

Introduction:
Troubling the Waters of Mimesis

When Alain Locke mandates in the “Foreword” of the *The New Negro* that the volume “register(s) the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America that have so significantly taken place in the last few years”, he identifies perhaps what is the organizing sign of the aesthetic productions and the political debates of the Harlem Renaissance.¹ Throughout the “Foreword” to this 1925 volume, and in the numerous essays written on the subject during this period, an emphasis upon the dialectic of interiority and exteriority, coupled with a vigorous discussion on the “truest self-portraiture”, signals how mimesis underwrites the discourses of the Renaissance and the emergence of the “New Negro”.² Jessie Fauset posits in her essay “The Gift of Laughter”, published in the same volume, that it is “the pressure of white opinion by which the American Negro is surrounded and *by which his true character is almost submerged*”; she also finds the Negro “the most dramatic figure in (the) country”,³ signaling the staging character of the New Negro/Harlem Renaissance movement. As a testament to the power of the problem, almost twenty years after the asphyxiation of the Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston claims in “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1947) that the “Anglo-Saxon’s lack of curiosity about *the internal lives and emotions of the Negroes...above the class of unskilled labor*” again

¹ Alain Locke. *The New Negro: Voices of the Harlem Renaissance*. Foreword. Intro by Arnold Rampersad. (Atheneum, New York: 1992.) 1

² James de Jongh comments upon the cultural production of African American and Africana writers who deliberate upon the duality and interiority of their subjects when they make pilgrimage to Harlem from the period of the Renaissance to that of the Black Arts Movement of the 1950’s-1970’s. See *Vicious Modernism: Black Harlem and the Literary Imagination*. (Cambridge: Cambridge: UP, 1990).

³ *The New Negro* (161, 165).

points to the continued centrality of an unwritten interiority, an as yet unplumbed understanding of black souls. In her earlier piece, “Characteristics of Negro Expression” (1934), Hurston takes up Fauset’s language when she posits the theatrical nature of black self-representation in the “Negro’s universal mimicry” as “not so much a thing in itself as an evidence of something that permeates his entire self. And that thing is drama.” A personage of no lesser importance than W.E.B. DuBois argues implicitly in terms of mimesis and the status of representation when he suggests, in “The Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), that it would be a deadly proposition for African America if “the only Negro who survived some centuries hence was the Negro painted by white Americans in the novels and essays they have written. What would people in a hundred years say of black Americans?” And the still prescient debate between Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen and George S. Schuyler is played out respectively in the essays “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”, “The Negro Art Hokum” and the poem “Heritage”; all foundational texts in that they take up the questions of mimesis, representation and reference by which we are arguably still currently bound, a century later.⁴ The heated debates of identity and difference marked the critical scholarship of the Harlem Renaissance in its engagement with the artworks; both forms attempt to “register the transformations of the inner and outer lives of the Negro”.

With the focus on the complexity of black interiority and the perils of exteriority, the “copy” (as an “imitation” of an object) versus the “original”, and the debates of “appropriate” representation of black subjects and themes in art works, the

⁴ Napier, Winston, ed. *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*. New York: New York University Press: 2000.

Hurston, Zora Neale. “What White Publishers Won’t Print”; *Characteristics for Negro Expression*. Napier 54-58, 31-44

Du Bois, W.E.B. “Criteria of Negro Art”. Napier 17-24

Hughes, Langston. “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain”. 27-31

Schuyler, George S. “The Negro-Art Hokum”. 24-27

work of mimesis in the critical discussions of the Harlem Renaissance generates the analysis in this study. Mimesis arguably continues to hold sway today in American and African American literatures because racial, gender and sexual differences continue to sustain contemporary relations of power as much as they did during the dawn of the last century when, as has been famously asserted: “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line.”⁵ The vocabularies which adhere in theories of mimesis are comparable to the lexicon of the political and artistic struggles of the Renaissance; the anxieties expressed about representation (being versus appearance), the imitation of “white” culture, and shattering of stereotypical images of blackness compose the dictionary of the Renaissance project. While a small number of black artists were at that time encouraged and groomed to produce an art that would verify African American expressive productions as a culture, concerns about authenticity and appropriateness held in tension the historical project of what one critic has called “Civil Rights by copyright.”⁶ For the whole problem that these artists and scholars faced is that of their intersecting differences: racial, gendered and sexual in tension with vicious hegemonies constitutive of white supremacy.

In their tradition—building enterprise, the “New Negroes” consistently referred to themselves self-reflexively as part of a “drama;” indeed their work consistently dramatized the problematic that every critic and artist to some degree must confront whenever they critique or produce a work of art in the context of the cross-cultural dynamics of the American scene: How can an actor on the stage of this

⁵ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: W.W. Norton Press), “Forethought”. The question of how to portray black subjects spans the century. Just one example of the debate’s extension took place in a dialogue between scholars and artists which was launched by the question raised by Du Bois’s 1926 “Opinion” column in *Crisis* entitled “A Questionnaire”. See Henry Louis Gates Jr. Ed. “The Black Person in Art: How Should S/he Be Portrayed?” *Black American Literature Forum* (Bloomington: Indiana State University Press) volume 21 Numbers 1-2, Spring-Summer 1987.

⁶ David Levering Lewis *When Harlem Was in Vogue* (New York: Penguin Books, 1997) xxvii.

peculiar American cultural theatre learn how to engage (and therefore reconcile or disrupt) the classic and vernacular elements of American artistic forms? That is, how can the artist (and the reader) hold in tension the need to maintain the specificity of black cultural practices while simultaneously attending to their inevitable imbrications in the broader domain of American culture? How does the “New Negro” represent these tensions in expressive forms that *disidentify* with the catalogue of stereotypes of black humanity, and yet maintain a relationship to the truths of his or her experiences and historical moment? Although superficially Manichean in its posing of white and black, male and female, self and other, subject and object, Renaissance works trouble the waters of these binarisms through the work and play of mimesis.⁷

In particular, the works of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen pose a diverging critical focus on how the female figure of racial passing, read precisely as a literary figure, references not only a “racial” body whose ambivalent legibility may or may not be read through the visual field; both Fauset and Larsen use the figure of racial passing in her coming to identification as a dramatization of the possibilities apparently inherent in passing for white, and, as a linguistic reference to the literary discourses of slavery and the sedimentation of that inheritance. The dramatization takes place for their characters, many of whom are artists themselves, in two stages: the first in which the protagonist or character chooses to disavow her history and pass for white; the second occurs during the long process of the character’s re-identification with a de-idealized other; this other is of course the protagonist’s own self formed in relation to a history of enslavement and disfranchisement, formerly disavowed. In this way the novels of racial passing upon which I focus perform an ethics available to the black

⁷Theodor W. Adorno reclaims the sense of the “early Greek meaning of mimesis [impersonating dancing or acting] in the conceptualization of the concept: ‘All art, above all music, is kindred to drama.’” Quoted in Michael Cahn “Subversive Mimesis,” in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, ed. Mihai Spărosu (Philadelphia: Johns Benjamin Publishing Company, 1984) 34.

artist-subject. Many of the protagonists and characters in their works are artists or artisans of some sort, therefore, Fauset and Larsen use their artworks self-reflexively to comment upon their own cultural scene during the Renaissance. Much of the criticism about the figure of racial passing has focused upon the revelation of a racial essence; I argue that what is ultimately “revealed” in their works is not simply an epistemologically legible racial body. Rather, Fauset and Larsen engage the ways that the figure of racial passing both destabilizes the logic of identity as irreducible difference that underpins scientific racism and racist practices in America, and, simultaneously, insist upon an understanding of a shared vernacular (because inherited) history constitutive of “race” through the attainment of a position within discourse. This position within discourse is specifically rendered through the literary tropes ellipsis and caesura. Both tropes are themselves figures for a blank space, a silence or a pause whose presence in the texts is visible and invisible, legible and illegible.

In their critique of the processes of identification, as opposed to identity, both authors underscore the importance of the public and psychic field of vision and who exactly, at crucial moments in the protagonists’ progression through subject-formation, occupies that field. The methods of surveillance externally at work in the social realm engaged by these characters are mirrored by their psychic configurations during processes of identification. Therefore, this dissertation will focus upon the figure of racial passing as a literary figure whose mimetic identifications provide different positions within discourse from which the protagonist may, or may not, speak. What each text attests to is that even in the event of articulation, current representational systems refuse their incorporation.

The black subject presents a problem for modernism and the field of the visual. In particular, black femininity seems to confound critical discourses of modernism.

Michele Wallace comments upon the difficulties inherent in the field of the visual for black subjects when she distinguishes two “scenes of instruction” between Africans and Europeans. She suggests a triumphalism apparent in the positive “scene”, aligned with music, versus the pessimistic one, allied with the visual.⁸ She further links the problems of modernism and primitivism, feminism and postmodernism specifically to the problems of Western “art and culture”:

More specifically it was Picasso...and Modernism, in general, that epitomized the art historical moment of greatest fascination. The debate was precisely situated in the paradox that Picasso, Cubism and subsequent Modernists had borrowed heavily from African Art. In other words, as it was widely interpreted among a black, middle-class intelligentsia in the ‘50’s and ‘60’s, “they”, or white Euro-American high Modernism, had borrowed from “us”, the African peoples of the world, even if “they” were incapable of admitting it...(b)ut the problem remains the unilateral unwillingness of Euro-American culture to admit and acknowledge its debt, or even its relationship, to African and Afro-American culture. (“Modernism, Postmodernism” 43, 45).

In an extended discussion of filmmaker Isaac Julien’s film “Looking for Langston”, Wallace continues her critique of the “negative scene of instruction” which she sees as directly related to a historically necessary “disembodiment” within black literature for the negation of “the primitivization of the black subject by white critics”:

The film made me aware, as I had not been before, of how disembodied cultural figures of the [Harlem] Renaissance generally are made to appear within black critical discourses, compared with those black artists, such as Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and Josephine Baker, who have been cast in “primitivist” or neoprimitivist terms, and who, as such, have always been of more interest to white criticism...This disembodiment, with its attendant desexualization of black literature and high culture, occurs in response to the over-sexualization of black images in white mass culture. It is an effort, in part, to block the primitivization of the black subject by white critics (this is particularly relevant in Afro-American literary criticism), resulting in the not surprising though still

⁸ See “Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture” in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West eds. *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*. (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press) 40-41.

devastating outcome of, once again, marginalizing or erasing as irrelevant or unworthy the female subject. (Modernism, Postmodernism).⁹

The “disembodiment” to which Wallace refers is also connected to the discourse of racial uplift in direct contrast to the primitivistic discourses that held, and continue to hold sway over white and black critics in the reception of art. Ann du Cille makes a similar connection in her focus on the perceived dichotomy between black producers of culture in the context of sexual liberation as opposed to the sexually repressed:

It is through a disturbing twist of fate and intellectual history that Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen have been criticized for not measuring up to the sexual and textual liberation of their blues-singing sisters...Perpetually measured against Bessie Smith, on the one hand, and Zora Neale Hurston on the other, however, Fauset and Larsen have rarely been read in terms of their own particular contributions to modernism, to American and African American literature, and to the development of the women’s novel.¹⁰

For the black artist/intellectual, repressions and fantasies of sexuality and sexual license enact their cultural work on the backs and through the images of black people and those constituted as other; the fact that discursive representative models in the United States have produced and sickeningly reproduced stereotypical images of black sexuality and gender is precisely, the problem. And it is precisely to the dialectic of embodiment and disembodiment, (“fetishistic-recognition-and-disavowal”) for the black female subject in connection to positions within discourse, and how that connection is conflated, represented and worked through in the field of the visual, that

⁹The primitive is a modern problem, a crisis in cultural identity, which the west moves to resolve: hence the modernist construction “primitivism,” the fetishistic recognition-and-disavowal of the primitive difference. This ideological resolution renders it a ‘non-problem’ for us. On the other hand, this resolution is only a repression: delayed into our political unconscious, the primitive returns uncannily at the moment of its potential eclipse. The rupture of the primitive, managed by the moderns, becomes our postmodern event. Hal Forster, *Recodings: Art, Spectacle, and Cultural Politics* (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1985) 204.

¹⁰ Ann du Cille, *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993) 86.

Fauset and Larsen contend in their work. In addition, the ways these tensions are worked out is directly connected to the location of the scene (sometimes Harlem, sometimes another black neighborhood), and the presence or absence of legible or illegible black subjects.

A Portrait in Black:

We are treated to a staple in condensed form of aesthetic mimesis, a gesture at the primitive and Locke's mandate "to register the interior and exterior transformations of Negro life," in a scene from Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*.¹¹ When Angela Murray, the young black protagonist and fledgling artist who can pass for white, wishes to compete for an art scholarship, she turns her attention to a particular subject. Hetty Daniels, the Murray family's legibly black housekeeper provides an excellent model for Angela's ambitions. During a discussion of "sex morality," Miss Daniels' face takes on an aspect of fascination for Angela:

Her unslaked yearnings gleamed suddenly out of her eyes, transforming her usually rather expressionless face into something wild and avid. The dark brown immobile mask of her skin made an excellent foil for the vividness of an emotion which was so apparent, so palpable that it seemed like something superimposed upon the background of her countenance (*PB* 66).

This passage has been interpreted as representative of Fauset's attempt to "question dominant cultural codes that thwart free expression of female desire."¹² Hetty's desire certainly "transforms" her "rather expressionless" face. In the first instance, the "dark brown *immobile mask* of her skin" suggests an iconicity of racial identification (like "the Negro") which, in the same way as the "tragic mulatto" may move through time, may possess meaning, yet eschews reference.¹³ The dominant rhetorical codes constitutive of the stereotypes of blackness place black subjects outside of historical

¹¹Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990) 66.

¹²Jacqueline McClendon, *Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: Virginia University Press, 1995).

¹³ See "Notes on An Alternative Model: Neither/Nor" in *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press).

time and movement; this “fixing” work by the stereotype historically “silences” black communities within public discourse and captures their images in the visual field. The theft of a voice and an affirmative image forms a signifying substitutive chain marked by repression through which black subjects must form themselves. The ekphrastic moment is equally ubiquitous in Fauset and Larsen’s fiction; they use the verbal description of a visual image to signal the contestation of the visual field.¹⁴

Yet the “dark brown immobile *mask* of her skin” is also an obvious reference to the “mask of the primitive” whose celebration during the early decades of the twentieth century made it a popular object of aesthetic mimesis from high to low modernist art. In the second instance, however, there is a dynamism to Hetty’s features that bears analysis. The “foil” mediates between the “immobile mask of her skin” and the “vividness of an emotion.” Her emotions are “superimposed upon the background of her *countenance*,” they are imprinted upon that which lies back of, or “behind” the *foreground* or her face. Hetty’s interior is in dynamic motion *with the mask*. The narrator completes the work of outside/in and situates the “mask” as a construction, literally, the primitive mask is figured here as a “text.”¹⁵ The line functions like a palimpsest; to read Hetty, one must traverse the texts already written upon her blackness. A palimpsest is a synchronous conflation or superimposition of multiple historical texts upon the present. The term originally denotes a parchment on

¹⁴ Ekphrasis is also perhaps the literary figure that most obviously stages a literal conflict between self and other. A few examples of works that focus on ekphrasis as a literary genre include Murray Krieger’s book-length study *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Françoise Meltzer’s *Salome and the Dance of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Page DuBois’s *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic* (D.S. Brewer: London, 1982).

¹⁵“We call text any entity that can be considered from such a double perspective: as a generative, open-ended, non-referential grammatical system and as a figural system closed off by transcendental signification that subverts the grammatical code to which the text owes its existence.” Paul de Man, *Allegories of Reading: Figural Language in Rousseau, Nietzsche, Rilke and Proust* (New Haven: Yale University Press) 270. Hereafter, AR.

which one text has been overwritten with another, and has long been used to refer to narrative confluences of time.

Hetty is turned inside out by the dynamism of her desire, whose object remains, despite the narrator's suggestions, unknown to Angela. Although the passage might be read simply in terms of Hetty's repressed desire for a sexual partner, to the degree desire is at play, it could also be read in terms of Hetty's desire for her self beyond the mask that ensures a specific pose. The "mask of her skin" connotes the figuration and textuality inherent in racial identity.

It is also significant that Angela sees this "look" in relation to herself. "If I could just get that look...I bet I could get any of their old scholarships" (*PB* 66). What Angela wishes to attain in the sketch in order to capture an art scholarship is not simply a stereotypical representation of Hetty as an oversexed "primitive type;" literally, she wants to "get that look." In the language of psychoanalytic models of identification, the "look" possesses a particular currency in relation to the "gaze." Kaja Silverman's feminist appropriation of the Sartrean and Lacanian "look" is specifically connected to a reappropriation of the "not-me", often a culturally devalued other, into the ego's reserves.¹⁶ It would appear at first that Angela's thirst for appropriating Hetty's "look" is a vulgar quest for personal gain, another way by which to exploit her own status (passing for white and supporting the structure of the dominant order of representation); in her sketch providing yet another representation of debased blackness. And the narrator's focus on Hetty's "unslaked yearnings" and her "wild and avid emotions" would seem to support this reading. However, the finished portrait suggests something different has occurred.

¹⁶ Kaja Silverman, *Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge, 1996). Hereafter, *TVW*.

A fellow art student, a white woman, views Hetty Daniels's portrait and interprets

“that look” in the following way:

What an interesting type! said Gertrude Quale. Such cosmic and tragic unhappiness in that face. What is she, not an American?

Oh, yes she is. She's an old coloured woman who's worked in our family for years and she was born right here in Philadelphia.

Oh coloured! Well, of course I suppose you would call her an American though I never think of darkies as Americans. Coloured—yes that would account for that unhappiness in her face. I suppose they all mind it awfully (*PB*, 70).

According to Gertrude, Angela has drawn in Hetty's expression a “cosmic and tragic unhappiness.” Despite an ostensibly reductive “othering” of Hetty in the first passage, Angela's final product in which she gets that look suggests a more complex relation between the “the dark brown immobile mask of Hetty's skin,” and the completed sketch. By representing Hetty's face dynamically in motion under “the dark brown immobile mask,” Fauset signals to her readers the ways in which the discourses of primitivism are at play for the black female subject and the black artist at this moment; however, in having Angela sketch an image of Hetty that differs from the mask, itself linked to received notions of wanton sexuality, she also signals what happens when a black subject gets behind the mirror to manipulate inherited, oppressive representative models. Angela desires Hetty's expression, she wants “to get” Hetty's look; and, in her identification with Hetty's “wild and avid” emotions, she comes to occupy a different position within discourse. I will return to this section of *Plum Bun* in more detail in Chapter One.

Fauset presents in this scene the challenges of aesthetic mimesis for the black artist of the Renaissance by foregrounding the discourses that organized their representative lexica.¹⁷ The limitations of the discourses of primitivism and racial uplift provide the material background for both Fauset's and Larsen's projects.

¹⁷ In this way we can read both Fauset and Larsen as predecessors to contemporary visual artists like Kara Walker. Walker is also often dismissed, and/or celebrated for her silhouette drawings

The following chapters will explore the following questions: what exactly is so important about the focus of mimesis as identification in the critical and artistic production of the period of the Renaissance? How did its organization of the debates and concepts of that period open up and foreclose upon certain avenues of productive inquiry in black representative art? What is mimesis, and how does it function in African American works of the period of the Renaissance? And finally, as interpreters of literature and other forms of art produced by black subjects, why do we, or should we, still care about mimesis in the 21st century?

