivering of his [her former fiancé's] lips sometimes when her hands had unexpectedly touched his." Now as the subject of desire Helga's physical repulsion is cured by her love for Robert Anderson; Helga's belief that she loves Anderson underscores her attempt to validate the "unrespectable" sexual desires which rise within her. Helga's conversion of desire into love illuminates the limited and limiting opportunities for black women to express themselves sexually.

When Helga does marry, her marriage finally sanctions her

\[^{151}\text{Larsen, Quicksand, p.104.}\]
\[^{151}\text{Ibid., p.109}\]
\[^{152}\text{Ibid., p.24.}\]
sexual experiences, which she again translates as spurred by love: they are "[E]motional. Palpitating, amorous, all that was living in her sprang like rank weeds...with a vitality so strong that it devoured all shoots of reason."\textsuperscript{153} Larsen, however, does not conclude with Helga's sexual fulfilment, but dramatizes Helga's final demise. Larsen, herself childless, critiques the harsh realities of reproduction. Finally, Helga's sexuality consumes and betrays her. Through numerous pregnancies, Helga is caught in the vicious cycle of giving life and attaining death.

Almost on her deathbed, the "filmy crepe nightgown slipped from one carved shoulder." Her husband's desire is "like a flick of the whip;" at her moment of illness and vulnerability his desire is "a fresh reminder of her desirability."\textsuperscript{154} Larsen underscores the irony, the double standards of the dominant ideology, which will ultimately bury Helga before her time. Helga's restraint, her search for sexual control, her immense guilt at feeling pleasure, her belief in sex as an expression of romantic love are all shadowed by a dark reality. Despite any effort of nobility, ladyhood or restraint, middle-class black women of the period possessed no rightful claim to define their own sexuality; they remained, within the stifling sexist ideology, mute, immutable sexual objects.

\textsuperscript{153}Larsen, \textit{Quicksand}, p.122.

\textsuperscript{154}\textit{Ibid.}, p.129.
Larsen and Fauset, remaining within the established parameters of proper black literary etiquette, manipulated the conventions to elucidate the sexual restrictions imposed upon black American women. They illustrated the realities of black female sexuality: the necessary bondage of sexuality to marriage for economic support; the perception of self-actuated female desire as detrimental to black respectability; and the constant battle of black women to repudiate the long history of pejorative sexual stereotyping. Their ability to do so, despite their own immersion in the identity and responsibilities of black middle-class novelists, indicates that, despite the difficulty of sexual self re-definition, this was not a wholly impossible task. And it was this battle that another group of women, the blues women of the 1920's transported onto the stage and etched onto phonographic recordings; they created a sexual discourse similar in effort to Larsen and Fauset but unique in enterprise. Projecting their voices and visions to black audiences in new urban areas, these women insisted that the societal construction of sexuality failed to offer any understanding of black women's sexual realities. And it is from the discontent with the construction--from the blue-ness of their lives--that there emerged another viable expression of black female sexuality.
sing a black girl's song
bring her out
to know herself
to know you
but sing her rhythms
carin/struggle/hard times
sing her song of life
she's been so long dead
she doesn't know the sound
of her own voice
her infinite beauty
she's half-notes/scattered
without rhythm/no tune
sing her sighs
sing the song of possibilities
sing a righteous gospel
let her be born
& handled warmly.

-Ntozake Shange
For Colored Girls who have
Considered Suicide (1974)
Traditionally sung as Negro work songs, the blues of the 1920's evolved into an intricate and emotionally laden form of expression for black Americans. Possessing all the "diverse and conflicting elements of Negro music," the "classic blues" of the 1920's are so defined because "it was the first Negro music that appeared in a formal context as entertainment, though it still contained the harsh, uncompromising reality of the earlier blues forms." The classic blues transformed the blues from a private ritual to public entertainment: no longer were the blues sung in isolation, or to families, or to small groups of kin and kind; beginning in 1920 they were now recorded, packaged, advertised and sold to both black and white America. Classic blues not only introduced what was considered traditionally black music to the American mainstream, but it also brought distinctly black female voices expressing explicitly black women's issues to the forefront of 1920's America. In a decade not unique in its domination by white men there is, in the classic blues, a rare display of not only female hegemony, but the hegemony of black women. It was not the voices of black men that permeated the walls of cabarets or recording studios in America; rather the blues

decade was almost exclusively controlled by women.

The sale of black cultural sentiment via recorded music is a fundamental component of any discussion of the 1920's blues decade. First recorded in 1920, the classic blues altered black individual expressions into an art form that transcended the regional, particular or private. The phonograph, an important feature in both urban and rural homes, mobilized the recorded blues and transformed a previously private ritual into a public expression. In a period characterized by mass consumerism and technological advances, the 1920's provided blacks (and whites) with new modes of cultural and social production. Blacks finally discovered a small measure of equality in America, at least in the value of their currency to capitalistic enterprise; however, black consumerism (at least in this analysis) should not be viewed in a wholly cynical fashion. Consumption of these products proved not only satisfying but provided expression for the social and cultural needs of black communities. The popularity of recorded music as well as other forms of entertainment is evidenced by Harlem Renaissance novelist Zora Neale Hurston, who, in 1927, commented that "The bulk of the [black] population now spends its leisure time in the motion picture theatres or with the

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phonograph." 

Leroi Jones argues that, in addition to being a cultural phenomenon, the industry of recorded blues was patronized almost religiously by the new Negro consumers in black cities like Harlem and Chicago. Jones reports: "Friday nights after work in those cold gray Jordans of the North, Negro workingmen lined up outside record stores to get the new blues." 

In describing Harlem's cultural and social life, James Weldon Johnson, one of the period's most influential novelists, advocated the white Protestant ethos of thrift and diligent toil as the mainstay of blacks in Harlem. Johnson denounced the stereotype of the black migrant as a crazed consumer, and challenged stories which represented blacks as "primitive" spendthrifts. One such story that Johnson recalls in disgust is that of the black migrant entering "into a general store and on hearing a phonograph for the first time promptly ordered six of them, for each child in the house." Recording this as an exaggerated observation, Johnson nonetheless reinforced the differences between the Old Negro of the South and the New Negro of the North: Johnson says "I shall not stop to discuss whether Negroes in the South did that sort of thing or not, but I do know that those who got to New York didn't. The Negroes of Harlem, for the greater part,

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154 Zora Neale Hurston as quoted in Lawrence L. Levine's, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness*, p.227.

worked and saved their money." Johnson, in avoiding the discussion of Southern Negroes, stigmatized the Negro who indulges in what he construed as primitive over-consumption. Explicit in Johnson's diatribe is the idea that these superficial accoutrements were detrimental to the social success of blacks in urban centres: endorsement of the blues was not a middle-class endeavour.

Although Johnson and other middle and upper-class blacks viewed the blues as a reversion to primitivism, they nevertheless could not escape the influence of the blues due to the pervasive nature of recorded music. Whereas reading or philosophizing are consciously performed activities, audition and the resonance of its effect often permeate the psyche without conscious decision. And despite Garvin Bushell's observation that the blues were not usually played in the middle-class black home as it suggested "a low element,"

Mahalia Jackson, whose own religious upbringing was extremely conservative, commented on the far-reaching influence of the blues. Jackson says: "You couldn't help but hear the blues - all through the thin partitions of the houses - through the open windows - up and down the street i: the colored

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neighbourhoods - everybody played it real loud."\textsuperscript{162}

Despite the ability of the blues to travel beyond its original listener, the classic blues of the 1920's appeased the specific needs of black masses. Most of the urban middle class who had "been in the city so long, [that] they were fully acclimated"\textsuperscript{161} failed to respond to the blues in the same fashion as working-class blacks, the majority of whom were new migrants. The dissimilarity in black reaction to the classic blues is not indicative solely of black class structures; indeed, it supports the thesis that the 1920's was a period of multiple black identities and divergent material realities. It is this spectrum of black realities that gave rise to divergent forms of black female sexual expression because, as Hazel Carby argues, "different cultural forms negotiate and resolve different sets of contradictions."\textsuperscript{162} Consequently, the classic blues of the 1920's remained a largely black working-class phenomenon.

Within the black working-class capitalistic America recognized the value of "the Negro as consumer" who now became

\textsuperscript{162}Mahalia Jackson as quoted in Lawrence L. Levine's \textit{Black Culture and Black Consciousness}, p. 227.

\textsuperscript{161}Jones, p. 128.

"a new and highly lucrative slant," and the market for recorded blues remained "almost exclusively black throughout the 1920's and 1930's." Far from being passive recipients of the selections of recording companies, blacks through massive mailings to the recording companies demanded gratification of their own musical sensibilities. Owned and operated by black businessman Harry Pace, Black Swan Records was one of the period's earliest recording companies. Pressured by the black middle class to "dignify" black musical expression, Black Swan produced far less bluesy or sexually explicit records than other companies. But the musical sensibilities of its black listening (and buying) audience failed to respond to Black Swans's cleaned-up creative output and, in 1924, Pace sold out to Paramount which had "no qualms about recording the rougher, less dignified blues performers."

Originally titled "Harlem Blues," Mamie Smith recorded "Crazy Blues," the first black musical recording in America, and initiated a blues style and sentiment that radically reformed the position and polemic of black American women. Released on Valentine's Day, 1920, Mamie Smith's blues was not a traditional, delicate love song but a sexually syncopated blues. Folklorists Odum and Johnson noted "The majority of

143Jones, p. 101.


145Douglas, pp.392-393 and Jones, pp.128-129.
these female blues are sung from the point of view of a woman...upwards of seventy-five percent of the songs are written from a woman's point of view.\textsuperscript{166}

Predominantly a feminized phenomenon, the classic blues evolved from the employment of black women in minstrelsy and vaudeville.\textsuperscript{167} Prior to the advent of Negro theatre in the late 1890's, the voices of black women were heard only in churches or when "they sang their own personal sadness over brown wood tubs." The development of professional Negro entertainment and its employment of women provided for many black women an opportunity to earn a living in an independent and glamorous fashion. Formerly restricted to work defined as both suitably black and female--volunteer church activities, domestic service, and prostitution--the advent of the Negro theatre presented black women with new and less restrictive job opportunities.\textsuperscript{168}

And it was this promise of jobs in the North that partially precipitated the Great Migration of 1914-1930, which bore witness to an unprecedented mass exodus of blacks from the rural South to the urban North, an exodus that did not


\textsuperscript{167}For a deeper analyses on the development of Negro theatre, minstrelsy and vaudeville, many excellent sources, too vast to list are available. For a historical overview of the development of the black music, many of the sources used in this chapter are valuable starting points.

\textsuperscript{168}Jones, pp.91-93.
merely alter American demography but transformed the culture of black Americans. Movement from South to North failed to fully detach Southerness from the lives from new migrants; the geographical polarity of South and North is symbolic of the psychological dichotomization of the urban black experience in the early twentieth century. Whereas the South represented brutal racism that was equally emotionally and physically damaging, it nonetheless remained a central, maternal symbol of home, family and cultural rooting. And despite the Zion-like perception of the North, the new city centres held unforeseen social problems. Living within densely populated, overpriced areas, black migrants faced a host of urban problems, namely, disease, alcoholism and drugs. The North with its promise of employment and opportunity physically separated black migrants from their Southern communities, which, in consideration of the inhumanity of the South, must have been a solace and a sanctuary. The polarity of South and North, the oscillation between the known and hated and the unknown and chaotic prompted the invention of ways to cement new Northerness and acclimate to a foreign lifestyle. As historian Darlene Clark Hine notes, migrants developed divergent forms of acclimation that were reflected in “food, family structure, social

networks, and music, most notably the blues."\textsuperscript{170} Physically
disconnected from the church and tightly-knit Southern
communities, black migrants had the opportunity to develop new
forms of entertainment.\textsuperscript{171} Though many blacks remained
steadfastly loyal to their religious and social upbringings,
others enjoyed the new found freedom of the North by
frequenting the new cabarets, music halls and nightclubs that
developed in Harlem and other urban centres.