For it would appear that mimesis as a concept is itself out of favor with some of the more provocative, contemporary critical thought of the late twentieth century. Roland Barthes defines it as one of the most conservative of literary models, that which induces “nausea” through the reproduction of already existing signs.¹⁸ For Barthes, it is precisely the reproduction, or “imitation” of the external world that relegates his understanding of mimesis to its sad fate. What is crucial for Barthes as a semiotician is how the free play of signs produces meaning, rather than simply reproduce the closure of a system structured by reference and repetition; this is what he would probably define as the economy of mimetic imitation. In an essay devoted solely to a critique of “mimetology” and a discussion of the workings of mimesis and mimicry in the work of Mallarmé, Jacques Derrida likens the term to both a “crisis in literature” and in “literary criticism” itself; both discourses in danger of being read as “part of what we have called the ontological interpretation of mimesis or of

of a perverse American slave history. Her work can be read, however, as a critique of the very materials a black artist has inherited, the dilemma of “creating images of Black American identity and culture...as thin as the paper on which they were drawn. Indeed, Walker’s most significant contribution may be her insistence that *the artist and the intellectual can attempt to create a noble history for themselves but that they cannot do so with tools of their own choosing...*(w)e cannot ever escape the fact that this image(s)...has come to us already freighted with meaning.” Robert Reid-Pharr “Black Girls Lost” in Annette Dixon, Ed. *Pictures From Another Time: Kara Walker* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2002) 27-41.

¹⁸ Roland Barthes, *S/Z*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993)

metaphysical mimetologism.”¹⁹ Likewise, Paul de Man denies mimesis’s singularity by lumping it together with other literary tropes, mimesis’s “naturalness” must be deconstructed, “for what we call ideology is precisely the confusion of linguistic with natural reality, of reference with phenomenalism.”²⁰

For these theorists among many others, the register of mimesis, or what is too often taken as its twin, “imitation,” promotes a nausea over and suspicion about the implicit ideological pitfalls of a naïve referentiality. As far back as Plato, mimesis is presented as a troublesome concept, in its dangerous ability to undermine a stable notion of Truth that founds the Republic through the duplicitous copies of appearances; for these contemporary post-structuralist theorists, however, the vexations of mimesis worry truth-claims in an opposite direction: that there would be a privileging of a “true” and “authentic” original over an infinite series of copies.²¹

And yet, there are interruptions in this debate which view the workings of mimesis in a somewhat more positive vein. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno find something necessary to retain in the concept. According to their argument in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, mimesis employs itself as a valuable resource in the battle against instrumental rationality in the modern period.²² In this aspect they are connected to Walter Benjamin’s somewhat nostalgic, albeit suggestive celebration of mimesis in his essay “On the Mimetic Faculty”.²³ Adorno’s engagement with the concept is more fully expounded upon in all its difficulty in *Aesthetic Theory* and

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, “The Double Session,” in *Dissemination*, trans Barbara Johnson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981) 245.

²⁰ Paul de Man, *The Resistance To Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1986) 10-11.

²¹ See Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendahl, Nerval, Flaubert* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988) 1-23, for a useful staging of the debate between the Platonic and post-structuralist discontent with mimesis. Hereafter *OM*.

²² Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum Press, 1972) 180-181, 227.

²³ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986) 333-336.

Minima Moralia.²⁴ And, although the post-structuralist theorists who would seem to condemn mimesis to the dustbin of an ideologically suspect aesthetic and critical practice, an argument could be made at least for Derrida (also in “The Double Session”) that there is more to mimesis, and more that is potentially positive, than is dreamed of in theories of imitation.

For example, literary philosopher Paul Ricoeur’s three volume work *Time and Narrative* raises the questions of temporality, history and emplotment through a reinterpretation of Aristotle’s aesthetic mimesis in *Poetics* and Augustine’s discussion of time in *Confessions*. More than a “commentary” on *Poetics*, Ricoeur establishes a system divided into sections designated mimesis1, mimesis2, and mimesis3; he defines the relation of the three registers as intersectional: between the world of the text and the world of the reader, with an emphasis upon a “rethinking” through “reenactment” in the historical imagination, in this way banishing the process of mimesis (through a rendering of its relation to history, memory and time), from the claustrophobic effects of the sign of the same which so nauseated Barthes. Ricoeur’s readings of the multiple registers of mimesis fall under the sign of the same *and* the other, interpreting “imitation of an action” as repetition with a crucial difference.²⁵ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s *Typography*, an English translation of a collection of essays chosen from his collections, *Le sujet de la philosophie: Typographies I* and *L’imitation des modernes: Typographies II* and from *Mimesis: Des Articulations* form, along with Ricoeur’s work, one of the more extended, albeit emphatically post-structuralist accounts, of the positive aspects to the oscillations of mimesis.²⁶

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. C. Lenhardt (London, 1984), *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1996).

²⁵ Paul Ricoeur, *Time And Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984-1988).

²⁶ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography*, trans. Christopher Fynsk (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1989).

In *The Order of Mimesis* literary critic Christopher Prendergast, reading through Pierre Bourdieu, presents the intriguing notion of mimesis as praxis, “a practice without theory,” capable of “bypassing the authoritarian forms of knowledge.”²⁷ He understands the ambiguity of mimesis as consistent with Georges Batailles’s “limit,” simultaneously in the service of the Censor whose repression is inescapable from what Ludwig Wittgenstein calls a “form of life,” and, in that way, a possible ground for resistance to the hegemonic order. Congruent with Prendergast’s suggestions, postcolonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha’s essays in *The Location of Culture*, specifically “Of Mimicry and Man,” argue along similar lines and find in the workings of mimesis/mimicry a site of resistance capable of destabilizing the authoritarian order of colonial discourses.

Erich Auerbach’s magisterial *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* is the lodestar in the field of literary studies for any engagement with mimesis. Its monumentality has for years been irreproachable, and its foundation for a long time assumed to be intact. But mimesis is currently “back on the agenda as a problem.”²⁸ Its demise along with the death of humanism; along with it, mimesis was ostensibly buried. But the corpse keeps “springing back to life.”²⁹

Auerbach’s *Mimesis* is, nevertheless, also an exilic text, written between 1942 and 1945 in Istanbul, where Auerbach (a German Jew) had taken refuge from the Nazis, after being dismissed from his post at Marburg University in 1935.³⁰ His focus upon realism as a category of value (as opposed to modernism, for example), centers

²⁷ Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendahl, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 8.

²⁸ Mimesis is magisterial precisely because for [Auerbach] the concept of ‘mimesis’ as such was intrinsically non-problematical. *OM* 212.

²⁹ *Ibid* 213.

³⁰ The poignancy of the terror Auerbach and millions of others experienced during this chapter in European history is captured in his exhortatory lines: I hope that my study will reach its readers—both my friends of former years, if they are still alive, as well as all the others for whom it was intended. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003) “Epilogue” 557.

his interpretative strategies upon the voice of the common people.³¹ In a review of the fiftieth anniversary edition of *Mimesis* (2003), accompanied with a new introduction by Edward Said, Terry Eagleton defines realism in ways similar to the proliferating definitions of mimesis.³² He highlights the difficulty of “representationalism” specifically in terms of vision, resemblance and the “self,” in this he captures the dynamic limit point of mimesis.³³ And Edward Said also uses the language of vision (“optic for seeing”) to describe Auerbach’s strategies of reading diverse literatures in the Western tradition, as well as how the epochs form themselves in their own representational formations.³⁴ Auerbach’s *Mimesis* is the particular vision of a Berlin Jew exiled to a Turkish and Muslim space whose humanism informs the coherency and irreconcilability of both his muted political position as “other” in Europe (“I am a Prussian of the Jewish faith”), and the antinomies of literary styles that inform his work. His desire to return to the home which, for a devastating period of time, reviled him never waned. Till the end of his life, Auerbach continued to imagine ways to return to Germany.³⁵ Although often taken as the representative text of Eurocentric literature, Auerbach’s “optic for seeing” as an outsider critiques the failures of his own

³¹ Auerbach’s critical turn from Homeric epic to Old Testament narrative in the first chapter, “Odysseus’s Scar” structures the predominant focus of his study. Of particular note in this engagement is the focus upon the biblical rhetorical structures that produce interiorities previously absent in the Homeric epic. He also states: When Stendahl and Balzac took random individuals from everyday life in their dependence upon current historical circumstances and made them subjects of serious, problematic, and even tragic representation, they broke with the classical rule of distinct levels of style, for according to this rule, everyday practical reality could find a place in literature only within the frame of a low or intermediate kind of style, that is to say, either grotesquely comic or pleasant, light, colorful, and elegant entertainment. Ibid 554.

³² Realism is one of the most elusive artistic terms. Terry Eagleton, “Porkchops and Pineapples” in *London Review of Books*, 23 October, 2003, 17-19.

³³ Besides, representationalism has its limits. If the source of representing is the self, it is doubtful whether the self can be captured within its own view of the world, any more than the eye can be an object in its own field of vision. In picturing the world, the self risks falling outside the frame of its own representations. It is the dynamic power behind the whole process, but one which it is hard to figure here. (Ibid)

³⁴ Ibid., xiii.

³⁵ Ibid., xvii.

national literature to confront modern reality and its “everyday common people;” his praxis in *Mimesis* is both its “triumph...and (it’s) inevitable flaw.”³⁶

These theorists and literary critics emphasize to varying degrees the ambiguity of the workings of mimesis in its diversity of interpretations. However, to whatever degree that ambiguity is punctuated, there is something in mimesis which vibrates between the poles of presence and absence, of the visible and the invisible, of subject and object, of reference and imaginative enactment. In this way some of the most provocative discussions of mimesis take place in the discourses of psychoanalysis, where as a register its pride of place is located in distinctive models of identification, visual and otherwise. I take up this language in particular in my analysis despite the fact that psychoanalysis has long posed problems for the interpretation of African American literary and cultural texts. As Hortense J. Spillers states:

Little or nothing in the intellectual history of African Americans within the social and political context of the United States suggests the effectiveness of a psychoanalytic discourse, revised or classical, in illuminating the problematic of ‘race’ on an intersubjective field of play, nor do we know how to historicize the psychoanalytic object and objective, invade its hereditary premises and insulations, and open its insights to cultural and social forms that are disjunctive to its originary imperatives.³⁷

While Spillers advances her critique of the Eurocentric Universalism of psychoanalysis (“It seems that Freud wrote as if his man or woman was everybody’s”) and its potentially de-politicizing idealism (“Lacanian psychoanalytic theory is simply heavenly insofar as it has no eyes for the grammar and politics of power”), she concludes her argument by posing the following question, “how might psychoanalytic theories speak about ‘race’ as a self-consciously assertive reflexivity, and how might

³⁶ Said highlights Auerbach’s foregrounding of perspectival subjectivism: [t]he human mind studying literary representations of the historical world can only do as all authors do—[write] from the limited perspective of their own time and work. *Ibid.*,xxxiii.

³⁷ Hortense J. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be By Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race” in Spillers, *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003) 376. Hereafter *PR*.

‘race’ expose the gaps that psychoanalytic theories awaken?” (376). Spillers further states:

Neither from the point of view of African Americans’ relationship to the dominant culture nor, just as important, from that of the community’s intramural engagements have we been obliged in our analytical/critical writings to consider the place, for example, of fantasy, desire, and the “unconscious”, of conflict, envy, aggression and ambivalence in the repertoire of elements that are perceived to fashion the lifeworld (377).

Spillers is then led to conclude that despite enormous pitfalls, psychoanalysis—as a mode of self-inquiry—provides artists and critics the opportunity to interrogate and reconceptualize the endeavor of artistic and critical productions, both personally and politically. And this is good news, since the rigid dichotomy between psychoanalytic theories and “race” is not quite as strict as is often supposed; one may look only as far as Freud’s use of the “figure of mixed race” in his essay “The Unconscious” (1915), or read the phantasy of the “negro rapist” in Joan Riviere’s “Womanliness as Masquerade” (1929).

Although the African American literary establishment may not have been explicitly interested in psychoanalysis during the course of the twentieth century, clearly, psychoanalysis as a discourse since its inception has been interested in “race”, as well as other forms of difference, most obviously gender and sexuality. In fact, Kaja Silverman, like Spillers, also wishes to validate the use of the Freudian model of the castration crisis and Oedipus complex in the face of cultural differences. She goes so far to say that the historical and cultural specificity of the models provided by psychoanalysis as a discourse “are induced as an effect of the larger culture” rather than “occur punctually within the family.”³⁸

³⁸ I would...suggest that the actual family conditions which might distinguish one social group from another, and seemingly invalidate Freud’s model—missing father, unusually potent or old mother, reversal of caretaking roles—can qualify, but not entirely militate against, the implementation of scenarios that model describes. *TVW*, 32

Spillers's position on the field of "race" and psychoanalysis also dovetails Jacqueline Rose's recuperation of psychoanalysis in her critique of British leftist feminisms, Marxist and otherwise, that devolved into a naïve, empiricist resistance to anything the psychoanalytic frame of reference might offer a feminist, oppositional politics. Rose argues for the necessity of psychoanalysis despite Freud's ostensible universalism:

The Universalism of Freud was not, therefore, an attempt to remove the subject from history; it stemmed from his challenge to the category of hysteria as a principle of classification for certain socially isolated and confined individuals, and his shifting of this category into the centre of everybody's psychic experience. It was only by penetrating behind the visible symptoms of the disorder and asking what it was that the symptom was trying to say, that Freud could uncover those unconscious desires and motives which he went on to expose in the slips, dreams and jokes of individuals paraded as normal. Hence Freud's challenge to the visible, to the empirically self-evident, to the 'blindness of the seeing eye.'³⁹

Spillers, Rose, and Silverman employ the modalities of psychoanalytic discourse for the furthering of a feminist and "racial" critique of the illusory coherence of the subject constituted in the hegemony of patriarchal culture. And while Spillers identifies something of an historical absence in the writings of black critics vis-à-vis uses of psychoanalytic theories, her argument opens literary and cultural criticism to potentially provocative discussions of the ways psychoanalysis can help all critics (and readers) to understand themselves as already operative within a cultural/political frame; one often happy to benefit from their presence, if not actually affirm their humanity.

In her gloss on Lacan's notion of the "subject of enunciation," she points to the distinct problems of language within which black artists since have historically engaged; and this dissertation explores the signal question extended by African American literatures: how to represent oneself in a language which enslaves you? Contiguous to this question, Spillers states:

³⁹ Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1991).

The individual-in-the-mass and the mass-in-the-individual mark an iconic thickness: a concerted function whose abiding centrality is embodied in the flesh. But before the “individual”, properly speaking, with its overtones of property ownership and access, more or less complete, stands the “one”, who is both a position within discourse—the spoken subject of enoncé that figures a grammatical instance and a consciousness of positionality—the speaking subject of enunciation, the one in the act of speaking as consciousness of position. (395).

This question, to which I will return more fully in Chapter One, articulates the problematics of mimesis as constitutive of language. In her link between the weight of the “representative” upon individual black subjects (“Every Black Man/Woman *is* the race”), always in danger of collapsing into the “mass,” he or she thereby “taken as a supreme instance of its synecdochic representation,” Spillers revisits one of the central problems with which the Renaissance wrestled. When she further expounds upon the third position in the “iconic thickness,” she addresses the processes of mimetic identification and their specificities for the black speaking subject. Her argument looks to the most extensive critical apparatus that links models of identification (mimesis) to positions within language: the field of psychoanalysis.

Some examples of psychoanalytic theoretical models that engage mimesis as identification include Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen’s critique in *The Freudian Subject* of the shift in Sigmund Freud’s first to the second topography is all due to an impossible relation to mimesis; Kaja Silverman’s forceful and innovative theorization of Jacques Lacan’s mimetic visual paradigms for psychic categories seeks to exploit the political potential of mobilizing the screen, the look, and the gaze in a culturally specific context whereby identification is necessitated by a devalued other in the objectivity of the self; and Ruth Leys’s argument in “The Real Miss Beauchamp” argues that the mode of identification between child and mother per se necessitates an unavoidable trauma because it is structured through the tensions of mimetic and anti-mimetic

tendencies.⁴⁰ It is among these interpretations of mimesis as different models of identification staged in the mental theatre, which argue neither “for” nor “against” mimesis but rather seeks to plumb its dangers and pleasures, with which the literatures of the Harlem Renaissance resonate; as they do with the literary critical and philosophical theorists of mimesis which consider the concept as constitutive of modern artworks, and as the ground of certain alternative post-structuralist models of subjectivity.

Renaissance Discourses: The Black Modernist Dilemma

It is by now a commonplace of literary criticism of at least the last thirty years that the artists and scholars working during the Renaissance are marked by particular discursive regimes. For the purposes of this project it bears repeating. The antinomy is borne out by the command for an essentialist, authentic racial identity against which the productions of the Harlem Renaissance is launched. As a movement, it was meant to offer representative works by the New Negro whose artistic production would act as proof against the racist claims that African Americans, “New Negroes,” bore no relation to culture. However, the contradiction of the movement is reflected in its dual aspect: while the “New Negro” was meant to rediscover an authentic racial essence through a reliance upon either African American (Negro) folk traditions *or* ancestral African cultures, these artistic expressions are simultaneously meant to intercede in the construction of “race” and racial difference by offering new representations of “blackness,” which would shed light on the textuality and constructedness of racial categories, and of our ability to rearticulate racial difference in the service of diverse national and political goals. The discourse of the primitive, figured as “Negro” or

⁴⁰ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press); Ruth Leys, “The Real Miss Beauchamp: Gender and the Subject of Imitation” in Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott, Eds. *Feminists Theorize the Political* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 167-214.

African, is also intertwined with another discursive paradigm: racial uplift. If the “primitive” in its numerous iterations was meant to offer something “new” and necessarily “authentic” it succeeded in doing so only by ironically harkening back to (and therefore reproducing) some perceived notion of a primeval era of black life; racial uplift, in direct response to the disfranchisement of slave economies and communities, employed different demands virulently antagonistic to the notion of the primitive. Uplift emerges out of the histories of slavery, emancipation and

Reconstruction. As Kenneth Gaines writes:

Uplift’s origins were in antislavery efforts among enslaved blacks, as well as in the network of institutions for group elevation established within antebellum free communities. Barred from white churches, schools, and public and social facilities, free blacks in the North, including Canada, and the urban South, formed their own institutions, providing for themselves a space for fellowship, solidarity, mutual aid, and political activism.⁴¹

The politics of comportment haunted uplift ideology as fully as did the sexual abandon ostensibly inherent in primitive exoticism. It was uplift’s program to uplift the race through positive representation. In this modernist moment the black female subject found herself caught in the crosshairs of the primitive exotic or the proper race woman: neither provided an affirmative model for liberated expression of black female sexuality. Although racial uplift arguably offered the possibility of full citizenship for the black bourgeoisie, it also espoused prescriptive bourgeois cultural values that included in the long list “social purity, thrift, chastity, and the patriarchal family.”⁴² Gaines explains that the contradictions of racial uplift as a cultural politics meant to appease the unsympathetic white majority and was not a matter of black people copying the social mores of white people.⁴³

⁴¹ Kenneth K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press: 1996) 31.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.