Within this atmosphere of migration, displacement and
chaos, the blues women assumed the role of what Hazel Carby
defines as cultural mediators creating "a web of connections
among working-class migrants."\textsuperscript{172} Often performing with jazz
bands, female blues singers provided a visual image of
communal production and celebration that gratified the
audience's need for communal belonging.\textsuperscript{173} Not only did blues
women represent and cement a communal feeling among dislocated
blacks, but their glamorous performances likened them to a

\textsuperscript{170} Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest: The
Gender Dimension, 1915-1945," in The Great Migration in Historical
Perspective: New Dimensions of Race, Class and Gender, edited by Joe
134.

\textsuperscript{171} Harrison, p. 20.

\textsuperscript{172} Hazel Carby, "Policing the Black Woman's Body in an Urban Context,"

\textsuperscript{173} Giles Oakley, The Devil's Music: A History of The Blues, (London:
almost to the status of "priestess:" their blues sung almost as sermons.
Oakley quotes blues singer Alberta Hunter who says, "To me, the blues are
-well, almost religious. They're like a chant. The blues are like
spirituals, almost sacred." (p.115) While recognizing the spirituality of
the blues, my analysis focuses the blues women less as a priestesses and
more as signifiers of the black female sexual experience.
Phoenix, rising resplendent out of the despair and drudgery of black American life. In analyzing the performative and symbolic power of the blues women, music historian Giles Oakley concludes:

...the blues stars became virtually racial heroines, symbols of success and glamour...In a society that denied black people the dignity of human equality, denied them the means to even strive for it, [they] were symbols of great potency...the success based on their own intimate knowledge and experience of the blues culture of the poor and dispossessed made the symbolism even more profound.\textsuperscript{174}

As discussed in Chapter Three, the literary production of the Harlem Renaissance was largely a male-dominated effort, and female novelists of notable achievement were few. Occurring within the same period, it is then interesting to note that the classic blues—well-received by both blacks and whites—\textsuperscript{175} was a female-dominated enterprise. The opening of the profession to black women is often attributed to the expansion of black theatre, but one must question why women as opposed to men dominated the field.\textsuperscript{176}

One possible explanation is offered by historian Ann

\textsuperscript{174} Oakley, p. 106.


\textsuperscript{176} For an analysis of bluesmen's songs about women see Matthew B. White, "'The Blues Aint' Nothin' But a Woman Want to be a Man:' Male Control in Early Twentieth Century Blues Music," \textit{Canadian Review of American Studies}, 24, n.1 (Winter 1994), pp.19-40.
DuCille who argues that blues women were manifestations of the "primitivist proclivities of the historical moment." Basing her argument on the ideologies of the period, DuCille asserts that the commodification of the sexual blues, and of the women who performed them, is rooted in the primitivist desire of white America to celebrate "the erotic, the exotic, and the innocent:" the "blackface" of America was consciously chosen to be that of black women. Whereas the promotion of black women elucidates the cultural urge to celebrate the sexual and the submissive--identities respectively deficient in white women and white men--black men were not included in the mass marketing scheme of the blues industry. Though basing her argument on the impulse of primitivism and the commodification of blackness, DuCille does not address the absence of black men in this equation. Although the primitivist appeal of black men was certainly viable, they, as over-sexual blacks and as dominant men, embodied a dangerous combination of power which was not to be promoted to black or white America.

Elucidating the reason behind the domination of women in the classic blues is the understanding not only that the black community needed cultural management, but that the black female audience needed sexual self-representations. It is difficult to be certain of the female/male composition of the audience. But I can argue that as communal managers, blues

"DuCille, p.73.

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women secured an accepted role within the black community—a role which permitted them to address the entire community, but specifically target their message to, and answer the call of, those (women) who required their "counsel."

As mediators of female sexual crises the blues women performed a seemingly untraditional role: women, black or white, were not traditionally viewed as orators of sexual issues. But the blues is a complex web of oral tradition, racial pride and spiritual hardship and survival, and somewhere within that web of intricately woven cultural traditions, there is the covert assignment of sexual education to black women. An investigation and comprehensive analysis of the oral history of black women within their communities is crucial to understand the historical silence of black female sexuality, and to understand the ways in which sexual knowledge was traditionally passed on from one generation to the next. As the purpose of this thesis is not to undertake that analysis I suggest, rather than substantiate, that black women can be found performing the role of sex educator; the blues women can be seen as fulfilling a historically accepted role within their communities. Neither anomalous nor inflammatory to their audiences, the sexual discourse responded to the urgent needs of the community and blues women translated their wisdom and sexual savvy into the period's cultural form of oral transmission: the public nature of its discourse demonstrates the cultural and social changes in America in the
1920's. Not only did the changing climate permit such a discourse, but the altered demography of black women in urban areas required its existence.

Between 1915-1920, the average age of black female migrants was 15 to 16, many of whom were single women, unaccompanied by family or husbands. As women unescorted, black female migrants armed themselves with the necessary weaponry of survival: "cynicism and an extraordinary drive to achieve economic and personal independence." Blues women were like other black migrant women who typically entered their professional careers at comparatively early ages, often in their late teens. Daughters of the same socio-cultural experiences as migrant black women, blues women articulated the mature, but early acquired the tenacity and toughness necessary to the survival of black women. Entering the urban space, black working-class women sought economic and sexual autonomy (a freedom characterized by a two-dimensional casting off of physical enslavement: rural and sexual bondage). Survival mandated the toughness of spirit, the pragmatic awareness of economics and the ownership of sexuality; these interwoven necessities blues women articulated freely: "They were not afraid to name a job a

17"Jones, p. 91.

17"Harrison, pp.64-65.
slave, a marriage a meal ticket, and loving a grind."

As historian Darlene Clark Hine notes, analyses of
migration to the North usually focus on the pull factors such
as better jobs and improved race relations, and largely ignore
the push factors unique to black women of the period. As
discussed in Chapter I, the Southern experience systematically
devalued and abused black women's sexuality, and Hine locates
"the desire for freedom from sexual exploitation as a major
cause for the migration of black women to the North." The
identification of sexual abuse in black women's southern
experiences thus elucidates another dimension for the need of
a blues sexual discourse.

The great migration of blacks to Northern cities like
Harlem presented a host of contradictions on the sexual place
and identity of working-class black women. As discussed in
Chapter One, middle-class activists, concerned for the
morality of black women, focused their efforts on 'saving' new
female migrants from their pathological sexuality and the de-
regulated urban experience. Thus, the retroactive
respectability imposed upon middle-class black women touched
their working-class sisters nowhere. The ideological and
physical efforts of social activists and race leaders

15 Michele Russell, "Slave Codes and Linear Notes," in Gloria T. Hull
(ed.) All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us Are

14 Ibid., p. 138.
articulated the need, not to amend pejorative sexual stereotyping, but to contain and control any manifestation of its reality possibly lurking within the bodies of black women. Essentially, the ruler of respectable measurement never extended to the working-class black female body; middle-class efforts projected class and sexuality as concomitant realities: respectability failed to exist independently of middle-class status. The irony, of course, is that efforts to repudiate the over-sexualization of black women employed the same exclusionary tactics that whites endorsed to dichotomize black and white female sexuality. Consequently, the concerns for amending the image of black female sexuality applied to only certain black women—those of the middle class.

The overtly sexual nature of the blues and the openness of its discourse suggests that the blues women acted as surrogate mothers, sisters in sexual crisis who ventriloquized the pain of those who could not or did not choose to speak. The discourse of the classic blues expressed themes universal in appeal, but specific to the lives of black urban women. The community of the audience, the black working-class women and men, envisioned the blues women, not only as performers, but as those in common alliance: blues women sang of experiences commonly shared by black women; as performers of the blues, they transformed the banal and boring to the fantastic and surreal. But blues women did not simply express a host of sexual problems and crises; their performances
assumed a pragmatic polemic. Moaning out their pain, these women were "queens" of the blues: they conquered their own subordination and to their sisters offered the now not-so-secret resolution of sexual crises and survival. Effecting a sense of solidarity and strength, the diatribes of blues women often generated audience reactions which were interactive and intense. Having attended a Newark performance of Bessie Smith, the unrivalled "Queen" of the Blues, white cultural connoisseur Carl Van Vechten commented on the interactive nature of the performance; Van Vechten remarks:

...the black and blue-black crowd, notable for the absence of mulattoes burst into hysterical, semi-religious shrieks of sorrow and lamentation. Amens rent the air, little nervous giggles, like the shattering of Venetian glass, shocked our nerves. When Bessie proclaimed, "It's true I loves you, but I won't take any mistreatment any mo'," a girl beneath our box called, "Dat's right! Say it, Sister." 132

Sisters in sexual survival, the blues women said that it was understandable, even necessary, to experience the blues of being black and female and sexual in 1920's America. For black working-class female audiences, the blues women embodied the voice of sexual protests, and presented a vision of black female sexuality somewhat less encumbered by the blueness of black female sexuality.

It wasn't the music or the words or the woman that took that room by its throat until it gasped for air - it was the pain. There was a young southern girl, Etta Johnson, pushed up in a corner table, and she never forgot. The music, the woman, the words. 

Etta Johnson, one of the black female characters of Gloria Naylor's *Brewster Place*, could be any black working-class woman, who in hearing the blues of these queens found solace, advice and voice for their own muted pain. As mediators of the sexual issues facing black urban women blues women presented a comforting discourse. Embodying a reality familiar to the majority of their female audience, blues women sang songs of intimate pain, unforgotten heartache and misused sexuality. The final section of this chapter examines the lyrics of the blues and attempts to place the sexual messages transmitted to the audience in a cultural and historical perspective. I utilize mostly the same categories as used for the analysis of the writings of Larsen and Fauset: sexuality expressed as power, as appetite/food/desire, as love, as clothes/beauty and as motherhood/biological entrapment; this section demonstrates the particularity of the sexual discourse of the blues women.

In the sexual social order of white America, black women remained sexually abused, vilified creatures burdened with shame and silence. If the black middle class sought to repudiate sexuality through respectable conduct, the blues

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women amended the identical problem by owning, controlling and expressing what was rightly theirs. Emerging from a history of rape, sexual oppression and misuse, the blues women articulated that sexual power was no longer grasped in the hand of the white man, or any man, for that matter. Recognizing their sexuality as a source of power, blues women were unafraid of its potential.

Blues women were unafraid to demonstrate that power or to proudly use it for their own advantage. The sexual blues often assumed a form of sexual bragging; the blues woman, knowing that her sexuality was her most valuable asset, flaunted it with daring and immodesty, and knowing that she was a sexual being heightened the sense that she was the giver of sexual pleasure. Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama" and Sippie Wallace's "Mighty Tight Woman" attest to the belief that vaginal tightness enhanced the sexual pleasure for a man (and maybe a woman); many of the blues singers boast about being a "tight woman."

Now when my man starts jivin'  
I'm tighter than a pair of shoes, (2)  
I'm a mean tight mama, with my mean tight mama blues.14

These bragging sexual blues situated the site of pleasure-giving in the bodies of black women; the phallicentric nature of sexual intercourse is thus overturned. Thus, these sexual

14"Mean Tight Mama," Sara Martin, (1928), As quoted in Oakley, p. 118.
blues challenge the notion of black female sexual submission; these women are not raped, seduced or submissive to undesired sexual acts, but are those who celebrate their sexuality and the power of that sexuality active in their own bodies.

Departing even further from phallo-centric concepts of sexual intercourse, blues women expressed the ability of the sexually sophisticated woman to accommodate men of all sexual sizes. Mary Dixon sings about being an "All Around Mama:"

I've had men of all sizes, had 'em tall and lean
Had 'em short, had 'em flabby, had 'em in between,
I'm an all around mama, I'm an all around mama,
I'm an all around mama, with an all around mind.¹³⁵

As advice manuals to young, black women blues women indicated that women's sexuality was her chief asset and that in this aspect, some women are more proficient than others. The varying ranges of female sexual proficiency inform the audience that rivalry exists among black women. Unconcerned with morality, Ma Yancey's "Make Me a Pallet on Your Floor" is more about imparting a cautionary note to black women than it is about chastising the woman who betrays others. Yancey sings:

If you feel like - lying down
With me on the pallet on the floor
When your main girl come
I swear, she will never know.¹³⁶

¹³⁵Harrison, p. 105.