⁴³ [It was not] simply a matter of educated African Americans’ wanting to be white, as E. Franklin Frazier’s polemic attacking a materialistic, status—addicted black bourgeoisie suggested. On the contrary, uplift, among its other connotations, also represented the struggle for a positive racial identity in a deeply racist society, turning the pejorative designation of race into

In his trenchant and yet sympathetic critique of the vicissitudes of racial uplift, Gaines points to the background of the social scene Fauset and Larsen used as material for their novels, novellas, short stories and essays. Primarily for them, the repressive and hierarchical gender and social class aspects inhering in “uplift,” when cross-pollinated with the rhetoric of a wild and free primitive, provided no models for a valid, black, and female sexual subject. These are however the discursive text that they inherited, and consequently their work “stresses the discontinuities and contradictions surrounding issues of representation.”⁴⁴ Because the modernist discourses of their day constructed black femininity in the reproductions of a masculinist and racist patriarchal hierarchy which insisted upon either one of two representations: of a proper race woman, or a debased sexuality, both Fauset and Larsen use the figure of racial passing as a visually ambiguously raced and gendered literary trope (although crucially, not an unraced or ungendered figure), to destabilize the discursive limits that structured their historical moment.⁴⁵

a source of dignity and self-affirmation through an ideology of class differentiation, self-help and interdependence. What was problematic about this was not African Americans’ quite understandable desire for dignity, security and class mobility. Rather, the difficulty stemmed from the construction of class differences through racial and cultural hierarchies that had little to do with the material conditions of African Americans, and less to do with the discrimination they faced in a racially stratified southern labor market, with the active complicity of the state and opinion-making apparatuses of civil society...(r)eflecting the clash between blacks’ communal quest for social justice and individualistic imperatives of survival, uplift ideology was forged in the fire of U.S. racism, emerging through peonage, disfranchisement, Jim Crow, the terrorism of lynching and rape, and the ubiquitous contempt for persons of African ancestry. Although uplift ideology was by no means incompatible with social protest against racism, its orientation toward self-help implicitly faulted African Americans for their lowly status, echoing judgmental dominant characterizations of “the Negro problem” Ibid, 3-4.

⁴⁴ Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), 164.

⁴⁵ The mulatto figure is a narrative device of mediation; it allows for a fictional exploration of the relationship between the races while being at the same time an imaginary expression of the relationship between the races. Ibid, 171

Mimesis and Figures of “Race”: How To Take a Snapshot of a Contradiction:

My interest in the kinds of cultural work the figure of racial passing is made to enact within these 20th century texts is driven by some more contemporary questions within the academic fields of African American and American studies regarding “race” that also resonate in more contemporary discussions within the wider culture. The most obvious question the figure of racial passing asks is: how do we, or can we “know” “race?” It is an unoriginal question, and it’s most powerful iteration in this century finds itself in W.E.B. Du Bois’s “[t]he Negro is a sort of a seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world.⁴⁶ In Du Bois’s, Fauset’s and Larsen’s analyses one can know ‘race,’ through a visual mediation; either through the veil or the lure of the passing figure. And herein lay in part the “contradiction of double aims:” how to, on the one hand, escape the history of political dispossession inherited by enslavement, and on the other to secure full property in political, civil and socio-cultural rights for herself and her people⁴⁷? Du Bois’s “contradiction of double-aims” speaks to the elemental complexities of mimesis. In the beginning of the last decade modernist and avant-garde Marxist artists took up the battle to overthrow all existing dominant orders—representational and political in their complicity with each other. They wanted to overthrow the “act of representation itself” partly because it was unclear how to represent a contradictory reality in always in transition. The question became “how do you take a snapshot of a contradiction?”⁴⁸ Linking the two contradictions together, the problem is thrown into further relief. The

⁴⁶ W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1999) 10.

⁴⁷ Here in America, in the few days since Emancipation, the black man’s turning hither and thither in hesitant and doubtful striving has often made his very strength to lose effectiveness, to seem like an absence of power, like weakness. And yet it is not weakness—it is the contradiction of double aims. The double-aimed struggle of the black artisan—on the one hand to escape white contempt for a nation of mere hewers of wood and drawers of water, and on the other hand to plough and nail and dig for a poverty-stricken horde—could only result in making him a poor craftsman, for he had but half a heart in either cause. *Ibid*, 10.

⁴⁸ “pp” 18.

models whose overthrow was underway in the beginning of the 20th century had as their ground the negative property of black humanity. An image of a black subject had yet to be fully incorporated into the dominant cultural repertoire when this particular revolution was underway.

By extension, one of the other questions raised in our current post-Civil Rights-era asks, are we, or can we ever be post-race, and, in general, post-identitarian? Critics Walter Benn Michaels and Ross Posnock would emphatically answer in the affirmative. Michaels's work forms the most determined critique of the "racial essentialism" pervading current scholarship. He argues that race be "drop(ped) as a category of analysis." And, although Posnock critiques Michaels for "ironically...leaving the anti-identitarian lineage of black intellectuals unaccounted for," he also celebrates Michaels's thesis that American modernism "helps explain why the pragmatist pluralism theorized by black intellectuals has been overshadowed, their aspirations for a deracialized, universalist approach to culture unfulfilled."⁴⁹ In his commitment to a post-identitarian project, Posnock uses Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, and Zora Neale Hurston, among other African American writers and intellectuals, to further an attractive argument. Posnock necessarily rejects affirmative as well as racist stereotypes of black writers by positing individuality as their definitive feature. In his and Michaels's view, any deployment of "race" risks reinforcing rather than successfully contesting the suffocating logic of identity as irreducible difference that underpins racist practices in American social and cultural life. And yet, one could see how there is a way in which a post-identitarian project such as the one exemplified by Posnock and Michaels would ultimately throw the

⁴⁹ Ross Posnock, *Color and Culture: Black Writers and the Making of the Modern Intellectual* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998) 25.

baby of history out with the bathwater. For example, in a thoroughgoing assault on race as a category of analysis, Michaels states:

Furthermore, '[t]ransforming the question of whether or not there is such a thing as individual racial identity into the question of whether or not race is an 'essence' and thus deploying race as the grounds of the question rather than its object, this debate reinvigorates and relegitimizes race as a category of analysis.⁵⁰

In this way, both Michaels and Posnock argue for a pragmatist, pluralistic, and universalist approach to culture that seems quite close to a "color-blind ideology", whose perpetuations and dangers have been assiduously critiqued by Kimberle Crenshaw Williams in her interpretation of one of the two most public political dramas of the late twentieth century organized by "race", gender and sex: the O.J.Simpson case.⁵¹

In her own response to Walter Benn Michaels and post-identitarians in general, Hortense Spillers also asserts that history and power are constitutive of their interpretive positions. She insists that the very exchanges post-identitarians engage in

⁵⁰ Walter Benn Michaels, *Our America: Nativism, Modernism and Pluralism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995) 134.

⁵¹The other public dramas of the 1990's to which I refer is the Rodney King police authorized attack and the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas trial. Crenshaw Williams cites the intersection of interracial sex and criminal justice as the spot where the powder keg dynamics of racial power are always cocked and ready to blow. In her critique of Simpson's early positioning as a public sports figure whose blackness was serendipitously put under erasure, she argues that: the goal of a color-blind world is one in which race is precluded as a source of identification or analysis; its antithesis is color consciousness of any sort. Pursuant to this understanding, the moral force of racial equality is mobilized within contemporary settings to stigmatize not only apartheid practices but also efforts to identify and challenge manifestations of institutionalized racial power. It is not necessary, therefore, to redistribute racial capital; color blind discourse almost singularly achieves its mighty mission by simply suspending traditional signs of race and racism. The mere e-racing of the dynamics of racial power cannot wholly disrupt these historical and cultural patterns. E-racing neither forestalls the redeployment of racist discourses nor buries the color line beyond discovery. As revealed in the proliferation of commentary that framed Simpson's acquittal in terms of black lawlessness and irresponsibility, traditional articulations of black otherness are easily recovered. Race, suspended in the buffer zone, remains ready to appear as an interpretive frame to justify racial disparities in American life and to legitimize, when necessary, the marginalization and circumvention of African Americans. See "Color-Blind Dreams and Racial Nightmares: Reconfiguring Racism in the Post-Civil Rights Era" in *Birth of a Nation'hood: Gaze, Script and Spectacle in the O.J. Simpson Case*. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1997), 103.

the abolishment of the status of identity (and 'race') "as a grounding term," are themselves part of the historical map, and are therefore historical, most especially in relation to power and repression. She states:

As far as I can tell, African American culture critique, for example, within the American context, has not debated "race" as an "essence" of individuals or social formations in a century of discursive struggle, and from DuBois on (with exceptions in the Afrocentric outline), the question has come to focus on culture as praxis, in which event 'race' as ground is, in fact, destabilized. But this argument (Michaels's) is interested not in distinctions but, rather, in wholesale indictments that would render any deployment of 'race', even attempts to dismantle its efficacies, racist still. Even culture as praxis does not take us to new ground, Michaels goes on, since the critique of 'race' (by way of Edward Sapir) is 'actually the continuation of race through culture' (122) (o)therwise cultural identity 'makes no sense' (142). By that logic, is *Our America* racist and identitarian? If the only exit strategy from 'race' or 'culture,' or 'race' and 'culture,' or even 'culture' instead of 'race' is not to name it, then I see no reason why Michaels and his project would manage and escape, because surely he cannot believe he means that his argument has achieved an Archimedean point 'outside' or 'beyond' the questions that he presumes to have dissolved?"⁵²

Race is a necessary category of analysis because we are all in culture, in history and in language; therefore we are constituted by and through historical relations of production organized by hierarchies of power that are always already rhetorical and linguistic. Indeed, in the overarching logic Spillers executes against post-identitarianism attempts to "have done with" racialized forms of difference as if by waving a magic wand, her "Archimedean point" is analogous to the strongest feature of Ricoeur's argument regarding mimesis in *Time and Narrative*. For Ricoeur, the strategic point of mimesis lies in its antinomic relationship between narratives based on an always already mediated human experience (mimesis1) and the narratives from which experience is constructed (mimesis2); in this construction we may extrapolate: "there are no new stories to be told;" and the "as yet untold story." Ricoeur turns to the model of repression in psychoanalysis to explain the connection between these two

⁵² Hortense J. Spillers, "Little Man at Chehaw Station: Fifty Years Later," *Boundary 2* Summer 2003, 18.

levels of mimesis, in which the “continuity between the potential or inchoate story and the actual story we assume responsibility for” reside. Indeed, he even takes up Frank Kermode’s point that some narratives, some versions of mimesis² in Ricoeur’s model, “may not aim at illumination but at obscurity and dissimulation”. (I attend fully to Ricoeur and other theorists of mimesis in Chapter One). However, the fact that numerous narratives are produced through obscurity and dissimulation only furthers Ricoeur’s argument. He reads the “secret places in the text...as the mark of its inexhaustibility.”⁵³ For Ricoeur, the “as-yet untold story,” in tension with the always mediated actions and symbols that create narratives, emerges from an encounter with history and its repression—to underscore Spillers’s critique of Michaels—from which no one, in the production of narrative or the critique of narratives, can escape.

Indeed, there other culture workers in the field of literary and cultural studies who have passionately followed Spillers’s injunction “to illuminate the problematic of ‘race’ on an intersubjective field of play.”⁵⁴ The category of “race” is taken up directly in the context of psychoanalysis, formations of the subject and narrative in a collection entitled *The Psychoanalysis of Race*.⁵⁵ By untangling the conscious and unconscious configurations of racism, the essays here critically analyze the ways in which fantasy and the unconscious organize the meanings of racial, ethnic, and post-colonial identities. The trajectory of its project attempts to uncouple the oftentimes perceived seamless relationship between social resistance and psychic repression (as if there exists between them a causal link), while attending to the connections that do occur. More important, they address the disturbing and perverse issue that lies at the heart of any psychoanalytic investigation of group and individual conflict, material and psychic; that there are intangible gains to be earned in conflict which “freedom,”

⁵³ TAN, 74-75.

⁵⁴ “PR” 385.

⁵⁵ Christopher Lane, *The Psychoanalysis of Race* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1998.

however derived and defined, does not offer. As well, by taking the role of fantasy as a historical construct inherently political, the essays in this volume explore the ways in which mid-century Martinican psychologist and postcolonial theorist Frantz Fanon, among other twentieth black writers, refused to ignore material effects of recurrent racial fantasies:

The civilized white man retains an irrational longing for unusual eras of sexual license, of orgiastic scenes, of unpunished rapes, of unrepressed instinct...[P]rojecting his own desires onto the Negro, the white man behaves ‘as if’ the Negro really had them.⁵⁶

In his work on race, fantasy, identification and racisms inherent in the Eurocentric world-view, Fanon examines the ways in which the unconscious becomes a repository for the racial, gender, and sexual difficulties not so easily dispensed with in the conscious realm. In this way, he is a contemporary of Jacques Lacan, as the authors in this study are predecessors to the Lacanian framework, in that all explore how the unconscious and its attendant identifications are constitutive of historical and cultural locations, possible political positions within language and, simultaneously, irreducible to them. A sustained focus on psychic life and its resistances should do justice to the complexity of history, narrative and temporality, without reducing identification to identity, or, at least, without investigating how identifications demand that we retain notions of identity in the service of culture and politics.

The power of the novels I focus on in this dissertation, as well as the more compelling African American and American texts produced throughout the twentieth century, produce “race”, and other forms of difference as linguistic figures that are historical; and what these novels argue is that history inevitably brings itself to bear. This is not to say, nor do I argue that the work these texts “do” persist in a cynical understanding of history: that since we can never escape our past (which has always

⁵⁶ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* trans. Charles Lam Markmann. (New York: Grove Press, 1967).

already occurred) our future is always already written, or, to state the point somewhat differently, “Because I possess a particular history, privileged or oppressed, I am incapable, in relation to my present and future moment, to effect change”. To the contrary, the only way to effect change is through praxis, through a confrontation with history and historical forms that is necessarily linguistic and figurative.

Chapter One focuses upon models of mimesis, literary, philosophical and psychanalytic. By drawing out the similarities and distinctions between these different models, I show throughout the dissertation how mimesis as a conceptual object is always to some degree at work in the artwork’s relation to history, linguistic inheritances, and subject-formation. For example, what is at stake in juxtaposing Lacoue-Labarthe’s post-structuralist accounts of mimesis with Borch-Jacobsen’s investigation of mimesis (identification) as the ground of a subject in formation; in addition, how do those inquiries into mimetic practices inform both Adorno’s insistence upon preserving mimesis as a necessary stage in the production of modernist art over and against Ricoeur’s exhaustive three-level mimetic model (prefigurative, configurative, and refigurative) that dramatizes the dialectics of time and narrative? I use Fauset’s portrait of Hetty Daniels as a literary object whose construction expresses the exemplary dissonance of alternative modernist art practices, and the “whole history of suffering (that) cries out for vengeance and for narrative.”⁵⁷

The second part of this chapter begins by tracing the models of identification in Fauset’s *Plum Bun* as they move through positions within language in the field of the visual. In the process, I argue how Fauset’s work is, in part, a critique of the limitations of the discursive paradigms constitutive of the Harlem Renaissance. These paradigms continue to persist in our present moment. I contend that Fauset’s novel stages a dramatization of praxis suggested by the dynamism of the figure of racial

⁵⁷ TAN 75.

passing in the field of the visual; and through her shift from attenuating the Lacanian “look”, profoundly situated in the body within the spectacle, to the mastery of the more disembodied “gaze,” figured in the camera through the “screen,” whose always mediated and shifting social and political conduits offer the subject a capacity to see, speak and accept others and herself that are de-idealized by various cultural hegemonies. However, as I will show through close readings of the texts, none of the twentieth century modalities of mimesis work for the black modern subject in the field of the visual in seamless fashion, and sometimes they do not work at all. Fauset and Larsen pose challenges to modern literary critical models of mimesis; in so doing their works form a critical, alternative modernism that uses the novel as both a repository for the failures of the modernist project and a prolegomena that simultaneously points towards a possible, albeit future, reconciliation with language.

Chapter Two analyzes Angela Murray’s coming to identification in *Plum Bun* as a process marked by a relationship to a position within language. This rhetorical position is inherited from the discourses of slavery. In particular, the garret in Harriet Jacobs’s *Incident in the Life of A Slave Girl* emerges as an ellipsis that structures both Angela and her mother, Mattie Murray’s identifications as a psychic space projected onto the social milieu in the act of hiding their historical sources.

The first part of Chapter Three explores the function of citation in Jessie Fauset’s last novel, *Comedy, American Style*. By the end of her career as a novelist, Fauset had become further disillusioned with the representative possibilities available to the black subject in American culture, despite the destabilizing slippages inherent in her representations of interpellation. I read the tragic suicide of the black male subject in her final work as a coda to the untimely death of Junius Murray, the patriarch in her second, more optimistic work, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*.

The second part of Chapter Three reads Nella Larsen's novel *Passing* in its engagement with history, narrative and the uncanny. Although clearly invested in a critique of the visual field as is Fauset, I focus upon Larsen's attempts to dramatize the impossible foundations of the black modernist narrative. This impossibility is metaphorized as the shattering of an object that figures as a metaphor for human vision; I also trace the function of the death-drive in this discontinuous narrative

In Chapter Four I turn fully to the question of mimesis in relation to narrative and history by reading David Bradley's *The Chaneyville Incident* as a text which represents an impossibility of closure upon the questions of mimesis, history and narrative in the context of African American fiction, history and the gendered and raced subject. I complete my examination of the question of mimesis with a more contemporary novel from the late twentieth century in order to bridge some of the questions raised by Fauset and Larsen in a different historical context and from a different gender position. Also, *The Chaneyville Incident* provides one of the most difficult yet oddly humanistic models for how to read the black subject of history as a subject of "interior-intersubjectivity," in spite and because of the difficulties that continue to be posed by gender and racial difference in discourse.

Chapter One:

Modalities of Mimesis: Portrait of An Artist as a Young, Black Lady

But perhaps the most profound force of resistance stored in the cultural landscape is the expression of history that is compelling, aesthetically, because it is etched in the real suffering of the past.

Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*

The epigraph to this chapter establishes one of the more powerful arguments that underwrite Theodor Adorno's assessment of mimesis as a category of value in modernity: a dissonant resistance based in a sedimentation constructed out of a memory of suffering. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, both Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno argue that mimesis goes hand-in-hand, and always remains in tension with rationality (the imposition of form), whose power consistently threatens to obliterate "the non-conceptual affinity of a subjective creation with its objective and unposited other (mimesis)."⁵⁸ There is ultimately something constitutionally atavistic about modern aesthetic production in the "dialectic of enlightenment." In Adorno and Horkheimer's framework, this atavism is a morphological result of the enlightenment and the ways in which its various logics are differentiated from each other. Terry Eagleton draws a similar conclusion in his reading of the modality of mimesis as a "representation of reality."⁵⁹ As they mourned the demise of a primal human capacity to imitate nature as enlightenment followed its fateful course, mimesis constitutes a cardinal stage in the development of their thought. And although the dangerous

⁵⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 80. Hereafter *AT*.