Acknowledging the rivalry among women to secure a "good man," blues women informed the naive that "keeping a man" was equally as difficult as obtaining one. Ida Cox's "'Fore Day Creep" suggests that the only way to secure a man was to remain silent about his sexual prowess. Cox sings:

Girls, I'm gonna tell you this,
ain't gonna tell you nothin' else, (2)
Any woman's a fool to think she's got a whole man to herself.

But if you get a good man
and don't want him taken away from you,(2)
Don't ever tell your friend woman what your man can do."^{187}

As advice manuals the sexual blues were so sisterly in their discourse that their advisory of silence and ensuing suspicion of other black women seems paradoxical. Much like sisterly conspirators--plotting and planning a childish prank--the blues women and their female audiences expressed and defined the nature of the competition among women. Alerted to the reality that black women competed for black men, the black female understood that the battle was not with the "other" woman per se: rather all women--even themselves--who, due to economic necessity, needed to sexually campaign for a man; the blues as a discourse on black female sexuality articulated this necessity without apology. Blues women tell it like it is (or at least as they see it): there are no fairy tale endings here but bare (and often brutal) facts about human

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^{187} "'Fore Day Creep," Ida Cox (1927) as quoted in Oakley, p.117.
nature, sexual need and emotional survival. The need for a man and the ensuing problem of female rivalry to "get and keep one" is indicative not only of the need for sexual satisfaction. The harsh realities of black women's economic status without male partnership is an undercurrent of the blues; nothing, as Ida Cox's "Hard Time Blues" poignantly points out, is worse than being emotionally, physically and financially bankrupt. Cox sings:

I can't go outside to my grocery store, (2)
I ain't got no money and my credit don't go no more.
Won't somebody please, try'n' find my man for me.
Tell him I'm broke and hungry, lonely as can be.  

If the blues women's songs reflected a cynicism and worldliness necessary for survival, then the question arises of what black women had learned about sexuality prior to this discourse. As one blues woman, Ethel Waters, suggests many black women's previous sexual education may have been harsh and indelicate. Ethel Waters, who achieved great status in the 1920's, remarked on her own sex education:

In crowded slum houses one's sex knowledge begins very early indeed. Mine began when I was about three and sleeping in the same room, often the same bed, with my aunts and transient 'uncles.' I wasn't fully aware of what was going on but I resented it. By the time I was seven I was repelled by every aspect of sex.  

198 "Hard Time Blues," Ida Cox (1939) as quoted in Duvall Harrison, p.73.

Certainly Waters' experience did not necessarily parallel that of all black women, but the lives of black rural women were similar enough to suggest that this may not have been a unique occurrence. This is a matter for further research, but Waters, one of the biggest blues singers of the decade, did not allow her earlier repulsion for sex to limit her outward expression of the sexual blues and her lyrics followed the main trend of overtly sexual blues.

Blues songs were predominantly a heterosexual discourse, and lesbian sexuality, when incorporated, becomes an assertion not only of lesbian sexual pleasure, but also of the ability of black women to choose sexual partnership with other women. Although many blues women performed songs written for, but not necessarily by, them Ma Rainey both wrote and performed "Prove it On Me Blues" as an assertive blues song about lesbian love. Rainey does not idealize the female-to-female sexual relationship: it is still prone to heartache and despair; nor does she claim that being a lesbian is easy in a society which seeks to condemn so-called deviant sexuality. Rainey sings:

Went out last night, had a great big fight,  
Everything seemed to go on wrong;  
I looked up, to my surprise,  
The gal I was with was gone.\textsuperscript{130}

But central to Rainey's composition is the claim that despite all the pressures, she the black lesbian is indeed a woman.

\textsuperscript{130} "Prove It On Me Blues," Ma Rainey as quoted in Lieb, p.124.
“Prove it On Me Blues” is probably one of the most assertive sexual blues songs; despite admitting to the whole world that she is a lesbian, Rainey claims that society must prove their suspicions before they condemn her, and even if they can she does not care. Rainey continues:

Where she went, I don't know,  
I mean to follow everywhere she goes;  
Folks said I'm crooked, I didn't know where she took it,  
I want the whole world to know:

They say I do it, ain't nobody caught me,  
Sure got to prove it on me;  
Went out last night with a crowd of my friends,  
They must've been women, 'cause I don't like no men.

Representing food as a source of pleasure, the blues women consistently used food imagery as readily recognizable metaphors for sex; they confirmed that as much as food is a necessity, so too is sex. Presented not only as necessary to sustain life, all references to food are to delicacies: decadent pastries and jelly rolls. Thus, recognizing the interchangeability of sex and food the blues women presented sex as life-enhancing, sweet and utterly irresistible.

Whereas novelist Jessie Fakest uses the metaphor of appetite for food to suggest the danger of women’s unleashing their sexual desire, the blues women represent food/sex much more positively. Likening the production of food to sexual


activity, the blues present female sexuality as an active, productive force. Common in the sexual blues are images of ovens (female genitalia), which, "hot and ready," require the insertion of raw produce (male genitalia) to "cook nice and brown" (intercourse).\textsuperscript{193}

Continuing in the metaphoric use of food, the songs suggest it is the comfort and knowledge of one's own body which brings a woman and her lover pleasure. Anything but puritanical about their sexual organs, the blues women bragged about how effectively they knew and presented their sexuality. Nellie Florence's "Jacksonville Blues" uses these metaphors of food to indicate she is a well-informed woman of great sexual prowess. Florence sings:

\begin{quote}
Men, they call me a hot oven, \\
they say that I'm red hot(2) \\
They say I got something the other girls ain't got. \\
I can strut my pudding spread my grease with ease,(2) \\
'Cause I know my onions that's why I always please.\textsuperscript{194}
\end{quote}

Far from being subtle, these blues dictate that female passion is an energy-giving force. And although these blues do not declare sexual independence, they describe a sensuality which exists prior to, and apart from, male intervention or manipulation.\textsuperscript{195} Locating the nexus of female sexual desire as existing within the female body, blues women's ownership of

\textsuperscript{193}Harrison, p.104.

\textsuperscript{194}"Jacksonville Blues," Nellie Florence, as it appears in Sackhiem, p. 40.

\textsuperscript{195}Lieb, p.104.
sexual desire was not the endorsement of primitivism or pathological black female sexuality. They present sexual desire as energy-producing, not destructive, and the act of intercourse not as a response to some genital twinge, but as a positive and potent expression of black female selfhood. Claiming desire as emergent from within, the blues women believe expressions of sexual need are not to be feared but to be nurtured, explored and ultimately satisfied.

Acknowledging sexual desire as a genuine physical need, blues women cite love as an authentic—though often crippling—emotional need; the "blues about a man" were the most painful blues to banish. Making the love for a man and the loss of that love central to the majority of the sexual blues, blues women provided black women with a variety of ways to come to terms with loss, betrayal and sexual misuse. The blues reactions to lost love allowed women to own the range of their emotions—depression, anger, destructiveness, cynicism—and to scale the ladder of human emotions until empowerment was attained. Although different blues songs usually articulated a single sentiment, they allowed the audience to fully own that particular emotion at that particular moment.

In addition to validating female emotions, the blues also demonstrate the ways in which society closely regulated the emotionality of women. The blues of the 1920's articulated

194 Ibid., p. 81.
197 Ibid., p. 83.
society's demand for women not only to shield their pain but
to isolate themselves, often within the very home which was so
unbearable. Clara Smith's "Freight Train Blues" vocalizes the
limited opportunities of resolution accessible to black women;
Smith sings:

When a woman gets the blues,
she goes to her room and hides,(2)
When a man gets the blues,
he catches a freight train and rides. 179

Not only do blues about a man allow women to validate
their emotions, but they impart an understanding of loss which
is extremely empowering. Blues women singing of love gone
wrong assumed no blame for the break-up, but often proclaimed
the intrinsic no-goodness of men. Hence, the age-old question
of why one is rejected is squarely resolved; blues women
offered comfort in despair and absolved themselves of the
shame associated with losing a man. Blues women also
understood the very real pain of sexual exploitation; the
blues about love say that male concepts of love capsize when
male desire is satiated. Lil Johnson moans out the pain of a
woman who after being sexually giving is rejected; Johnson
berates the man who leaves her:

If you don't like my sweet potato
what made you dig so deep (2)
Dig my potato field
three, four times a week. 179

179"Freight Train Blues," Clara Smith, Columbia, September 1924.
179"You'll Never Miss your Jelly," Lil Johnson, Sackhiem, p. 44.
Ma Rainey's "Don't Fish in My Sea" echoes much of the same
disgust for the man who uses a woman sexually, then once
satisfied, discards her. Instead of berating herself for the
loss of her man, Rainey rationalizes:

If you don't like my ocean
then don't fish in my sea (2)
Stay out of my valley
and let my mountain be. 200

Reasoning that it is better to lose a man than to withstand
his cheating, lying, mistreating ways, Ma Rainey's "Victim of
the Blues," imparts this understanding despite being in the
throes of despair:

My man left this mornin', just about half past four,(2)
He left a note on his pillow,
says he couldn't use me no more.

Then I grabbed a pillow, turned over in my bed,(2)
I cried about my daddy, till my cheeks were cherry red.

It's awful hard to take it, it's such a bitter pill,(2)
If the blues don't kill me,
that man and mean treatment will. 201

Although the blues validated the emotional responses to
the loss of love they also indicated that, within the city,
new methods of coping were now available to women. Substances
such as alcohol and drugs quickly developed into social
problems within the urban centres, and the blues women, though
incorporating drugs and alcohol into their lyrics, 202 do not

200"Don't Fish in My Sea," Ma Rainey in Sackhiem, p. 47.
201"Victim of the Blues," Ma Rainey as quoted in Lieb, p.85.
202Harrison, p. 96.
glamorize substance abuse. More common in the blues is the portrayal of a woman, emotionally-weakened due to the loss of love, who falls to the temptations of the city and consequently hits rock-bottom: the blues are not morality plays (for many of the blues women were themselves heavy drinkers). Rather, they are an understanding, a typology of "been there, done that;" they are an acknowledgement that extreme emotional pain can foster the overwhelming need to banish one's blues in any way possible.

Similar to novelists who relied on their words to effect a sensation, blues women used their lyrics to relay an image of the sexualized black woman. But as performers, blues women also employed the presentation of self to enact a powerful display of black female sexuality. As visual icons, blues women held licence to be outrageous in their manner of dress; donning all the accoutrements of fashion and success, they were symbols of hope and heroism for the race. Performing for largely working-class audiences who understood the realities of material strife, the blues women in their expensive, glamorous costumes conjured an image of female success and strength. Having evolved from similar working-class, rural backgrounds, blues singers presented to black women an image of women like themselves who had succeeded in American society. Testament not only to the reality that black women could get a piece of the American pie, those who sang the blues, who voiced hardship and despair, were visual displays
of tenacity. Moaning out the blues, these women were beautiful, desirable; despite their blue-ness of their melodies, they survived, and that survival offered hope to the hopeless. Mamie Smith, like many other popular blues women, incorporated into her performance all the glamour of the industry; the effect on the audience was nothing short of fantastic:

Standing in the spotlight on a darkened stage, the silver crown shimmering, the ostrich plumes gently swaying, the diamonds on her fingers and around her glittering neck, Mamie was a breath-taking sight. She didn't even have to sing. She just walked grandly across the stage and there were storms of applause.\textsuperscript{203}

Blues women also articulated material realities unique to women of the urban working-class. Recognizing the value of money, the blues singers constructed sexuality as a valuable commodity, not for the trade of marriage, but for profit through sale. Ma Rainey's "Hustlin Blues" echoes empowerment not through prostitution, but by her control (instead of her pimp's) of the sale. In granting the prostitute this control, Rainey overturns the stereotype of the "hustler," and gives voice and humanity to a woman who is both despised and feared: this prostitute is not "chained to her pimp by love, dope or weakness."\textsuperscript{204} Living a life she hates and knowing she will face the wrath of her pimp, the prostitute decides not to work.