⁵⁹ "Perhaps the roots of our admiration for resemblance, mirroring and doubling lie in some very early ceremony of correspondence between human beings and their recalcitrant surroundings. In that case, what Erich Auerbach takes in his great study *Mimesis* to be the most mature form of art may actually be the most regressive." Terry Eagleton, "Porkchops and Pineapples" in *London Review of Books*, 23 October, 2003, 17-19. Hereafter *LRB*.

combinations of mimesis and instrumental rationality that cohere in fascism are more apparent in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* than in *Aesthetic Theory*, mimesis remains an important resource whose dissipation in modernity is to be regretted:

Civilization has replaced the organic adaptation to others and mimetic behavior proper, by organized control of mimesis, in the magical phase; and, finally, by rational practice, by work, in the historical phase. Uncontrolled mimesis is outlawed. The angel with the fiery sword who drove man out of paradise and onto the path of technical progress is the very symbol of that progress. For centuries, the severity with which rulers prevented their own followers and the subjugated masses from reverting to mimetic modes of existence, starting with the religious prohibition on images, going on to the social banishment of actors and gypsies, and leading finally to the kind of teaching which does not allow children to be children, has been the condition for civilization. Social and individual education confirms men in the objectivizing behavior of workers and protects them from reincorporation into a variety of circumambient nature. All devotion and all deflection has a touch of mimicry about it. The ego has been formed in resistance to this mimicry.⁶⁰

In their metaphorization of mimesis as an “outlaw,” Horkheimer and Adorno imply one of its central dangers: that mimesis cues a crisis of representation in the process of representation; and, that this crisis is in the modern world to some degree a problem of identification, an anxiety figured in the numerous literary figures that emerge in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: the charlatan, the imposter and in our case, the figure of racial passing. All in all “mimesis is a matter for the police.”⁶¹ And for this reason, it remains insistently present in Adorno’s work as a concept with which to be wrestled.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, a fuller elaboration of the concept is a driving force of the text’s argument. Adorno’s conceptualization of mimesis approximates not the collapsing of differences under the logic of sameness; rather, mimesis bridges while maintaining the integrity of difference. It sympathizes with non-identical particulars

⁶⁰ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *The Dialectic of Enlightenment* (New York: Continuum, 1995). Hereafter *DE*.

⁶¹ Christopher Prendergast, *The Order of Mimesis: Balzac, Stendahl, Nerval, Flaubert* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986) 217. Hereafter, *OM*.

and preserves the coarse equality of the object and subject involved. For Adorno aesthetic mimesis respects difference. In this way he sees the work of art as a critical “receptacle,” or container that holds “all that has been violently lopped off from and repressed in man by centuries of civilization, during which human beings were forcibly subjected to suffering.”⁶² As a spokesman for that which has been repressed in human history, it expresses itself through a praxis otherwise denied in the reified relationship of subject to object ubiquitous in conceptual thought. In Adorno’s terms, art is an “after-image of praxis.”⁶³ The trace of that practice emerges in the dissonant resistance between mimesis and rationality, and the relationship between object and subject inheres in the sedimentation (or precipitations) and remembrance of a painful historical past.⁶⁴

Mimesis bridges differences, not of least importance the difference between present and past, and thereby respects the integrity of the object through a less obtrusive, less aggressive relationship between object and subject. This is accomplished through an “assimilative” relationship between object and subject in which the object at hand is not subsumed in an imperialist gesture of domination. At the heart of his thesis in *Aesthetic Theory*, the relationship that adheres in aesthetic mimesis between subject and object is one of *contiguity*. Adorno states:

Mimetic behavior does not imitate something but assimilates itself to that something. Works of art take it upon themselves to realize this assimilation. They do not imitate the impulses of an individual in the medium of expression, much less those of the artist himself. If they do, they immediately fall prey to replication and objectification of the kind which their mimetic impulses react against (*AT*, 110-11).⁶⁵

⁶² Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984) 453, 465. Hereafter *AT*.

⁶³ *AT* 439.

⁶⁴ “In aesthetic mimesis in particular, what is preserved—as well as transformed—is the sedimented “material” of past artistic endeavors, which suggest a historical and natural ‘other’ worthy of assimilation.” Martin Jay, *Cultural Semantics: Keywords for Our Time* (Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press, 1998) 124. Hereafter *CS*.

⁶⁵ The Lenhardt translation is explicit in the debt that the English word assimilation bears to the German *anshmiegen* which means “to snuggle up or mold to.”

This “assimilative” faculty is perhaps analogous to “sympathetic magic,” yet it is not identical to it, at least in Adorno’s understanding, despite one theorist’s claim that Adorno conceived of the mimetic faculty as that which “provided the immersion in the concrete necessary to break definitively from the fetishes and myths of commodified practices of freedom.”⁶⁶ Adorno’s sense of mimesis is an “identifying with” something as opposed to an “identifying of” an object; it thereby relies on the older Greek meaning of mimesis, “impersonating by dancing or acting.”⁶⁷

In viewing aesthetic mimesis as precisely that which rejects and opposes the reification of the copy through a kind of “snuggling up to” in the form of assimilation, Adorno distances himself from the notion of mimetic comportment as a simple copy of an already constructed presence; again, this idea is most obviously apparent in Roland Barthes’s critique of the nausea incited by the stable economy of signs and meanings whose “mimetic” repetition copies what is socially understood as a stable “truth”.

In fact, in Adorno’s analysis, there are dissonant forces at work in the modern artworks which trouble the harmonizing tendencies of both reconciliation with past suffering, and the contemporaneous problems of power and desire that coordinate the process of artistic creation. These dissonant aspects found in the artwork are organized by mimetic comportment in relation to pain and past suffering: “(a)rtistic expression comports itself mimetically, just as the expression of living creatures is that of pain.”(AT, 162). The human body is the nodal point for mimetic expression as the

⁶⁶ Michael Taussig celebrates the affirmative moments of Adorno’s theories of mimesis at the expense of what Adorno never lost sight of: that mimesis alone is insufficient. Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Altherity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 254. “It was imperative to temper it (mimesis) with a non-instrumental notion of reason that involved the capacity for judgment though the better argument.” Martin Jay, “Unsympathetic Magic” in *Visual Anthropology Review* Volume 9, Number 2, Fall 1993, 80.

⁶⁷ See Michael Cahn, “Subversive Mimesis: Theodor W. Adorno and the Impasse of Critique” in *Mimesis in Contemporary Theory: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Ed. Mihai Spariosu (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 1984) 27-64.

locus of both pain and pleasure. Adorno does not lose sight of the complex relation of mimesis to expression; his magnification of that relation is something more substantive than the psychological interiority of the individual artist. The dissonance in the artwork is located in the remembrance of suffering.⁶⁸

For Adorno, mimesis is congruent with the most inflexibly dissonant modernist art, the hallmarks of which for him include the works of Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka. In this regard, Adorno is situated in direct opposition to Erich Auerbach's subtle devaluation of modernist works. Auerbach much prefers a robust realism to the more "decadent" artistic productions of Virginia Woolf.⁶⁹ And so, despite the fact that modernist art is signaled by a breaking through the frame of old forms and old discourses, its new mask, according to Adorno, necessarily structures itself upon a sedimentation of past suffering—a repetition, but with a difference.⁷⁰ The artwork's office is to retain rather than falsely reconcile the tensions of a historical memory; they should also execute a "negative dialectics of imitation" in relation to what exists outside their ostensibly self-enclosed boundaries. This is not a theory of art for art's sake, since the modern artwork is always in tension with the dissonant features of a historical body in pain, and because although it only resembles itself, that resemblance exists in relation to the external world. Spirit and mimesis, construction and expression, infiltrate each other; as Adorno claims in another work: "to represent the

⁶⁸ "Instead, what is expressed in the dissonant resistance to the harmonizing impulses of affirmative art, a resistance that is grounded in the remembrance of the sedimented suffering of the past and the continued suffering of the present—the suffering of the object as well as the subject." *CS*, 124.

⁶⁹ *LRB*, 18.

⁷⁰ In his explanation of mimesis2 (configuration), Paul Ricoeur takes up the haunting of the past over the configurative aspects of narration. "Innovation remains a form of behavior governed by rules. The labor of the imagination is not born from nothing. It is bound in one way or another to the tradition's paradigms. But the range of solutions is vast." Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, trans. Kathleen McLuaghlin and David Pellauer (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1984) 69. Hereafter, *TAN*.

mimesis it supplanted, the concept has no other way than to adopt something mimetic in its own conduct without abandoning itself.”⁷¹

In the preservation of past suffering and the formal tensions attendant upon that sedimentation, Adorno’s modern artworks respond to the Platonic fear of art’s duplicity; its failure to imitate a higher reality through a “negative dialectic of imitation.” For Adorno, “similarity with itself separates the artwork from a false reality where nothing is really real because everything obeys the laws of exchange.”⁷² In this way, by refusing to imitate a degraded external reality, works of art hold out the hope for a version of mimesis beyond domination and reification. Whether or not the hope would be realized is in many quarters a question still to be answered. But what Adorno’s theory forces one to come to terms with is his understanding of the dialectical relationship between rationality and expression. Adorno’s version of mimesis is not simply the opposite of rationality; it is a placeholder for a cognitive power of intuition. And these two moments, expression and rationality, are irreconcilable to each other. In the work of art, the mimetic action dialectically saturates the constructive rational moment (without ultimately being in accordance with it) in such a way that its difference is still articulated through the form; crucially, that difference provides a critique of construction itself.⁷³ The rift between mimesis and construction is dialectical movement as critique. Adorno further emphasizes:

Mimesis should not be dismissed just because it is irrational. What the stubborn persistence of aesthetic mimesis proves is not that there is an innate play instinct, as some ideologues would have us believe, but that to this day rationality has never been fully realized, rationality understood in the sense of an agency in the service of mankind and of human potentials (AT, 453).

⁷¹ Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973).

⁷² Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge: University of Massachusetts Press, 1991) 181.

⁷³ Peter Osborne provides a cogent account of the dialectic of mimesis and expression. See “Adorno and Modernism” in Andrew Benjamin ed. *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin* (London: Routledge, 1989) 23-48.

The purchase of rationality having “never been fully realized” is of vital importance to human agency and the human body, both embattled by dominative and repressive discursive regimes. In one of his less dour moments, Adorno retains the possibility of an untapped human potential as a resource for the future.

Art is not reconciliation in the classicist sense: Reconciliation is the comportment of artworks by which they become conscious of the non-identical. Spirit does not identify the non-identical: It identifies with it. By pursuing its own identity with itself, art assimilates itself with the non-identical: This is the contemporary stage of development of art’s mimetic essence. (AT, 134).

Clearly, there is no doubt that “reconciliation” can only occur through a vexed process that traverses differences, and whose difference from an art of conciliation and idealism is colossal. Embodied in the notion that “spirit does not identify the non-identical in a relation like a subject identifying an object: it identifies with it,” the psychoanalytic perspectives on mimesis as identification are punctuated. I will address these connections later in this chapter. However, Adorno’s ideas also punctuate Paul Ricoeur’s thesis on mimesis in *Time and Narrative*.

Part Two:

Concordant Discordance/Discordant Concordance: Time and Narrative
(T)ime becomes human to the extent that it is articulated through a narrative mode,
and narrative attains its full meaning when it becomes a condition of temporal
existence. Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*

Can it be that the memory is not present to itself in its own right but only by means of an image to itself?

Saint Augustine, *Confessions*

Paul Ricoeur’s three-volume work *Time and Narrative* finds its argument located in a strategic positioning of Augustine’s Book 10 of *Confessions*, and Aristotle’s foundational aesthetics in *Poetics*. He reads the absent cause of Aristotle’s

thesis on mimesis and emplotment (*muthos*) in Augustine's paradoxes of time, and vice-versa. Ricoeur stages a "confrontation" between *Confessions* and *Poetics* in order to provide a framework through which we may answer the question of "time and narrative."⁷⁴ He employs this confrontation as the springboard for his argument; if Augustine "gives a representation of time in which discordance never ceases to belie the desire for that concordance that forms the very essence of the animus" and "the Aristotelian analysis, on the other hand, establishes the dominance of concordance over discordance in the configuration of plot," then the only way to understand our experience of time is through plot, the mimesis of an action (*TAN*, 4). Ricoeur sums up his position that "in plots we invent the privileged means by which we re-configure our confused, unformed, and at the limit mute temporal experience." (*TAN*, 45-46). Reading through these two foundational works and their resistances to each other, Ricoeur establishes a system of mediating construction he identifies as "time and narrative."

Human attempts to place an order upon the chaotic disorder of time result in plots; the emplotment of time is divided in Ricoeur's analysis into three discrete categories, mimesis₁, mimesis₂, and mimesis₃. His project is to construct the relationship between the three mimetic modes that constitutes the "mediation" between time and narrative. Ricoeur offers the image of the text itself as a visual metaphor through which we can pass from one side to the other; like a single page in its recto and verso we traverse it in three stages: "to conduct us from the one side of the text to the other, transfiguring the one side into the other through its power of configuration" (*TAN*, 53). Above all else "mediation" is the privileged term in

⁷⁴ "What is even more important for my purpose is that the first author inquires into the nature of time without any apparent concern for grounding his inquiry on the narrative structure of the spiritual autobiography developed in the first nine books of *Confessions*. And the second constructs his theory of dramatic plot without paying any attention to the temporal implications of his analysis, leaving to the *Physics* the problem of how to go about analyzing time." *TAN* 4.

Ricoeur's system of time and narrative. The stages of experience which precede, coincide with and exceed the text are *sui generis* "mediated." Ricoeur explains:

[T]o resolve the problem of the relation between time and narrative I must establish the mediating role of emplotment between a stage of practical experience that preceded it and a stage that succeeds it. In this sense my argument in this book consists of constructing the mediation between time and narrative by demonstrating emplotment's mediating role in the mimetic process [W]e are following therefore the destiny of a prefigured time that becomes a refigured time through the mediation of a configured time. (*TAN*, 53-4).

To further explain, Ricoeur's argument goes to the heart of Aristotle's definition of mimesis as an "imitation of an action". This is the first anchorage of Ricoeur's system. Human actions themselves are mediated by a "preunderstanding of the world of action, its meaningful structures, its symbolic resources, and its temporal character" (*TAN*, 54). In defining the sorts of actions by which his whole structure is compelled, Ricoeur distinguishes a conceptual network from a concept of action so that the intersignification of practical actions is clear. He states: "[a]ctions imply goals...actions refer to motives...actions also have agents" and "these agents can be held responsible for certain consequences of their actions." (55) However, the story of "narrative" cannot end here. The conceptual network of action is itself supplemented by narrative's "discursive features that distinguish it from a simple sequence of action sentences." (56) These features are differentiated from the "conceptual network of the semantics of action;" specifically, they are "syntactic features, whose function is to engender the composing of modes of discourse worthy of being called narratives." (*TAN*, 56) In understanding how these actions confer meaning upon each other in the conceptual network, one must understand that the recognition of a narrative requires a facility for the rules that govern language and action: "a narrative is to master the rules that govern its syntagmatic order." Therefore, to understand a narrative, or a "story", is to both "understand the language of 'doing something' and the cultural tradition from which proceeds the typology of plots." (57)

Ricoeur further establishes his argument of the “public character” of mimesis1 by drawing upon two notions of “symbolic:” Clifford Geertz’s perception of symbolic mediation and Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*.⁷⁵ In linking sociology of Geertz to Cassirer, he takes the meaning of symbol as both ritualistic and textured in a way that exceeds a “psychological operation”. If culture is public because meaning is public, symbolism at this stage does not reside in the mind, rather, it is a “meaning incorporated into action and decipherable from it by other actors in the social interplay.” (*TAN*, 57). Ritual gestures and actions symbolize meaning within a specific culture.

Symbolic mediation in mimesis1 is textured before it becomes a text. The exemplary case of understanding a symbol in this way is in ritual; symbols are parts of a cultic system in which a symbolic act must be situated; along with the whole set of conventions, beliefs and institutions that compose a framework of a culture. As such, even before being submitted to interpretation, symbols are “interpretants internally relating to some action.” (*TAN*, 58). Ricoeur points out that as an interpretant, the symbol governs what Geertz calls “thick description”. This connection is crucial in determining the differences between the texture of an action that is part of cultural ritual, and the text of that action actually written by ethnologists. Symbols should be understood as interpretants that inhere in “thick description” and confer an initial legibility on action. Such legibility is mediated before it enters the texts (and concepts, tables, lists) of the ethnologist, fiction writer, or historian. Ricoeur states:

We can see the richness in the meaning of mimesis1. To imitate or represent action is first to preunderstand what human acting is, in its semantics, its symbolic system, its temporality. Upon this preunderstanding, common to both poets and their readers, emplotment is constructed and, with it, textual and literary mimesis. (*TAN*, 64).

⁷⁵ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

“Opens the Kingdom of the As-If:” Mimesis 2

In moving his analysis of time and narrative along to the second stage of his tripartite system, Ricoeur shifts firmly into the realm of fiction, or, configuration. In the transition to mimesis² we are in the realm of the “as if;” of paramount importance to Ricoeur in this stage is a fuller comprehension of the “mediating” function of emplotment—a term he prefers to plot—as the organizing paradigm of this stage. Emplotment, derived in large degree from Aristotle’s plot, mediates in three ways: between individual or series of events and a story taken as a whole; it brings together heterogeneous factors like agents, goals, interactions, circumstances and unexpected results; third, it mediates in its relation to temporality. It is this third subset of plot that captures Ricoeur’s expansion of Aristotle’s covert implications regarding time.

Ricoeur asserts:

Aristotle did not consider these temporal characteristics. They are directly implied, however, in the constitutive dynamism of the narrative configuration. As such, they give the full meaning of the concept of concordant discordance. In this respect, we may say of the operation of emplotment both that it reflects the Augustinian paradox of time and that it resolves it, not in a speculative but rather in a poetic mode. It reflects the paradox inasmuch as the act of emplotment combines in variable proportions two temporal dimensions, one chronological and the other not (*TAN*, 66).⁷⁶

In its continued focus on narrative’s relationship to time, Ricoeur’s argument develops the idea that emplotment configures time in non-linear ways which vexed Augustine “to silence” in *Confessions*. Firstly, in the repetition of a story, the retelling rather than the telling, a new quality of time is apprehended by the reader/audience, in its closure

⁷⁶ The “combination of two temporal dimensions” has been thoroughly discussed in the field of narratology; whether through the post-structuralist distinction “story” and “discourse”; Russian Formalist “fabula” and “sjuzhet”; or, the confusions of récit (sometimes fabula, sometimes sjuzhet); in all formulations, two distinctive levels exist within narrative: the sequence of actions or events and the discursive presentation or narration of events. Perhaps the signal post-structuralist analysis of the two organizing temporal dimensions is Jonathan Culler’s “Story and Discourse in the Analysis of Narrative” in *The Pursuit of Signs: Semiotics, Literature, Deconstruction* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

and linearity.⁷⁷ And finally the retelling of a story reorganizes the idea of time which leads from past to future for “recollection invert(s) the so-called ‘natural order of time’” (*TAN*, 67).

In the continuity leading from mimesis₂ to mimesis₃, the productive imagination is a key player. And in this stage, sedimentation and tradition are in overt dialectical relationship to each other. Expanding upon Kant’s notion of “apprehension,” literally a “grasping together,” Ricoeur aligns configuration with the Kantian productive imagination. The schematism organized by the productive imagination in Kant’s first *Critique* (according to Ricoeur) is directly connected to history and tradition. Ricoeur’s definition of “tradition” obtains benignity in this moment; he understands it as the “living transmission of an innovation always capable of being reactivated by a return to the most creative moments of poetic activity.” However, he is quick to link his charitable reading of tradition to a paradigmatic “sedimentation” characteristic of tradition’s inheritances:

In fact, a tradition is constituted by the interplay of innovation and sedimentation. To sedimentation must be referred the paradigms that constitute the typology of emplotment. These paradigms have issued from a sedimented history whose genesis has been covered over (*TAN*, 68).

Ricoeur does not explicitly develop this idea regarding tradition, sedimentation and innovation, suffering in mimesis, to Adorno’s ideas of the sedimented suffering of the past apparent in the dissonance of the artwork; however, for the purposes of this argument I will continue to draw these comparisons as tightly as possible. Throughout Ricoeur’s exhaustive analysis of time and narrative, I want to draw out the subtler aspects of his reading of an engagement with the suffering of the silenced past in his exhortation to the voices sedimented over in the typologies of emplotment. Although there are problems with the subtleties of Ricoeur’s model in terms of tradition and

⁷⁷ “As soon as a story is well-known...to follow the story is not so much to enclose its surprises or discoveries within our recognition of meaning attached to the story, as to apprehend the episodes which are themselves well known as leading to its end.” *TAN*, 67

difference to which I respond in the next section, I would like to tease out the more oppositional aspects of his model.