\textsuperscript{203}Samuel Charters and Leonard Kundstadt, \textit{Jazz: A History of the New York Scene}, p.89.

\textsuperscript{204}Lieb, p. 122.
one rainy night for purely practical reasons: there are no customers. She is not a slave; she is a business woman.

Rainey sings:

It's rainin' out here and tricks ain't walkin' tonight,(2)
I'm goin' home, I know I've got to fight.

If you hit me tonight, let me tell you what
I'm going to do,(2)
I'm gonna take you to court and tell the judge on you.

I ain't made no money, and he dared me to go home,(2)
Judge, I told him he better leave me alone.205

Whereas the heroines of middle-class novels are fair-skinned beauties, the blues articulated a non-standardized concept of beauty. By white standards, black was never considered beautiful. But instead of casting off their blackness, blues women told their sisters that it made little sense to strive for an unrealistic ideal: beauty did not hinge upon the perpetuation of white standards. Defining sexuality and the celebration of its ownership as a black woman's true attractiveness, Sara Martin's "Mean Tight Mama" celebrates female sex appeal despite non-conformist physicalities:

Now my hair is nappy and I don't wear
no clothes of silk,(2)
But the cow that's black and ugly,206
has often got the sweetest milk.

The de-standardized concept of beauty was not only presented

205"Hustlin' Blues," Ma Rainey as quoted in Lieb, pp.121-122.

206"Mean Tight Mama," Sara Martin, 1928 as quoted in Oakley, p. 118.
in the lyrics of the blues; the less-than-perfect physical characteristics of some blues women also demonstrated that sexual attractiveness transcended societal expectations. Ma Rainey, the undisputed "Mother of the Blues," represented the ultimate sexually attractive black woman. Despite her maternal nickname, Ma Rainey's blues were "rough and earthy." An "extraordinary-looking woman, ugly-attractive with a short stubby body, big-featured face and vividly-painted mouth full of gold teeth," Rainey challenged a definition of female beauty as passive, fragile or white.

Often cited as an empowered statement of sexual maturity, Bessie Smith's "Young Woman Blues" insists that despite being far from the physical ideal, black women should not conform to society's pressure to marry, to settle for what was less than desirable, or to clamour for protection. Smith sings:

I'm a young woman an' ain't done runnin' round,
Some people call me a hobo, some call me a bum,
Nobody knows my name, nobody knows what I've done,
I'm as good as any woman in your town.
I ain't no high yellow, I'm deep yellow-brown,
I ain't goin' to marry, ain't goin' to settle down...
An' I'm a good woman an' I can get plenty men.

Blues women sang of a range of female experiences, love, sex, betrayal, lesbianism and beauty; conspicuously absent in any blues songs is the discussion of pregnancy, motherhood or children. Rejecting the ideology of the New Negro woman as

\[\text{207 Oakley, p. 99.}\]

\[\text{208 "Young Woman's Blues," Bessie Smith, (1926) as quoted in Oakley, p. 111.}\]
the quintessential "Black Mother," blues women depicted black female sexuality as being free from the burden of children. Projecting a claim of sexuality as free from responsibility, blues women did not necessarily represent reality, but offered the visions of sex as being recreational, emotional and financially profitable. On the rare occasion when motherhood does arise in the blues, it is a unique discourse: it situates the subject of the blues not as a mother, but speaks about a mother in the third person—as the "other;" motherhood becomes the experience of an older generation. One such example is Elvie Thomas' "Motherless Child Blues," which presents the adult black woman not as a mother but as the motherless child who did not heed her mother's warning to "please don't be like me, to fall in love with every man you see." This blues song focuses on the wisdom of women and its passage from one generation to the other; the newer generation is unconcerned with motherhood: that is not the message of her mother's wisdom: the singer's failure to heed her mother's advice on falling in love is the reason for her blues.209

In extending the sexual discourse to include the less- "respectable" aspects of black female realities, the blues women developed the problems which Larsen and Fauzet voiced in their novels: the overriding concern for economic security through male partnership was expressed by both novelists and

blues women. Whereas Larsen and Fauset questioned the urgency of marriage, the economic need for a man, the blues women articulated the imperative nature of such a relationship. Not only did blues women underscore the economic necessities of male partnership, but they also tackled issues such as prostitution and presented it as a woman's independent way of making a living by using her most sought-after commodity. Selling sex not for marriage but for survival underscores the class differences of these two discourses; instead of becoming morality plays of class ideals, both discourses reflect that in one manner or another society forced black women to compromise their sexuality to attain material comfort and economic security.

Flaunting the materialism of the age, blues women modelled diaphanous gowns, glittering tiaras and cloaks of ostrich plumes. As performers these women held the necessary licence to do so, and their conspicuous consumption and proud display demonstrated both their and society's concepts of self and sexuality. The fictional characters of Larsen and Fauset dress to please, to stir attention and to express their internal sexual conflicts: despite the narrowness of the modes of acceptable dress they utilized that which was readily available to project the sexuality black women. In much the same manner, blues women used their clothing to project a sexual image of black women—an image which was desirable in their particular community—and thus satiated the needs of
their audience to view them as queens, regal black women who sang of the working-class black woman's experience. For the working-class audience the blues queen not only lifted the woes and sexual crises of their black sisters onto the stages, but also represented the black woman who had it all: money, fame and sexual freedom.