*“The Whole History of Suffering Cries Out for Vengeance
And Calls For Narrative:” Mimesis³*

The third stage of mimesis and how we get there is complex. There is a liminal relation between mimesis² and mimesis³ whose texture says something about how “narrative has its full meaning when it is restored to the time of action and the suffering of mimesis” (*TAN*, 70). Mimesis³ comprises the relation between the world of the text and the world of the reader, the reader opens up a horizon that the text or story has hitherto not known. For what is a story if it is never told and never heard?

I shall say that mimesis³ marks the intersection of the world of the text and the world of the hearer or reader; the intersection, therefore, of the world configured by the poem and the world wherein the real action occurs and unfolds in its specific temporality (*TAN*, 71).

By way of responding to objections he perceives might arise against the ostensible circularity of his argument, Ricoeur’s discussion takes an interesting turn. As he explains, one could easily follow his model of mimesis in a vicious circle, its end point leading to its starting point and vice-versa. Ricoeur asserts that there is a redundancy to mimesis¹ which mimesis² could restore to mimesis³, since ultimately; mimesis¹ would already be a work of mimesis³. The decisive question posed by this problem would be: if the integrity of the mediated symbol, icon or narrative were inviolable, in what way could we ever suggest that we might have access to different dramas of existence, or, to phrase it another way, how would new stories ever be told?⁷⁸ Indeed, Ricoeur poses the question: “How indeed can we speak of a human

⁷⁸“If there is no human experience that is not already mediated by symbolic systems and, among them, by narratives, it seems vain to say, as I have, that action is in quest for narrative.” (*TAN*, 74) Walter Benjamin argues that the diminished communicability of an experience is a

life as a story in its nascent state, since we do not have access to the temporal stories told about them by others or by ourselves?” (*TAN*, 74)

Anticipating such objections, Ricouer offers two paradigms through which we might counter the claim of a vicious circularity guiding his system. The first is the psychoanalytic model. Some theorists have suggested that we understand this discourse as a set of rules for retelling our life stories; this implies that a life story potentially proceeds from untold and repressed narrative material in the direction of actual stories the individual can take up as constitutive of her or his history and identity.⁷⁹ This inchoate narrativity constitutes a “demand for narrative”—one which could, by extension, witness the pain of an invisible and silenced history of a subject, community, or a nation. As such, an “imaginary witness” is proleptically called forth in the demand for repressed narratives.⁸⁰

The second paradigm is connected also to mimesis I. There are ways in which subjects and communities are themselves “trapped by narratives,” stereotyped into the sedimented material which is always already symbolically mediated. In a nod at a Michel Foucault’s critique of the relations of institutional power, Ricouer uses the example of a judge who, in her/his interpretation of a crime (a course of actions), must “unravel the tangle of plots the subject is caught up in” (*TAN*, 75.)⁸¹ Ricouer’s reading of “the verb [‘entangled’] whose passive voice emphasizes that “the story happens to

consequence of a remove from the authority of death in the modern world by which the storyteller is shamed into silence. He poignantly states: “More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed.” Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” in *Illuminations*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 83.

⁷⁹ Roy Schafer, *A New Language for Psychoanalysis* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).

⁸⁰ “It is not the portrayal of reality as hell on earth but the slick challenge to break out of it that is suspect. If there is anyone today to whom we can pass the responsibilities for the message, we bequeath it not the ‘masses,’ and not to the individual (who is powerless), but to an imaginary witness—lest it perish with us.” *DE*, 256.

⁸¹ See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (London: Allen Lane, 1977).

someone before anyone tells it” resonates with Louis Althusser’s theorization of interpellation.⁸²

Ricoeur, however, never explicitly capitalizes upon the language of ideology and relations of power in this section, and this point is more objectionable than the ostensible “circularity” of the model he presents. If we extend the implications of Ricoeur’s system, the advantages lie with history and historical change; but narratives are not only ordered by time, they exist within time and they construct time. Therefore, the sedimentations of history must be confronted in order for change to occur; however, it is impossible to directly and simply graft onto an old plot a new narrative, complete with a different set of characters, without first taking into account the forms and archetypes as they have existed and continue to exist in that historical moment of reconstruction. And the modern predisposition for fragmentation and discontinuity does not solve the problem; eventually, all the representations we make in time are broken, remade, reworked—and the modern artwork shows us why this state of affairs is not only a *fait accompli* but also desirable. Here we must return to Ricoeur’s benign invocation of tradition. Who ultimately speaks for tradition, which traditions does Ricoeur resort to, and who is admitted into traditions’ hallowed halls? Although history is one of two dynamic actors in his system (the other is the reader, as

⁸²The entanglement seems more like the ‘prehistory’ of the told story, whose beginning has to be chosen by the narrator. This ‘prehistory’ of the story is what binds it to the larger whole and gives it a ‘background.’ This background is made up of the ‘living imbrication’ of every lived story with every other story. Told stories therefore have to ‘emerge’ from this background. We may thus say, ‘the story stands for the person’. The principal consequence of this existential analysis of human beings as ‘entangled in stories’ is that narrating is a secondary process, that of the ‘story’s becoming known’. Telling, following, understanding stories is simply the continuation of these untold stories. (*TAN*, 75). Of course, to confront prehistory from the perspective of communities historically oppressed and abjected by the constitutive power of meaning relations, like women, colonized subjects, New World Africans, and homosexuals means also to confront the “history” of sedimentation in narrative—and that means taking ideology seriously as a function of narrative production. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx* trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1969). See also Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation) in Slavoj Žižek ed. *Mapping Ideology* (London: Verso, 1997) 100-140.

we will see), Ricoeur's enforcement of tradition empties out the category of history; in making tradition timeless he turns it into the image of a toothless tiger, whose bite is, nevertheless universally felt. Ricoeur's account ignores the specificity of historical differences such as "race," gender, sexuality, nation, and religion as they are constituted by ideological relations of power and oppression.⁸³ Where, finally, is the idea of mimesis as an outlaw, to which Horkheimer and Adorno cast their jaundiced hopes? And where have the police gone in Ricoeur's analysis? Within historical time, narrative traditions are governed by property laws, codes of conduct, and modes of address. An example of a dominative gesture whose history still haunts us is the prohibition of language to enslaved New World Africans, enforced by the United States and other colonial regimes. Living at a particular time in history and within a particular regime makes a great deal of difference as to how one encounters the archetypes and sedimentations structuring Ricoeur's analysis, for some subjects, "to speak a truer word concerning myself, I must strip down through layers of attenuated meanings, made an excess in time; over time, assigned by a particular historical order, and there await whatever marvels of my own inventiveness."⁸⁴

The extensive list of what is appropriate to be told and who is an appropriate storyteller casts a long and deep shadow over Ricoeur's theories.

Although there is much to critique in Ricoeur's willfully blind invocation to tradition, there are specific points to retain that he does execute within his analysis. They lead us towards the final section of Ricoeur's argument: how does the dialectic of narrative and time, especially in light of the drive towards narrative (embodied in the as-yet-untold story), in tension with ideological readymade plots, allow us to think eternity

⁸³“Yet, if Ricoeur's location of mimesis in the dynamics of history enables him to account for change and, more radically, for subversion of the pre-given paradigms, that very same location is also what sets constraints on subversive play with the paradigms. Narrative deviations work in terms of 'rule-governed deformations.'” *OM*, 236.

⁸⁴ Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe” in *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003) 203.

and death at the same time? The muted praxis of his system results in the action of the reader, who completes the work of the story.

The Reader and Reference: Mimesis3

When Ricoeur identifies the traversal from mimesis2 and mimesis3, configuration and refiguration, his argument reveals the breadth of the aporetics of time and narrative he finds in the juxtaposition between Augustine and Aristotle. He expands his discussion of the “impossibility” of knowing time by taking a detour through Martin Heidegger. In addition, he takes up the question of reference. Of equal importance in this section of his discussion, another major player is introduced: the reader, or the audience who both have an opportunity to transfigure narratives.

In the act of reading the bias towards understanding a text as “static and closed” is shattered; “schematization and traditionality,” as they are engaged and worked over in the relation between text and reader, “contribute to breaking down the prejudice that opposes and ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ of a text” (*TAN*, 76). The text is organized by received narratives, symbols and actions that structure the audience’s ability to recognize and follow the development of the story. The act of reading itself that fully realizes “configuration” (mimesis2).⁸⁵

What schematizes emplotment is the interaction between sedimentation and innovation. The reader completes the work of the text through her or his interaction with the paradigms set forth and the “holes, lacunae, zones of indetermination, which...challenge the reader’s capacity to configure what the author seems to take malign delight in defiguring” (*TAN*, 77).

For Ricoeur, the reader is the operator who is the “final indicator of the refiguring of the world of action under the sign of the plot.” Without this worthy

⁸⁵ “Schematization and traditionality are thus from the start categories of the interaction between the operation of writing and reading.” *TAN*, 76.

agent, texts would not be “texts;” in the absence of a reader the text would only fall open to a self-enclosed blind and mute world. Working against the certain linguistic and semiotic fields, Ricouer insists upon the extra-linguistic character of discourse. He expands upon the “horizon (of expectation)” that organizes his definition of mimesis³ in defense of reference. Ricouer states:

With the sentence, language is oriented beyond itself. It says something about something. This intending of a referent by discourse is completely contemporaneous with its event character and its dialogical functioning. It is the other side of discourse. The complete event is not only that someone speaks and addresses himself to an interlocutor, it is also the speaker’s ambition to bring a new experience to language and share it with someone else. It is this experience, in turn, that has the world for its horizon. Reference and horizon are correlative as are figure and ground. All experience both postulates a contour that circumscribes it and distinguishes it, and arises against a horizon of potentialities that constitutes at once an internal and external horizon for experience: internal in the sense that it is always possible to give more details and be more precise about whatever is considered within some stable contour; external in the sense that the intended thing stands in potential relationships to everything else within the horizon of a total world, which itself never figures as the object of discourse (*TAN*, 78).

The sort of work literary works do, therefore, and in this Ricouer agrees with the sense if not the exactitude of Adorno’s remarks on the dissonance of the artwork, is to magnify “reality” on the basis of a visual grammar that is both limited—that is, sedimented; and also dense—that is, innovative, at the same time. What is always at stake in mimesis as a modality structured in Ricouer’s fashion is a successful redescription of “the world;” whereby the tension between sedimentation and innovation already present forms and their re-working. It is exactly the question of time, the past and the present, history and its “writing,” (in its historical and fictional sense) which anchors mimesis.

Thus we are lead back to Ricouer’s original thesis on time and narrative. To reiterate, he draws a relationship of tension between an “aporetics” of time (or temporality, as he comes to describe it), in Augustine’s *Confessions* with Aristotle’s *muthos*/emplotment in *Poetics*. And to restate that relationship precisely, time and

narrative exist in supplementary and articulated relationship to each other. Noting

Augustine's "aporetical" style regarding his ruminations on time, Ricoeur asserts:

"This aporetical style, in addition, takes on a special significance in the overall strategy of the present work. A constant thesis of this book will be that speculation on time is an inconclusive rumination to which narrative activity alone can respond. Not that this activity solves the aporias through substitution. If it does resolve them, it is in a poetical and not a theoretical sense of the word. Emplotment replies to the speculative aporia with a poetic making of something capable, certainly, of clarifying the aporia, but not of resolving it theoretically. (TAN, 6).

How to somehow recognize, especially in the peripeteias and misrecognitions of plots, the structuring elements and activities of former aporias, without paying for such discoveries by reproducing at higher price new aporias of their own, would seem to be the mission of texts. Taking up Heidegger's exploitation of Augustine's breakthrough in *Confessions*, Ricoeur foregrounds the "hierarchization of temporality" that for Heidegger is connected to "historicality" in the middle-term of the hierarchy, "being-towards-death".

Indeed, Ricoeur reads the Heidegger of *Being and Time*, in his "ontology of Dasein" as phenomenologically analogous to the problems faced by Augustine. For Augustine, hierarchization of time occurs when human time is raised "beyond its inside" to its polar opposite, eternity. Ricoeur juxtaposes Augustine's time to Heidegger's philosophy of time; it "orients its meditation not toward eternity but toward finitude sealed by being-towards-death" (TAN, 85). These two opposite notions of time, the one more affirmative (eternity), the other a "quasi-stoic resoluteness in the face of death" presents the following question to artistic productions: "can the eternity of works of art oppose to the fugacity of things be constituted only in a history? And does this history in turn remain historical only if, going beyond death, it guards against the forgetfulness of death and the dead, and remains a recollection of death and the remembrance of the dead?" (TAN, 87).

By juxtaposing the authoritative opposition “eternity” against “death” in his linking of Augustine and Heidegger as a way to understand the interweaving reference of history and fiction, time and narrative, Ricouer’s comments dovetail with another equally authoritative opposition, Eros and Thanatos, Freud’s life and death-drives theorized in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*.⁸⁶ In that model of the infinite struggle between the two drives, time and significantly repetition play key factors. Something close to repetition is at play in Phillippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s work on mimesis, and Homi Bhabha’s theorization of mimicry in colonial discourse. It is towards these mimetic dynamics and a fuller explication of the relationship between history and narrative, and narrative in history, to which we now turn.

“Desistance” and Parodic Mimicry:

In his essays collected in *Typography*, “The Caesura of the Speculative” is Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s celebration of Holderlin’s dramatic works. He thinks them to be exemplary of a “speculative dialectic” that is the foundation of a particular understanding of tragedy and Western idealist philosophy. The common stitch that ties together the two systems is the actual working of mimesis. He claims:

the guiding thread of a primary and constant preoccupation, of a single question—none other than that of mimesis, at whatever level one chooses to examine it (whether it be that of ‘imitation’, in the sense of the ‘imitation of the Ancients,’ of mimesis as a mode of poesis, i.e., Aristotelian mimesis, or even—and this does not fail to enter into play—of mimesis in the sense of mimetism or *imitatio*.⁸⁷

From a persistently post-structuralist vision, he shares with both Adorno and Ricouer a celebration of mimesis (each to varying degrees and at different registers); for Lacoue-Labarthe, only mimesis can give the possibility of “tragic pleasure.” The

⁸⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989.)

⁸⁷ Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998) 214. Hereafter *T*.

transfiguration of negativity into positivity is only accessible through representation; only mimesis (through an Aristotelian catharsis) produces subjects capable of bearing the unspeakable.⁸⁸ His argument leaves him open to accusations of a dreaded “mimetologism,” whose logic is based upon the imitation of the same in a closed system that loftily promises reconciliation. “Mimetologism” occurs in a system where mimetic representations augur the unity of a logos identified with a notion of a stable “Truth.”⁸⁹

In a way similar to Adorno’s view of the “dissonant” aspects of the modernist artwork, Lacoue-Labarthe uses Holderlin’s work as an example of a confrontation with the threatening implications of the reproduction of the same—however, instead of expelling them *tout-court* (as does Plato), Lacoue-Labarthe suggests that Holderlin allows it to vex his own dramatic works. His reading, however, includes Holderlin within the economy he describes—there is no simple transcendence of the system available for anyone here. He calls the deliberate maintenance of vexation a caesura that effects an internal dislocation of the problem.⁹⁰

⁸⁸ “Tragedy is the structure of mimesis. Only mimesis has the power of ‘converting the negative into being’ [Poetics, IV, 1448b]—and of procuring that paradoxical pleasure which man is capable of feeling in the representation, provided it is exact, of the unbearable, the painful, the horrible. Once they become part of the spectacle, in other words, both death and the unbearable ‘can be faced.’” *T*, 218.

⁸⁹ In Derrida’s “The Double Session”, mimesis is, however, not equated with straightforward imitation. As such, Derrida agrees with Adorno’s perspective; however, he is more willing to uncouple mimesis from any notion of truth, in direct opposition to Adorno’s insistences that a ‘truth’ is sometimes accessible. See Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination* trans. Barbara Johnson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) 183, 192, 207.

⁹⁰ “It seems to me that the very difficulty Holderlin had in theorizing, a difficulty that is increasingly marked and that also does not spare his poetic production or his lyric poetry [on the contrary, it constantly disorganizes them,] that in the aggravation of a kind of paralysis affecting his discourse [trapping it in ever more rigid logical and syntactic bonds,] Holderlin, by a movement of ‘regression,’ if you will [I shall return to this: it is not without pejorative implications,] comes to touch upon something that dislocates from within the speculative. Something that immobilizes it and prohibits it—or rather, distends and suspends it. Something that constantly prevents it from ever completing itself and never ceases, by doubling it, to divert it from itself, to dig into it in such a way as to create a spiral, and to bring about its collapse. Or that interrupts it, from place to place, and provokes its spasm.” *T*, 227

Jacques Derrida's "Introduction" to *Typography* translates the French word Lacoue-Labarthe uses to demonstrate the caesura "*desister*," to "desistance;" in his terms the logic that drives "desistance" is to some degree supplementary.⁹¹ The caesura of the speculative desists, or internally disorganizes the organization of the form, in this case, tragedy. And for Lacoue-Labarthe, the force that moves desistance in mimesis is hyperbologic. The endless, rhythmic undulations that take place between the original and its duplicate enact the working activity of mimesis itself. But the oscillations never rest at either pole, thereby denying sublation and reconciliation. As such, Lacoue-Labarthe's reading of mimesis differs from Rene Girard's influential work on mimetic desire.⁹²

Girard's implied dependence upon the revelatory aspect of mimesis needs to "fix" it in a certain way. Lacoue-Labarthe argues that in its malleability and plasticity the work (or function) of mimesis is not assignable because its logic

"allows us to understand what Girard can only deny: namely, that the determination of the scapegoat, the selection of a representative of mimesis, is strictly inevitable from the moment when an act of expulsion is involved and when what is to be expelled—because it is nothing other than mimetic representation 'itself,' that is, mimesis as the unassignable danger that representation might be primal, or, what amounts to the same thing, the danger of an originary absence of subjective 'property' or 'propriety'—can only be externalized, scenic, spectacular mimesis. That is why the only recourse, with mimesis, is to differentiate it, and to appropriate it, to identify it. In short, to verify it. (*T*, 116)⁹³

⁹¹ "Desistance: mimesis or its double. Desistance, that is to say, and in other words, what it doubles and engulfs, *alethia*. Immediately, the new 'question of the subject' calls for another experience of truth. Another engagement of Heideggerian deconstruction: one that involves playing [mimesis plays, there is some play in it, it allows some play,] playing at the return of a truth determined as *homoiosis*, *adequation*, *similitude*, or *resemblance*, but that is also removed, through this return that is played at and played out from (accuracy, exactitude, *e-vidence*) which finds itself destabilized in its turn. Destabilized not only through a movement of destabilization, but through this movement of desistance that dislodges it from any relation to a possible stance. It will be necessary to follow the trajectory of a supplementary loop. (*T*, 25)

⁹² See Sigmund Freud, *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989)

⁹³ "Which would without fail betray the essence or property of mimesis, if there were an essence of mimesis or if what is 'proper' to mimesis did not lie precisely in the fact that mimesis has no 'proper' to it, ever [so that mimesis does not consist in the improper, either, or in who knows

In his reading of Aristotle's ambivalence about mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe returns to that which haunts Plato's more damning critique: mimesis both produces a copy of what exists and adds something that the original also lacks.⁹⁴ His argument resuscitates Plato's fear of the "law of impropriety," discernible in the modern "man without qualities."⁹⁵ This position establishes the provocation posed by the black subject in the modern republic—he or she is divested of any "property" or "qualities" in the self that are not already put to use by a repressive regime of white supremacy inherited from the systems of enslavement.

In fact, the black subject's status as property functions as the negative ground against which humanity is defined. This being the case, the black subject in the West poses here a critical question: how can some subjects, historically categorized as the property of others, become absent to themselves in such a way as Lacoue-Labarthe describes? The destabilizing effects of such a desirable mimesis are not available to all subjects equally, and the relation to a hegemonic language and sign system are negotiated through degrees of oppression, difficulty, and ambivalence which are far more debilitating to some subjects as opposed to others. If identities and identifications, racialized and otherwise, are constructed through language, and if

what 'negative' essence, but ek-sists, or better yet, desists in this appropriation of everything supposedly proper that necessarily jeopardizes property itself.] Which would not betray its essence, in other words, if the 'essence' of mimesis were not absolute vicariousness, carried to the limit [but inexhaustible, endless and groundless]—something like an infinity of substitution and circulation: the very lapse 'itself' of essence." *T*, 216.

⁹⁴ This is not a simplistic notion of "imitation;" as Martin Jay observes, "Whereas the former is reproductive, the latter is productive. Whereas the former assumes nature is sufficient unto itself, the latter implies a need for substitution. The paradox follows from the fact that mimetic substitution means both the need to imitate what already exists and the realization that what exists is itself insufficient and must be supplemented by imitation. *CS*, 129.

⁹⁵ "The paradox lies then, in the following: in order to do everything, to imitate everything—in order to (re)present or (re)produce everything, in the strongest sense of these terms—one must oneself be nothing, have nothing proper to oneself except an 'equal aptitude' for all sorts of things, roles, characters, functions, and so on. The paradox sates a law of impropriety, which is also the very law of mimesis: only the 'man without qualities,' the being without properties or specificity, the subjectless subject [absent from himself, distracted from himself, deprived of self] is able to present or produce in general. *T*, 258-59.

oppression is constitutive of language, how do subjects who function as the stable and devalued Other within a language system reap the benefits of such an oscillation as Lacoue-Labarthe describes?⁹⁶

In connection to the rhythmic oscillations of an infinite spacing in the work of mimesis, Lacoue-Labarthe privileges the aural over the visual mimesis in art.⁹⁷ Ironically, other critics perceive that black traditions of visuality have been ignored in favor of a focus upon music.⁹⁸ This neglect is inevitably bound up with the racist hegemonies that structure the production of black art and black visual culture. And, although there is a similarity between Adorno and Lacoue-Labarthe in their respective understanding of mimesis's function (respectively dissonant and oscillating), Adorno never fully dismisses the visual. In fact, he argues for the importance of a "visual moment" in art, although ironically, in his defense of this moment, Adorno's language echoes Lacoue-Labarthe's schema.⁹⁹ Yet the uncanny rhythmic repetition of an infinite deferral so attractive to Lacoue-Labarthe is not so in Adorno's case, for that would mean marginalizing the expressive moment in art.¹⁰⁰

⁹⁶“The very notion of such a rhythmic repetition described by Lacoue-Labarthe is hostile to the idea of a “genuine” original and a “degraded” copy—in this he shares Adorno's concern about “the concept of genuineness as such. In it dwells the notion of the supremacy of the original over the derived. This notion, however, is always linked with social legitimation. All ruling strata claim to be the oldest settlers, autochthonous.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life* (London: Verso, 1996) 155.

⁹⁷ *T*, 179

⁹⁸ “Moreover, the necessity which seems to persist of its own volition in Afro-American studies, for drawing parallels or alignments between Afro-American music and everything else cultural among Afro-Americans, stifles and represses most of the potential for understanding the visual in Afro-American culture.” See Michele Wallace, “Modernism, Postmodernism and the Problem of the Visual in Afro-American Culture” in Russell Ferguson, Martha Gever, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West eds., *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures* (Cambridge: University of Massachusetts Press, 1990) 40-41.

⁹⁹ “The desideratum of visuality seeks to preserve the mimetic moment in art, mimesis only goes on living through its antithesis, which is rational control by artworks over all that is heterogeneous to them. Art is the vision of the nonvisual; it is similar to a concept without actually being one.” *AT*, 141-142.

¹⁰⁰ “Unlike Lacoue-Labarthe, Adorno never relegates to the margins of his analysis the expressive moment of mimesis, which reveals the body—natural as well as human—in pain.” (*CS*, 134).

Parodic Mimicry: Colonial Ambivalence:

The body in pain is theorized by the ambivalence of colonial discourse in Homi K. Bhabha's "Of Mimicry and Man: Ambivalence in Colonial Discourse."¹⁰¹ Bhabha identifies mimicry as one of the most destabilizing effects through which speaks the "forked tongue" of colonial power. In his reading of mimicry, Bhabha locates the contradictory pressure that lies between "stasis and identity" and "change and difference" in the movement of history.¹⁰²

It is an ironic compromise in that the system of colonial power relations necessarily produces its own resistances; just as all conceptual frameworks have their own fishnets, and therefore, something which exceeds or escapes their logics; colonial discourse's ambivalence about itself produces its own excess, slippage and opposition.¹⁰³ As a sign of its own resistance, mimicry is thus "inappropriate" and capable of menacing "normalized knowledges and disciplinary powers." Colonial discourse betrays its own alienation in producing mimicry; as such, the colonial subject is fastened within a scopic economy as a "virtual and incomplete presence" (*LOC*, 86).

Mimicry functions in some accordance with the "desistance" Lacoue-Labarthe suggests operates in mimesis; mimicry is the sign of an "internal dislocation" within an authoritative system constitutive of its own prohibitions; and thereby productive of its own disruption and failure. It is menacing in its mockery of colonial mimesis's

¹⁰¹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: Ambivalence in Colonial Discourse" in *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994) 85-92. Hereafter, *LOC*.

¹⁰² "Within that conflictual economy of colonial discourse which Edward Said describes as the tension between the synchronic panoptical vision of domination—the demand for identity, stasis—and the counterpressure of the diachrony of history—change, difference—mimicry represents and ironic compromise." *LOC*, 85-86.

¹⁰³ "[t]he discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its own slippage, its excess, its difference. Mimicry emerges as the representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal. Mimicry is, thus the sign of a double articulation; a complex strategy of reform, regulation and discipline, which 'appropriates' the Other as it visualizes power." *LOC*, 86.

insistence upon racial and cultural authority and priority. Mimicry thereby marginalizes the dominant model to the sidelines of history; literally, mimicry potentially unseats colonial authority's power, and mocks its claims as the singular model to be imitated.¹⁰⁴

Each of these models of mimesis engages the issue of cultural authority in the process of producing and interpreting the function and meaning of works art, literary and visual. To varying degrees, some mild (Ricouer), others explicitly oppositional (Bhabha), they take up the work of art and the subject who produces and interprets it as constitutive of relations of power. What each model also gestures at to varying degrees is the primeval applications of mimesis in its atavisms. The following pages will explore some of the mimetic models established by the discourses of psychoanalysis, whose concerns as a field are directed towards the ancestral and the primal, specifically subject-formation and identification in the field of the visual. The production of Hetty Daniels's portrait in *Plum Bun* is exemplary of the problems of the mimesis, the visual and its connection to language in African American culture. It demonstrates some of the pressures brought to bear upon the black subject of mimesis.

Part Three: Capturing Hetty's Look

As Angela Murray matures into a young woman, her artistic ambitions flourish and, unlike her sister Virginia, the musician in the family, she decidedly takes up her sketch pad and brush and goes to The Philadelphia Academy of Fine Arts. There Angela continues to "pass," and also improve her hand at drawing and painting. It is also at the Academy that she presents her sketch of Hetty Daniels and is, for the last

¹⁰⁴ What emerges between mimesis and mimicry is a writing, a mode of representation, that marginalizes the monumentality of history; quite simply, mocks its power to be a model, that power which supposedly makes it imitable. *LOC*, 87-88.

time in Philadelphia, “outed” as black.¹⁰⁵ This final outing spurs her complete disavowal of her sister, Virginia, who acquiesces in the “pass.” Once in New York City, living in Greenwich Village and not in Harlem, she translates her name from Angela Murray to Angéle Mory. It is early in her career as a fledgling artist in New York that her acquisition of a particular economy within the field of the visual—an economy which is also a psychic space constitutive of language—is made apparent. I argue in this section that Angela as a subject-in-information in the field of the visual obtains different positions within discourse analogous to Lacan’s theorization of the look, the gaze, and the screen. During this development as a subject, Angela performs an ethics which situates her in a different relation to her choices about identification and “race.”¹⁰⁶

When Angela draws Hetty Daniels, the weight of the discourses of “the primitive” framing this modernist moment directs her initial interpretation of Hetty’s “vividness of emotion.” Angela’s initial interpretation of Hetty’s “unslaked yearnings” reads them in the transform(ative) power that turns her “usually rather expressionless face into something wild and avid.” In particular, the “dark brown immobile *mask* of her skin” that makes an “excellent foil” for the emotions which Angela reads. The mask is of overdetermined significance during the modernist production of the primitive; it is the sine qua non sign of alterity and its appropriation. In this moment, Angela teeters on the threshold of an interpretive othering: ostensibly, she reads Hetty’s emotions through her own assumptions about the “primitive” and its connections to legibly female “blackness.” However, upon creating the actual

¹⁰⁵ Angela’s first significant outing occurs when she is a young girl; this moment is connected to the process of identification she undergoes very early in the novel. I attend fully to the complexity of the childhood “outing” and the complications of identification in the first part of Chapter Two: “Tales from the Crypt.”

¹⁰⁶ My argument is indebted largely to Kaja Silverman’s development of the Lacanian paradigm in *Threshold of the Visible World*, (New York: Routledge, 1996).

drawing, she produces something else, her interpretation of the “wild and avid” shifts. The final product inspires a different vision. The sketch translates Hetty’s emotions into a significantly different image; the altered version of Hetty’s “unslaked yearnings” is captured in Angela’s drawing of “that look.” As readers, we know something has been translated in the space between Angela perceiving Hetty’s emotions, and the actual representation of her visage in the sketch. This is apparent because of the conversation Angela shares with Gertrude Quale, another art student who views the sketch of Hetty. Although notions of the primitive may underscore what Gertrude and Angela, a white woman and a black woman passing for white, read at this juncture in Hetty’s expression, the “cosmic and tragic unhappiness” are not necessarily part of the stereotypical representative arsenal of images white supremacy launched against black subjects. The question becomes, what is it about Hetty’s “look” that Angela believes is so crucial to capture? Before fully returning to Fauset’s critique of vision in *Plum Bun* we must make a brief excursus through the work of Lacan in order to see how and where Fauset’s novel diverges from his theories.

The Gaze, The Look, and The Screen:

Jacques Lacan’s work on the psychoanalytic analysis that the unconscious is “structured like a language” frames the subject of that structure as a figure in the visual domain. There it is almost perceived as perfectly timeless. One could argue that a significant degree of the power of his argument resides in its ahistoricism; as such its transhistoricality suggests something of a “deep structure” to desire and libido whose attractions bespeak “universal” applications. However, recent feminist interpretations of Lacan’s framework provide a different locus from which to understand the work of vision. There is a space in Lacan’s theories of the gaze, look, and the screen which has been productively employed by feminist critics to comment upon subjects rendered

through difference. And, although theorizations of psychic life do not lead directly to political action or praxis, there are gains to be made in the “real world.”¹⁰⁷ Lacan’s rendering of the gaze and the look have been usefully expanded upon by Kaja Silverman in her readings of their primary features. However, Silverman dilates upon Lacan’s theories by insisting upon a more coherent understanding of the gaze as “photo-graph” and camera.

The road to the Lacanian look and gaze is, however, first routed through his thoughts on the mirror-stage. This theorization of subject-formation takes its major specifications from Freud’s analysis of identification, in his essay “On Narcissism: An Introduction”. The connections between “On Narcissism” and “The Mirror Stage”, both structural models grounded in an identification that forms the subject, initiate Lacan’s later conception of the look and the gaze, linked more substantially to a *subject formed by desire*. To briefly restate the case, one of Freud’s crucial distinctions in his essay lies between the auto-eroticism of ego-libido and the ego itself as a separate function.

In the first place: what is the relation of the narcissism of which we are now speaking to auto-erotism, which we have described as an early state of the libido? And secondly, if we concede to the ego a primary cathexis of libido, why is there any necessity for further distinguishing a sexual libido from a non-sexual energy pertaining to the ego-instincts? Would not the assumption of a uniform mental energy save us all the difficulties of differentiating the energy of the ego instincts from ego-libido, and ego-libido from object-libido? *On the first point I would comment as follows: it is impossible to suppose that a unity comparable to the ego can exist in the individual from the very start: the ego has to develop. But the auto-erotic instincts are primordial; so there must be something added to auto-erotism—some new operation in the mind—in order that narcissism may come into being.* (“On Narcissism,” 34)¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁷ “It is certainly the case that psychoanalysis does not give us a blueprint for political action, or allow us to deduce political conservatism or radicalism directly from the vicissitudes of psychic experience...But its challenge to the concept of psychic identity is important for feminism in that it allows into the political arena problems of subjectivity (subjectivity *as* a problem) which tend to be suppressed from other forms of political debate.” Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1986) 103. Hereafter *SFV*.

¹⁰⁸ Sigmund Freud, *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1953).

Lacan imprints his concept of the Imaginary onto this moment, in which the fortification of the ego is connected to the possibility of deceptive self-reference in the concept of narcissism. This “misrecognition” is analyzed in Lacan’s 1936 essay “The Mirror Stage.”¹⁰⁹ In that essay, the infant comes to a (mis)recognition of itself through its relation to the other. It is via the representation of itself through (and as) the other that the imaginary ego constitutes itself, and by which its future misrecognitions are engendered. This imaginary instance is further elaborated as a reversal of Freud’s relationship between narcissism and ego-formation:

We have only to understand the mirror stage as an identification in the full sense that analysis gives to the term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image—whose predestination to this phase-effect is sufficiently indicated by the use...of the term *imago*.¹¹⁰

In his account of the mirror-stage, Lacan firmly establishes Freud’s notion of the “bodily ego” through a series of visual misrecognitions in the imaginary.¹¹¹ The category of the gaze and screen are built upon the disjunctive relation between visual *imago* and sensational body Lacan’s formulates in the mirror stage. The paradigms are analogous: the subject’s visual apprehension in the reflective surface of the mirror grounds her or his identity, the image in the mirror is external; the gaze, also external to the body in its differentiation from the “looking eye,” imprints the subject through the screen that operates in a mediating function.¹¹²

¹⁰⁹ Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits, A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1977) 1-7. Hereafter, *E*.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid*, 2. And, as Jacqueline Rose states: “[T]he ego itself becomes the reflection of a narcissistic structure grounded on the return of the infant’s image to itself in a moment of pseudo-totalisation.” *SFV*, 171.

¹¹¹ “The ego is first and foremost a bodily ego; it is not merely a surface entity, but it is the projection of a surface.” Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id”, *Collected Papers*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: Hogarth Press, 1953).

¹¹² Kaja Silverman asserts “that disjunction becomes even more readily apparent when we substitute the screen and the gaze for the mirror. Once again, the subject relies for his or her visual identity on an external representation. Instead of simply misrecognizing herself in the mirror reflection, the subject is assumed to rely for his or her structuring access to it on an “unapprehensible” and unlocalizable gaze, which for over 150 years has found its most influential metaphor in the camera” *TVW* 18.

Lacan's mirror stage theorizes that the infant/ego (at the threshold of language) comes into existence upon the apprehension of the image of its body within a reflective surface, and which is actually a mental refraction of that image. Thus, as Silverman argues in her reading of Lacan, the "ego is a representation of a corporeal representation."¹¹³ Throughout his work on ego identification, Lacan insists upon the "fictiveness and exteriority" of the image which founds the ego and that the mirror stage is precisely that, only the first stage among many of structuring identifications. Future levels through which the ego travels, as it transforms into an ego formed by desire, include the gaze, the look, and the screen.

It is by now a commonplace that in his development of the construction of the subject as an imago or reflection based upon alienation (lack), Lacan's thought in *The Four Fundamental Concepts* provides a different paradigm for subject-formation than that of the infant perceiving itself in the mirror. To restate briefly, the mirror-stage is based upon the infant subject's salutary misrecognition of itself. What is misrecognized by the child in the mirror is its own motor-coordination; the child perceives itself as a coherent whole when, in actuality, its body (its ego) is fragmented. The future identifications fortified by the initial misrecognition are themselves also based upon an "exteriority."¹¹⁴

For Lacan the mirror image is the model of the ego function itself and exists in this articulation in the imaginary. However, as Jacqueline Rose points out, this moment obtains its meaning in "relation to the presence and the look of the mother

¹¹³ Ibid, 10.

¹¹⁴ "The fact is that the total form of the body by which the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power is given to him only as Gestalt, that is to say, in an exteriority in which this form is certainly more constituent than constituted, but in which it appears to him above all in a contrasting size that fixes it and in a symmetry that inverts it, in contrast with the turbulent movements that the subject feels are animating him... Thus, this Gestalt—by these two aspects of its appearance, symbolizes the mental permanence of the I, at the same time as it prefigures its alienating destination" (*E*, 2).

who guarantees its reality for the child” (*SFV*, 53). With this in mind, and although Lacan asserts that the end of the mirror-stage “inaugurates, by the identification with the imago of the counterpart and the dialectic that will henceforth link the ‘I’ to socially elaborated situations,” the “other” already intrudes in this initial figurative model.¹¹⁵ Another articulation of the subject’s relation to the image and the other in the imaginary is sketched in the inverse triangle of the gaze, screen and look.

Psychoanalysis as a discourse is interested in how things which are exterior to the psyche, that which is “outside,” get “inside” and, once incorporated, how they operate in the interior domain of subjects, who then act upon themselves and others in the world. “The Mirror Stage” is an example of an exterior set of images which are then taken into the subject.¹¹⁶ Silverman’s point clarifies the connection between the psychic domain and ideology.

To restate the focus of this study, the dialectic by which the black subject in modernity is motivated is the tension between repression and ideology, the “as-yet-untold” story and the stories that are “already out there” which ensnare a subject to particular, and often infelicitous, meanings in the social and cultural realm. The connection between psychic domains and what passes for “reality” is in the transfer between the two modalities. This “transfer” functions in Lacan’s paradigm as the screen, a cultural repertoire of images always already present which mediates between the gaze and the subject, both as “spectacle” and as “look.” *Plum Bun* critiques the

¹¹⁵ *Ibid*, 5.

¹¹⁶ “Lacan’s account further elaborates this notion of an exteriority which is taken within the subject, first in the guise of its mirror image, subsequently in the form of parental imagoes, and later in the shape of a whole range of cultural representations, the *moi* becoming over time more and more explicitly dependent on that which might be said to be ‘alien’ or ‘other’”. Kaja Silverman, *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (New York: Routledge) 127. Hereafter *MSM*.

de-idealizing set of images that are collected in the screen, which is where ideology is constituted.

A powerful account of how reality itself is constructed textually is exemplified in Louis Althusser's model of ideology. It borrows from Lacan's account of the ego's ceaseless misrecognitions of itself. The misrecognition is a self-misrecognition and an actual misrecognition of the world, since for Althusser ideology is not really a matter of knowing, or the failure to know, reality at all. In his analysis of ideology, men and women overcome their dislocation and alienation through a consoling, whole image of itself reflected back through the mirror of dominant ideological discourse. Althusser describes the process as a confusion of ontology and discursivity and calls it "interpellation":

In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an 'imaginary', 'lived' relation...In ideology the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation, a relation that expresses a will (conservative, reformist or revolutionary), a hope or a nostalgia, rather than describing a reality.¹¹⁷

The "real relation" is the relation of the subject to the mode of production, and, therefore, the relation to the economic system which both exploits the subject and from which the subject profits. His example of interpellative confusion of ontology and discourse visits the subject in the "hailing", or address by another person.