The blues women voiced and represented a kaleidoscopic, un-romanticized vision of the lives of black women: panoramic in vision but specific in address. Mother, sister, rival, friend, the blues women were as flexible in their representations of black female sexuality as 1920's white America was rigid. As powerful icons, blues women recognized the intrinsic power of their sexuality, and they seized it, claimed it for their own use. Although the classic blues, much like the novels of Larsen and Fauset, focused on heterosexual love and sex, the blues expressed a lack of trust in men. Reflective almost of a love/hate relationship, the blues both demonstrate the physical, emotional and economic need for a man, and identify the intense pain and anger which accompanies infidelity and misuse; blues women not only exorcized their pain, but they also conveyed the message that it was a pain they did not have to endure. Voicing the sexual wisdom acquired through time and experience, the blues women played surrogate mothers to black working-class women; they instructed women in sexual secrets, emotional fortification and survival techniques in the new urban jungle. And hearing
the voices of blues women, black women in urban centres of America knew that even when the bluest blues descended, black women survived.
& this is for colored girls who have considered suicide/ but are movin to the ends of their own rainbows

—Ntozake Shange
For Colored Girls who have Considered Suicide (1974)
CONCLUSION:

It is difficult if not impossible to understand one's own sexuality if all examples, ideologies and representations that permeate your sensibilities are not created by those like you. If every image or concept or moral value you receive is manufactured far from your reality, benevolently handed down from some detached—"god" of omniscient understanding, then your receipt is void. These tools with which you construct your sexual understanding, conduct your sexual activities and internalize an image of your sexual worth are foreign and futile; the ultimate consequence is the bitter disappointment, the emptiness of failure, when you cannot attain these ideals. Surely, the fault lies within (you) as this is what the "gods" have said and nothing else is known to you. Constructing oneself against a pattern made by those who do not know your measurements, who do not understand the difference of race and gender and class, results in an uncomfortable fit; your sexual life becomes a series of accommodative efforts: non-attainment its final outcome.

Larsen, Fauset and the blues women represent the courageous efforts of black women to reclaim, to rename and to remodel the sexuality of black American women in the 1920's. Their endeavours did not radically transform the ideology of the 1920's into a trans-gendered, trans-racial understanding of black female sexuality (and how many single events/efforts
historically have): that was not their intent. But the value of their work is its testament to black women's efforts to deconstruct the understanding of what being black and female and sexual encompassed.

In the Harlem Renaissance, black cultural revival motivated and made possible the female creative expression of both groups of female artists/artistes. Creating in the midst of black cultural reverie, ideological imperatives and a consumer culture, their works were influenced by and articulated the climate of the era. But instead of merely packaging their sense of black female sexuality—rubber stamped with the approval of whatever industry in which they created—both groups of women used their artistic license to examine the limited and limiting concepts of black female sexuality. The words and the lyrics of blues women and novelists reflect a personal understanding—an intimate connection with the subject matter. The intensely personal discourses on sexuality transcend the individual experience; they reflect a broader understanding, that as black women, their sexual crises were not anomalous experiences.

Bridging the sexual ideologies of the late nineteenth century and the modern concepts of a more liberated sexual paradigm, these women addressed the sexual concerns particular, and peculiar to, a group of doubly oppressed Americans. As blacks and as women, they impart in their works an understanding that the ideology of their sexuality was not
a simple mix-and-stir formula, but a construction, cumulatively devised from historical inequity, class anxiety and exclusion from white concepts of respectability. Addressing the demands imposed upon and the choices limited to black women, blues women and novelists examined the construction of their sexualities within the imperatives of class, gender and race; their works reflect the limitations and necessities of black women from varying socio-economic and cultural backgrounds.

Central to both discourses is the acknowledgement that black women's realities were severely limited without male partnership—through marriage or non-institutionalized partnership. Larsen and Fauset's novels examine the concern of black middle-class women to achieve, maintain or accommodate their social status. Despite being more economically privileged than most black women, that status was not maintained without significant compromise. As few black women were independently wealthy and the range of job opportunities opened to them was limited, male support was crucial for basic survival. Even if they were financially secure, the social values attached to black female sexuality still tied black middle-class women to "respectable" expressions of sexuality within the institution of marriage. Deviation from the ideology trapped them in a web of treacherous charges: traitors to race and womanhood and ancestry; they were pariahs who betrayed the blood and agony
of their female ancestors. "Modern" Negro women understood, and conducted their sexual lives in a respectable manner; they spoke for their enslaved ancestors, who, locked in the bonds of slavery, tried to proudly guard their sexuality and projected it as a force so potent in its value to the race that it could not be compromised.

Although black middle-class women were consistently exposed to the ideology of New Negro womanhood and all that it represented to the respectability of the race, blues women (predominantly of the working class) understood their sexuality in a far more practical manner. Economically disadvantaged, black working-class women also knew the importance of male partnership for survival; the blues women expressed this need, but also emphasized the range of problems that often accompanied such a necessity. Because dependence (of any kind) frequently results in domination, the blues women articulated the need to counter dependence with a strong inner sense of their own sexual worth.

Sexually overt expressions had the potential to reinforce the white public's notion of the primitive sexual nature of black women; this was a matter of great concern among the black middle class, and through their dominance and influence within the Harlem Renaissance, novelists such as Larsen and Fauset avoided such depreciating sexual expressions. By using the accepted literary conventions, Larsen and Fauset were able to create sexual black female characters without calling forth
attention or disapproval. But the blues women, whose audience was largely black, whose social status and performer's licence negated such concern, addressed the sexuality of black women without this restriction and thus reflected the perceived cultural needs of their particular community.

Novelists and blues women used universally understood experiences and emotions--food, love, clothes, motherhood and desire--to create an intensely personal expression of what they perceived to be black female sexuality. The effect of this practical usage was to create a discourse which, though heard or read by many, was in some ways also addressed particularly to other black women. As performers and visual icons, the blues women entered into a discourse (with other black women) which was frank, confrontational and symbiotic. As writers and as middle-class black women, Larsen and Fauset worked in a medium which was constrained not only by its form, but by its political and class function. As speakers of the race, Larsen and Fauset, through their critical assessment of the position of black women, called attention to the impractical ideology of New Negro womanhood. And despite the "distance" from their black female audiences and the wide non-black readership, they also presented, to other black women, the opportunity to recognize and analyze themselves as sexual women.

By the onset of the 1930's, the brief glory of black cultural revival--The Harlem Renaissance--had come to an end.

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America faced years of unprecedented hardship--economic hardship which cut across the divide of black and white America. And as the emotional needs of black and white Americans altered, so too did the discourse--the verbal and oral parlance--of black female sexuality. But what the preceding decade had witnessed, what black women obtained access to, did not quietly dissipate into the background; the efforts of these black women engraved a lasting imprint on the future creative efforts of black women to reshape their sexuality.
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**SPECIALIZED STUDIES : SEXUALITY/BLACK FEMALE SEXUALITY**


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