Althusser states:

Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man: verbal call or whistle (along the lines of everyday common or police hailing), the one hailed always recognizes that it is really him who is being hailed.¹¹⁸

In Althusser's account of interpellation, the reality of the self is construed at the level of a discursive construction. However, in the "real relation invested in an imaginary relation..that expresses a will..a hope or a nostalgia", the model of identification upon

¹¹⁷ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1997) 233-234.

¹¹⁸ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: Verso, 1971)174.

which Althusser's theory of interpellation is based implicitly expands to include that of fantasy. This is an important implication, for it opens up the question of unconscious desire in the formation of ideal selves and de-idealized others.

Silverman glosses Althusser's implication with a suggestive reading of the employment of fantasy and the ego in the subject's relation to the real. If the subject's relation to the real is impossible, what defends that impossibility from drawing the subject into the abyss, that is, recognizing one's own lack or castration, is the imaginary—wherein fantasy is produced.¹¹⁹ To give fantasy and its forces an equal place at the table with the ego means to take seriously the ways in which ideological constructions exist within our unconscious and the desires which are there located.¹²⁰

Like the connection that inheres between mother and child in the mirror image, “the gaze” in all its manifestations continues to exist in a space external to the subject. The gaze is “the presence of others as such”.¹²¹ The paradigm of the gaze, the look and the screen is organized by the visual technology of photography and used widely in film theory; it provides a useful paradigm for reading these texts due to the black subject's unavoidable specularly.

¹¹⁹“Althusser's claim that in ideology ‘the real relation is inevitably invested in the imaginary relation’ can also be interpreted as implying that ideology is intimately bound up in the process whereby the subject's relation to the existential real—which is one of castration or loss—is covered over at the level of the imaginary; part of the process, that is, whereby not only the ego, but fantasy, are mustered against the void.” (*MSM*, 22). Others have criticized the ego-centric aspect of Althusser's theory of interpellation. Terry Eagleton claims that although based upon Lacan's subject, Althusser's model is far more static and excludes the *jouissance* (desire) which makes Lacanian subjectivity “punctured”, “traversable”, and unstable. Eagleton states, “The political implication of this misreading are clear: to expel desire from the subject is to mute its potentially rebellious clamor, ignoring the ways in which it may attain its allotted place in the social order only ambiguously and precariously. Althusser, in effect, has produced an ideology of the ego, rather than one of the human subject; and a certain political pessimism is endemic to this misrepresentation.” Terry Eagleton, “Ideology and Its Vicissitudes in Western Marxism,” in Slavoj Žižek, ed. *Mapping Ideology* (London, Verso, 1994), 216.

¹²⁰ Slavoj Žižek directs his argument along the lines of understanding racial difference when he insists that “the ideological figure of ‘the Jew’ is invested with our unconscious desire”, and, thereby, emphasize(s) racial difference as constitutive of subject-formation as gender and sexual difference (Žižek, 48).

¹²¹ Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1981), 84. Hereafter *FFC*.

Looking Relations:

Lacan clearly sets out to distinguish between the eye and the gaze in *The Four Fundamental Concepts*. The gaze is “unapprehensible”, it “issues from all sides”, unlike the eye, which “sees only from one point”. The gaze occupies a point in the field of vision that the subject tries to apprehend, yet by which it is always “surprised”. It “triumphs over the look”. Finally, for this subject of desire, the “gaze I encounter—is not a seen gaze, but a gaze imagined by me in the field of the Other.”¹²² Silverman argues that the relation between the look and the gaze is analogous to that of the penis as biological signifier in relation to the symbolic force of the phallus, “the former can stand in for the latter, but can never approximate it.” In addition, Lacan situates the gaze outside Sartre’s voyeuristic scene, and therefore as far outside of desire as the look which stubbornly remains within desire:

[F]ar from speaking of the gaze as of something that concerns the organ of sight, he refers to the sound of the rustling of leaves, suddenly heard while out hunting, to a footstep heard in a corridor. And when are these sounds heard? At the moment when he has presented himself in the action of looking through a keyhole. A gaze surprises him in the function of voyeur, disturbs him, overwhelms him and reduces him to a feeling of shame. The gaze in question is certainly the presence of others as such (*FFC*, 84).

For Lacan, the artist’s eye captures something motored by desire and is “fixed in the picture.” The gaze sustains the subject’s identity, yet, as the imaginary apparatus upon which light is projected onto the subject—it functions like a camera:

What determines me, at the most profound level, in the visible, is the gaze that is outside. It is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects. Hence it comes about that the gaze is the instrument through which light is embodied and through which—if you will allow me to use the word—I am photo-graphed.” (*FFC*, 106).

To restate, “the gaze is outside” of the subject. The subject enters the field of vision when the gaze emerges within the field of vision “it is through the gaze that I enter light and it is from the gaze that I receive its effects.” The “look” obtains a more direct

¹²² Ibid, 84.

connection to the body.¹²³ However, through what power does the subject adopt the position behind the camera? When, in fact, does a subject become a camera? These questions can be explored through the three triangular diagrams which further explain the relation of the eye to the gaze and the screen.

Mapping the Look:

In the first triangle, the geometral point is the place where the “looking subject” or artist views her or his subject. The position of the artist is reduced to a “function of seeingness”, and the artist’s model (the object) can only be viewed through “the image”. As Silverman observes, Lacan’s deconstruction of Albertian geometry “calls radically into question the possibility of separating vision from image—of placing the spectator outside the spectacle, in a position of detached mastery” (*MSM*, 146).

Diagram 2 inverts the position of the first triangle; the subject is here no longer the viewer at the site of the gaze, but rather is the object of the gaze. In radically disembodied language, the gaze is called a “point of light;” the apex of the first and second triangles are inverted, with the subject now at the wide end of the triangle and the gaze at its narrowest point. In that the subject is now located at the wide end called the “picture,” Lacan is interested in understanding the subject *as* spectacle as opposed to spectator of the spectacle. In the first triangle, the image is located between the point of light and the picture; in the second triangle it is designated “the screen.” Silverman reads the importance of the screen in relation to the subject’s “becoming a

¹²³ In her revisionary reading of the Lacanian paradigm, through which she juxtaposes Sartre’s theorization of “le regard,” Silverman furthers the disjunction between the look (the eye) and the gaze that were originally distinguished from each other in Lacan’s own reading of Sartre’s voyeur peeping through the keyhole. In French “le regard” is the only word for vision, whereas in English there are two: “look” and “gaze.” Silverman capitalizes upon Lacan’s de-anthropomorphizing of the gaze and “reserve(s) the word ‘look’ for the activity implied by the human eye, and counterposing it in a variety of ways to the gaze. (*TVW*, 167).

picture,” literally, through “assuming a form of representation.”¹²⁴ This process requires the all three faculties (the gaze, the look, and the screen); also, it crucially incorporates the concept of mimicry.

Roger Caillois’s “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” is central to this part of Lacan’s discussion; for Caillois, mimicry in the insect world signals a “disturbance in the perception of space” and a sort of recidivism.¹²⁵ Also, Caillois describes mimicry as photography at the level of the object rather than the image—“as a reproduction in three-dimensional space with solids and voids: sculpture-photography or teleplasty.” Drawing on Caillois’s work, Lacan distinguishes his position. Mimicry is not assimilation to space or the loss of individuality—rather, it is a visual articulation. This visual articulation occurs when the subject is photographed in the screen. Lacan claims, “at bottom, it is for the subject to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it.” While this first definition of mimicry is extended to the entire animal kingdom, a second sort of mimicry is also posited. This second kind of mimicry, which Lacan associates with “travesty, camouflage, [and] intimidation,”¹²⁶ is located solely within the human subject. Man alone in the animal world is capable of distinguishing his “being” from his “appearance”, and it is this talent which allows him to manipulate the screen. Lacan further explains:

Only the subject—the human subject, the subject of desire that is the essence of man—is not, unlike the animal, entirely caught up in this imaginary capture. He maps himself in it. How? In so far as he isolates the function of the screen and plays with it. Man, in effect, knows how to play with the mask as that beyond which there is the gaze. The screen is their locus of mediation.¹²⁷

This theorization of mimicry is not very different from Luce Irigaray’s feminist challenge to what she takes as the phallicism of language in her theorization of

¹²⁴ It is not for nothing that we have referred to as picture the function in which the subject has to map himself as such. (*FFC*, 100.)

¹²⁵ Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” trans. John Shepley *October*, no. 31 (1984) 17-32.

¹²⁶ *FFC*, 99.

¹²⁷ *Ibid*, 107.

mimesis. For her, “woman” is the subject most capable of the kind of mimetic play

Lacan describes as the “play with the mask”. She states:

One must assume the feminine role deliberately. Which means already to convert a form of subordination into affirmation, and thus to begin to thwart it... (t) o play with mimesis is thus, for a woman, to try to recover the place of her exploitation by discourse, without allowing herself to be simply reduced to it. It means to resubmit herself... to “ideas,” in particular to ideas about herself, that are elaborated in/by a masculine logic, but so as to make “visible,” by an effect of playful repetition, what was supposed to remain invisible: the cover-up of a possible operation of the feminine in language.¹²⁸

Irigaray’s analysis of mimicry in regards to a specifically female subject advances that the “recovery of the place of her exploitation by discourse” requires that “woman” actually “play with mimesis;” she must manipulate ideas about herself—the dominant fictions, oppressive texts and discourses constitutive of her castration in the symbolic. In Homi Bhabha’s analysis of the colonial subject, mimicry gives the lie to a “stable” truth. Since there is no *essence* behind the mask, the play is directed by colonial desire towards a destabilization of the normative and oppressive discourses in which they are formed as “other.”¹²⁹ For Lacan, the human subject’s ability to play with images derived from the screen drives the desire for reproduction.¹³⁰

The way in which a subject is imprinted is through the mediating function of the screen. As a function, it attains a position of significant importance in this paradigm since, as we can see in the second triangle, the gaze is de-anthropomorphized to such extreme degree (here a “point of light”), that it has no authority to form subjectivity except through the projection of an image upon the object.¹³¹

¹²⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which Is Not One* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985) 76.

¹²⁹ Mimicry conceals no presence or identity behind its mask: ...the menace of mimicry is its double vision which in disclosing the ambivalence of colonial discourse also disrupts its authority...they are also, as I have shown, the figures of a doubling, the part objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses in which they emerge as ‘inappropriate’ colonial subjects. (*LOC*, 88).

¹³⁰ (*FFC*, 107)

¹³¹ In this way, the photographing of the subject is constitutive of an alienation similar to that which occurs in the mirror stage; the infant can only see herself through an external image, and the “gaze”, disembodied and yet ubiquitous, can only “photograph” an object through the

This is one of the few moments in the Lacanian framework where the subject's agency is activated and might even result in a successful deployment of formerly oppressive and dominating texts. In addition, the further deconstruction of the eye is apparent in the third triangle, in which the first two inverted triangles are superimposed upon each other. This final stage of the paradigm achieves a conflation of geometrical positions in space. The gaze is now at the furthest distance from the eye; indeed, this is the point occupied by the object in the first triangle. Lacan explains that what occurs here is the conflation of gaze and spectacle, based upon the spectacle's "lit up" character. In the field of looking relations, I am not where I am seen, so to speak; and, actually, the "luminousness" of the object's specularity ("the pulsatile, dazzling and spread out function of the gaze"), literally, the function of light, allows the object to look back at the viewer.¹³² He states:

[C]an we not...grasp that which has been eluded, namely, the function of the gaze? I mean, and Maurice Merleau-Ponty points this out, that we are beings who are looked at, in the spectacle of the world...the spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing. (*FFC*, 74-75)

On stage in "the spectacle of the world" is where we find ourselves and where the gaze, mediated by the screen, "finds" us. As such, we are photographed even as we ourselves look upon the scene—the conflation of spectacle and spectator is complete, for the subject is generally both, simultaneously. The subject is dependent upon the image/screen for its own representation; simultaneously, the subject is also "in the picture" and "a representative for the Other of the gaze."¹³³ However, the access to the

mediating "screen." The mediating function of the screen also resonates with what Ricouer calls the "already textured," symbolic mediation of cultural symbols.

¹³²In his deconstruction of the philosopher's mastery over the field of vision, Lacan insists that the "relation between appearance and being...lie elsewhere." The point where the relation lies is written with light: "It is not in the straight line, but in the point of light---the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth." In this passage, Lacan connects the "source" to the eye as a figure of excess which is specifically vaginal; it is "Light may travel in a straight line, but it is refracted, diffused, it floods, it fills, the eye is a sort of a bowl--it flows over, too, it necessitates around the ocular bowl, a whole series of organs, mechanisms, defenses." (*FFC*, 94).

¹³³*MSM*, 152.

gaze is troubled by the position of the subject to it; she literally cannot see the object without the mediation of the image/screen. In both cases the mediation functions through “playing with the mask”:

the being gives of himself, or receives from the other, something that is like a mask, a double, an envelope, a thrown-off skin, thrown off in order to cover the frame of a shield. It is through this separated form of himself that the being comes into play in his effects of life and death (*FFC*, 107).

The possibilities for misrecognition are legion for the subject. However, it is only through mimicry (the mask, the double) that assumption of the dominant forms, and thereby changing of those forms, is possible.¹³⁴ And it is important to keep in mind that the gaze is always in two places at once; in its aptitude for light and “as that which is foreclosed upon for the subject, it partakes of the real, but in its status as ‘the presence of others as such,’ it clearly belongs to the symbolic. The relationship of subject to screen, on the other hand, is articulated within the domain of the imaginary.¹³⁵

How To Get ‘That Look’

Her unslaked yearnings gleamed suddenly out of her eyes, transforming her usually rather expressionless face into something wild and avid. The dark brown immobile mask of her skin made an excellent foil for the vividness of an emotion which was so apparent, so palpable that it seemed like something superimposed upon the background of her countenance. “If I could just get that

¹³⁴“The subject can only be ‘photographed’ through the frame of culturally intelligible images. Those attempts at a collective self-redefinition which rely on masquerade, parody, inversion, and bricolage will consequently be more successful than those aimed at the ex nihilo creation of new images, since they work upon the existing cultural imaginary. It is presumably for this reason that Lacan speaks of ‘playing’ with the screen rather than replacing it with a new one. In positioning its practitioners so tensely in relation both to dominant representation and the gaze, these strategies also work to maintain a productive distance between the subject and its ‘self,’ a distance which is indispensable to further change.”

MSM, 150.

¹³⁵ Lacan’s system is divided into three distinct categories; the imaginary—connected to the ego and its identifications, the symbolic is the order of language, and the real the moment of impossibility upon which both are grafted—that point’s endless return. “However, captation can occur only with the complicity of the gaze; the subject can only achieve an invisible join with those images or screens through which the gaze in its capacity as ‘others and such’ looks at him or her. The most apparently claustral of all psychic transactions—‘self-recognition’ is thus mediated by a third term.” (*MSM*, 152).

look for Mr. Shields,” Angela said half aloud to herself, “I bet I could get any of their old scholarships” (*Plum Bun*, 66)¹³⁶.

Jessie Fauset maps the trajectory of the Lacanian schematic through an analysis of black female subject-formation in the psychic field of the visual, and the race-relations of the social world of early twentieth-century Philadelphia. The following scenes critique the modes of surveillance which organize white supremacist power relations and their connection to positions within discourse, ways of seeing and of being seen.

An expression of the “development of the ego” that Freud asserts in “On Narcissism”, and that is charted through the Lacanian stages of the look, gaze, and screen organizes Jessie Fauset’s *Plum Bun*. Angela is outed at art school as a black woman the day she brings her sketch of Hetty’s “look” to the class; on that same day the living model who attends the sketch class is a young, white woman with whom Angela had attended school, Esther Bayliss.

But the sketch of Hetty Daniels haunts Angela’s capture of “that look” it presents a moment of resistance to the primitivist versions of the stereoptype. According to Silverman, the “look” is in the field of vision. Because it is more closely connected to the body it is capable of resisting the gaze in the visual field, itself dominated and directed by the screen. It is precisely because Angela captures Hetty’s “look” sympathetically in the sketch, and does not relegate her to the dominant narrative that equates blackness with primitivism, that she is then ejected from the Academy.¹³⁷

Angela’s sketch of Hetty’s “look” and the results of that capture are organized by the Lacanian paradigm of the subject who watches and is also within the spectacle. It is no accident that Fauset places Angela “capturing” of the destabilizing “look” that

¹³⁶ Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without A Moral*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990).

¹³⁷ Angela “passes” at the Academy simply by never speaking of her racial origins; there is one other black student at this school, Miss Henderson. This situation is repeated when Angela attends the art school in New York. There the legibly black student is also a woman, Miss Powell.

humanizes Hetty within a picture that is presented in the visual field of the Academy, literally, an art school whose business it is to produce images. After the felicitous representation that she sketches, she is immediately dismissed from the social space of the Academy because her racial identity is made known as that which she, Angela, had formerly withheld from everyone.

The relation between the two events is further emphasized by the complete break Angela makes with her Philadelphia community and the last living member of her family, Virginia. Having accomplished all this, she translates her name to a French surrogate (Angéle Mory) and is fully prepared, in the chapters that follow, to occupy the position of the gaze, as opposed to the look, in the field of the visual. When Angela tries to “get that look” she envisions in Hetty’s dynamic interior, the results signify upon her own position within the spectacle. It is also important that we never actually “see” the image Angela produces of Hetty; all we are witness to as readers are Angela’s and Esther’s interpretations of Hetty’s emotional dynamic and the actual sketch. The tension of the scene works between the sedimentation of the symbol figured by the primitive mask in its iconic thickness, and the “innovation” of a different reading:¹³⁸

What an interesting type!” said Gertrude Quale. Such cosmic and tragic unhappiness in that face. What is she, not an American?”

“Oh, yes she is. She’s an old coloured woman who’s worked in our family for years and she was born right here in Philadelphia.

“Oh coloured! Well, of course I suppose you would call her an American though I never think of darkies as Americans. Coloured—yes that would account for that unhappiness in her face. I suppose they all mind it awfully (*PB*, 70).

¹³⁸ To restate my earlier point: The act of reading itself stages the transition between mimesis2 and mimesis3. In the act of reading the bias towards understanding a text as “static and closed” is shattered; “schematization and traditionality”, as they are engaged and worked over in the relation between text and reader, “contribute to breaking down the prejudice that opposes and ‘inside’ and an ‘outside’ of a text.” (*TAN*, 76). The text is organized by received narratives, symbols, and actions that structure the audience’s ability to recognize and follow the development of the story. And it is the act of reading itself that fully realizes “configuration” (mimesis2).

Gertrude's reading of Hetty's nationality places her outside the boundaries of not only the United States but all of "America." In the negative statement "not an American?" she highlights the cruel irony that Hetty, as a legibly black woman, is actually not received as a proper citizen of the state. She also unknowingly comments on the politics that drive the actions of the black artist Angela, who is passing at the school and who produced the sketch. However, Gertrude is clearly uncertain of what the sketch proposes vis-à-vis "race". Neither could she imagine the sketch to be representative of "Americanness" because of Hetty's expression, and ironically, once Hetty's racial identity is determined, nor could she presume to "think of darkies as Americans". As a "darkie," Hetty literally does not exist, not only is she "not an American," Hetty does not exist as fully human. The "cosmic and tragic unhappiness" resonates with Adorno's "dissonant aspects of human pain" through which the artwork manages to communicate the "sedimented suffering of the past." For in the dynamic inversion of interior and exterior, the imprinting of the primitive is in tension with the sadness, "cosmic and tragic," that Gertrude interprets in Angela's sketch. It is precisely this "look", translated by Angela into "sadness," which prompts Gertrude not to identify Hetty as a citizen of her own country.

In her initial assumption of what appears to be sympathetic identification, followed quickly by her dismissal of Hetty as an "American", Gertrude's interpretation reveals a multi-layered critique of "race" and nationality. What the "coloured darkies" would "all mind awfully" is their complete absence in human form from the cultural repertoire of representative models. "Darkies", of course, do not actually "exist"; and that is precisely what "they" all "mind awfully".

However, since African Americans are clearly outside the value of the fully human, they provide the "background" and the ground by which value judgments can be made specifically about humanity. In her reception of the black woman's image

(“not an American?”), Hetty’s value in the economy of signs is clear: her very “valuelessness,” assigned to her race and gender, enables a ground upon which Gertrude’s speculations of national and racial value may be made. As such, her portrait is a sign by which great value—that of the fully human—is measured. Rhetorically, she is outside of discourse as a subject of enunciation.¹³⁹ In this, Hetty is “invaluable” to the order of hegemonic power anchored in white supremacy. And to extend the metaphor of vision this scene requires, as a subject in America, Gertrude’s interpretation disallows Hetty’s place in the picture. Hetty is fully negated in the political, American spectacle because of her race, although her use-value as an object remains non-negotiable.

It is also curious that Angela, whose own complex identification with her “racial” history—one which includes a disavowal of her own “lack” (castration) figured as “race” (her blackness)—would choose to sketch Hetty Daniels, a legibly black woman. Angela is a young woman at the Academy and at this point in the novel has not discontinued her passing activities.

If we think of the aesthetic work as a privileged domain for displacing us from our comfortable positions in the world of power relations, if the conscious and the unconscious faculties “lose their mutual exclusiveness” during the act of artistic creation, then the reason for her choice of model becomes more apparent. Hetty provides for Angela the racially legible part of her history that she disavows when “passing.”¹⁴⁰

¹³⁹ Lacan differentiates between the “spoken subject of enoncé” and the “subject of enunciation;” it is only the subject of enunciation which speaks within discourse—the subject of enoncé is “spoken for” (*FFC*, 138-139)

¹⁴⁰ In his essay “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” which takes up the function of memory in Proust’s fiction, Benjamin argues that “voluntary and involuntary memory lose their mutual exclusiveness.” Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1968) 159-160.

That it is part of the “sadness” which characterizes Hetty’s visage in the sketch that belongs to Angela as well. She has surrendered to her castration through the disavowal of passing which ironically establishes her inability fully to separate from the very people she ostensibly spurns: legibly “coloured” African Americans. What Angela “sees” in Hetty (and herself), the dynamism apparent under the mask of the primitive, is “sad” because there is no language as of yet for that powerful “vividness of an emotion” which is repressed by the discourses of the primitive. This absence within the discursive, visual grammar, made so clear in its value by Gertrude’s judgment, is also clear to Hetty who “loved to pose...it satisfied some unquenchable vanity in her unloved, empty existence. [s]he could not conceive of being sketched because she was in the artist’s jargon, ‘interesting,’ ‘paintable,’ or ‘difficult.’ Models, as she understood it, were chosen for their beauty” (*PB*, 65). Hetty obviously perceives herself as the ideal beauty; significantly, she would not be perceived “beautiful” because in her humanized presence she is fully absent from the cultural screen; yet she is wholly present as a de-idealized “other,” the prop that supports its dominant representations.

There is an additional way, however, to read Hetty’s “pose” in the context of mimicry and the screen. If we take into account the provocative details Lacan imports from Caillois’s reading of mimicry, Hetty’s agency figures the motion apparent under the “mask” of her skin. In her adoration of “the pose” she could be understood as manipulating the mask of the primitive in the sense of apprehending it; indeed, Hetty inscribes herself for Angela’s gaze with the only tools she has at her disposal, so that she might get “into the picture.” This would make her less the passive object of Angela’s perception in either gaze or look, and more an active subject who attempts to get herself into the picture in any way possible—even, and especially, through the assumption of a de-idealized image like the stereotype of “the primitive.”

Hetty plays with the mask and submits herself to ideas that circulate about blackness and femininity as a way to retrieve the place of her exploitation by discourse. In the pose, she offers herself up to the gaze through the material already imprinted upon her being.¹⁴¹ This does not necessarily mean that there is a space designated in the screen that she has yet to fill. Hetty (and Angela) are literally nowhere in the dynamic of representation.¹⁴² Despite this fact, her desire to pose is an agency that Angela wishes to also apprehend in Hetty's "look."

In addition, Hetty invites Angela's gaze to affirm her in the cultural repertoire of images.¹⁴³ Mimicry is a visual articulation made apparent when the subject is photographed in the screen. Hetty inserts herself in the "function" of the pose, and thereby exercises it—she plays with the mask.¹⁴⁴ What Angela has captured in the sketch is Hetty's "look." In that capture, she acquires a different relationship to a visibly devalued other; one visibly devalued because of the dominant fictions that populate the screen which mediates between the gaze and the subject.

The ideological function of the screen in its relation to the gaze and the look is crucial. The gaze, to restate, is "unapprehensible" and "connected to others as such". In this way, Lacan's reading almost insists upon an ahistoricity that seems to

¹⁴¹ Lacan emphasizes Caillois's point about the caprella, a crustacean that mimics the 'quasi-plant animal,' the briozaires, by taking the shape of a stain-like loop. He readily agrees with Caillois that the caprella does this not out of a need to protect itself; rather, it simply attempts to be a part of a particular picture. "[The caprella] becomes a stain, it becomes a picture, it is inscribed in the picture. This, strictly speaking, is the origin of mimicry" (*FFC*, 99).

¹⁴² In this way, she is like Frantz Fanon waiting for himself when he goes to the theater. Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markham, 140. "I cannot go to a film without seeing myself. I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me."

¹⁴³ Silverman discusses a similar development in theories of photography which come to understand events themselves as "hyperconscious of their dependence on the camera that they go so far as to elicit their attention." Commenting upon different approaches to this phenomenon, she links the "displacements onto the nonhuman domain of a phenomenon which is a central feature of human subjectivity" to a "resituat[ion] onto a nonhuman category some of the gestures by which the subject offers him—or herself to the gaze already in the guise of a particular 'picture'" (*TVW*, 200).

¹⁴⁴ "At bottom, it is, for the subject, to be inserted in a function whose exercise grasps it" (*FFC*, 100).

organize all social existence since the beginning of time. However, if the screen/image *mediates* between the gaze and the subject, it would appear to be the place where culture, the social and politics conjoin. The screen is not only the site of ideology, it is the passage through which culturally valued images and identifications are passed to subjects.¹⁴⁵

However, the “look” is also inextricable from the body. Although not technically a voyeur, for Hetty knows Angela observes her in this moment, the separation of the eye from the gaze is inherent in the relay between the women. The question for Hetty should be: with which “eye” is the artist seeing me? One could assume that if Angela were a subject of the gaze, her sketch of Hetty would have been quite different; in that Hetty’s memories of sexual desire and sexual repression are indicated, Angela, as subject of the gaze who receives its “pictures” from the cultural and historical arsenal of the screen, might well have reproduced a stock image of the “primitive.”

These images that transfer through the screen are then “photo-graphed” by the gaze. Although the gaze does not “dominate” per se, the repertoire of images that are available to black female subjects in the dominant culture during the early twentieth century remains practically nil. The various stereotypes of black life proliferated. The “objective of stereotypes is not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a

¹⁴⁵ I am here drawing on Silverman’s demonstrative reading of Lacan’s inchoate suggestions regarding the screen. Thus, her argument includes social categories and an ethics of the field of vision with which Lacan seemed unconcerned. She argues that the gaze does not “judge, create, or dominate...it is an apparatus whose only function is to put us ‘in the picture’...” The agency through which we appear “in the picture” is the mediating screen. Silverman continues: “It seems to me crucial that we insist upon the ideological status of the screen by describing it as that culturally generated image or repertoire of images through which subjects are not only constituted, but differentiated in relation to class, race, sexuality, age and nationality.” (*MSM*, 150). She further states “Now, I would like to put even further distance between myself and [Lacan], and define the screen as the conduit through which social and historical variability is introduced not only in relation of the gaze to the subject-as-spectacle, but also into that of the gaze to the subject-as-look. The screen represents the site at which the gaze is defined for a particular society, and is consequently responsible both for the way in which the inhabitants of that society experience the gaze’s effects, and for much of the seeming particularity of that society’s regime” (*TVW*, 135).

disguise, a mystification, or objective social relations.”¹⁴⁶ Against this “mystification” works the dynamism Angela perceives beneath Hetty’s “exterior” and consequent sketch.

However, it seems that it is precisely Hetty’s “unslaked yearnings,” to some degree connected to the stories of “sex morality” with which she regales Angela, that fasten Angela’s inspiration (the sketch) to the legible and illegible black body in a particular way. Since the look is more thoroughly associated with the body, and it is “that look” that Angela desires to capture, she returns to the legibly black body through an identification with Hetty and her “unloved, empty existence.” Her identification is discernible in the sketch, in the “sadness” of Hetty’s expression.¹⁴⁷

Since Angela is still living with her legibly black sister and in the neighborhood in which she was raised, she has yet to completely “tur[n] her small olive face firmly away from peering black countenances,” as she did when a child, after overhearing her mother’s confession of “shame” and “guilt” about the public disavowal of Junius and Virginia. She is aware of her castration as a black woman because of the proximity to her legibly black family members and friends in the social space. And to large degree, she accepts this lack figured as castration.

However, she is even more aware of her castration when she is not with her legibly black family and friends at all, when she abandons them for New York’s Greenwich Village, as opposed to the New World Mecca for black folks: Harlem.¹⁴⁸ When Angela ventures into the Art Academy and chooses to pass for white she

¹⁴⁶ See Hazel Carby, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987) 22.

¹⁴⁷ Ironically, much of Angela’s quest throughout the novel is for “happiness;” see *PB*, 54, 70.

¹⁴⁸ When she does visit Harlem, she is overwhelmed and initially conflicted by the scene: “But she was amazed and impressed at this bustling, frolicking, busy, laughing great city within a greater one. She has never seen coloured life so thick, so varied, so complete...Unquestionably, there was something very fascinating, even terrible, about this stream of life,—it seemed to her to run thicker, more turgidly than that safe, sublimated existence in which her new friends had their being. It was deeper, more mightily moving even than the torrent of Fourteenth Street” *PB*, 96-97.

constitutes as other and external that which she cannot accept about herself in the company of her family—what she constitutes as lack—figured in her racial identity which signifies a less-than-human status in the realm of the social and among the available images in the cultural repertoire of the screen .

She is also incapable of accepting the ways in which she experiences that lack when in the company of her family and friends—how her illegibly marked black body, in proximity to her legibly black family members causes her to become a subject of specularly and subordination to the gaze. At the same time, in her desirous identification with Hetty’s “look” (figured as the historical repression of black female sexuality), she identifies with a culturally devalued other that is also her own self, since they share a linguistic, “racial,” and gendered history, if not an epidermal schema. In her attempt at the sketch, Angela struggles to see the otherness of a still-desired part of herself; her sketch respects the difference that the “wild and vivid emotions” which move Hetty’s countenance, even if in her translation of those emotions she assimilates to them something of herself.

The look is not the gaze; although both are visual and psychic categories, they do not necessarily “see” things the same way. Joined to the body in a way the gaze can never be, the look is also mediated by representation however, it still maintains the ability to see in disagreement with and contradiction to the gaze, whose constitutive function of mastery distinguishes it in the paradigm. In fact, the structure of voyeurism is constitutive of the look’s separation from the gaze and its experience of shame in relation to it.¹⁴⁹

Yet, if the look is separated from the eye and castrated by its dislocation from it, it also retains in that dislocation a space external to the presumed position of

¹⁴⁹ Silverman points out that Lacan “proposes that the eye experiences its dislocation from the gaze as castration.” (*TVW*, 154-55).

constitutive mastery represented by the gaze's function "of seeingness" as such. Ironically, because the look is in the body, in desire and therefore, like the body, aberrant and unpredictable, it posits a possible challenge to the material, technological apparatus of the gaze—metaphorized by Lacan as a camera.¹⁵⁰ So, when Angela "gets Hetty's look" in the sketch, she brings out of repression the sadness that Adorno identifies as in part the project of the aesthetic object; in addition, she forgets that the gaze is still out there, and that she, too, can still be photographed by it.

Angela's "punishment" for her transgression is precipitated by an old nemesis, Esther Bayliss. When she spies Angela, her expression gives her away:

The model came in, a short, rather slender young woman with a faintly pretty, shrewd face full of a certain dark, mean character. Angela glanced at her thoughtfully, full of pleasant anticipation. She liked to work for character, preferred it even to beauty. The model caught her eye, looked away and again turned her full gaze upon her with an insistent, slightly incredulous stare. It was Esther Bayliss, who had once been in the High School with Angela (*PB*, 70).

While posing for the class, Esther "kept her eyes fixed on her former schoolmate with a sort of intense, angry brooding so absorbing she forgot her pose and Mr. Shields spoke to her two or three times (*PB*, 70). After a third reprimand from the teacher, Esther asks to be let out of her commitment to pose because "I haven't got to the point yet where I am going to lower myself to pose for a coloured girl." Later in the confrontation with the white Mr. Shields, Esther exclaims "Sitting there drawing from me just as though she were as good as a white girl!" To which the teacher ironically replies, "We're not taking orders from our models" (*PB*, 70).

Unlike Hetty's "love" of posture, Esther refuses to be captured by Angela's brush, it would require a "lowering" of her social status, already affected by the

¹⁵⁰"I now want to emphasize more than previously the errant nature of the look, by which I mean not only its susceptibility to meconnaissance, but also its resistance to absolute tyranny by the material practices that work to determine what it sees. Although human vision always occurs through the frame of representation, it is not always easy to control which frame is mobilized in a given viewing situation" (*TVW*, 155).

presence of the other, Angela, and the “Jew girl” Esther also identifies in her outrage. According to Esther, Angela “draws” from her, she sees her whiteness as the authoritative model, literally the authority to draw; when in actuality, Angela’s original inspiration is Hetty. The anxiety produced by the figure of racial passing resists the authoritative fiction constitutive of white supremacy that “race” is an irreducible difference.¹⁵¹ The inversion of place that occurs between Hetty and Esther as models physically displaces Angela from the social space of the Academy.

Although the “errant look” provides some space for resistance to the apparatusic function of the camera/gaze whose images are mediated by the screen, in Angela’s case it is precisely “the look’s” connection to the de-idealized, legibly black feminine body which works against its potential destabilizing effects. The result of her fledgling attempt to recognize herself in Hetty’s look, and thereby bring into representation a productive image of black humanity which could pose a challenge to the repertoire of images that people the screen, she is punished. The scene develops seamlessly out of the previous one during which Hetty’s portrait is showcased. What might have developed for Angela into a black feminism is negated by Esther’s outing, ironically of her racial identity.

This moment crystallizes the problems with available models of mimesis for the black subject. Fauset’s critique of identification and the field of the visual showcases how for the figure of racial passing, a desired and necessary identification with a “legibly” black subject disallows, in the dominant public view, a place within the cultural screen. That Angela draws an image of Hetty is of crucial importance, since she provides in the sketch a destabilizing image to the dominant fiction of white supremacy.

¹⁵¹ “Colonial mimicry is the desired for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (*LOC*, 86).

Since Angela has once again not articulated her racial background, the wound whose healing might have begun with Hetty's portrait is reopened. What does it matter that she reveal, or not, her racial identity?¹⁵² In the visual field her legibility as an African American supports her captation by the screen and the gaze; without that support, she can evade the radar. By not revealing her sources as a legible text within specularly and the spectacle, her figurative status ostensibly erodes the mastery of the visual; as such, she can represent herself in the social and images of blackness in sketches whose very presence would threaten the representational order.

At the same time, any sort of identification with the history she disallows since childhood, even in a version of exteriority like Hetty's sketch, qualifies her for what these texts pose as a revenge of the visual. This process of mimicry has been described as "a discourse uttered between the lines and as such both against the rules and with them."¹⁵³ Bhabha argues that the inappropriate and parodic imitations constitutive of mimicry threaten colonial authority, and that such destabilization is the inevitable effect of a system of power based upon cultural differences of race and ethnicity.¹⁵⁴ In addition, as a black subject of mimesis, Angela is an outlaw in a system that demands identification papers for the continued enforcement of its authority.¹⁵⁵

Plum Bun engages in a strategic resistance that establishes an enabling self through a narrative both implicated in and resistant to the surrounding culture. Passing for white and hiding her sources, Angela is nevertheless doubly "visible" in her

¹⁵² This section ends with the novel's primary repetition. In response to Mr. Shields's dismay about her racial identity, Angela thinks: "She felt as though she were rehearsing a well-known part in a play. 'Coloured! Of course I never told you I was coloured. Why should I?'" (*PB*, 72-73).

¹⁵³ (*LOC* 89).

¹⁵⁴ "Almost the same but not white: the visibility of mimicry is always produced at the site of interdiction. It is a form of colonial discourse that is uttered inter dicta: a discourse at the crossroads of what is known and permissible and that which though known must be kept concealed...The question of representation of difference is therefore always a problem of authority. (*LOC* 89).

¹⁵⁵ *OM*, 239.

transgressions, as a subject-of-spectacle and as subject-of-look. Although “race” is not a feature that can be empirically known, Angela is caught in the lure of her own fantasy of escape: she believes that she can wholly disavow her history and family, thoroughly rejecting her blackness simply by not articulating it. To reject the “black, peering countenances,” to reject the “image” of blackness is to reject, or in her case repress, a position within discourse. Angela imagines that by not citing her historical sources, she can escape specularly. And, although Esther is the convenient instrument that articulates Angela’s racial identity for her, Angela’s identification with Hetty’s image puts her in the picture even more clearly, as do, ironically, all of her “passing” activities.

Finally, to be a subject of blackness who desires an ideal reflection of herself in the social world, who accepts the socially codified “castration” black subjects had to endure in relation to whiteness and white supremacy, is presented at this point of the novel as a necessary impossibility for the figure of racial passing; also, any escape from the power relations that structure that castration is equally impossible. The balance of the novel dramatizes the praxis of manipulating the field of vision so that Angela finally allows her symptom “to speak,” and, in so doing, becomes a different kind of subject within discourse. And although the purchase of her speech is beneficial to Angela as an individual subject, Fauset makes clear that in no way are the representational orders of the day capable of ceding ground to their own de-idealization.

I Am A Camera:

When Angela attends her first day of art classes in New York, it is as a camera that her gaze is metaphorized:

Several people came in then, and she discovered that she had been half an hour too early, the class was just beginning. She glanced about at the newcomers, a beautiful Jewess with a pearly skin and a head positively foaming with curls, a tall Scandinavian, an obvious German, several more Americans. Not one of them

made the photograph on her mind equal to those made by the coloured girl whose name, she learned was Rachel Powell, the slate-eyed Martha Burden, Paulette Lister and Anthony Cross (*PB*, 95).

The “coloured girl” is the authoritative image “photograph[ed]” on Angela’s mind. This “photograph[ing]” takes place in the social space of Cooper Union art class. Throughout the long section of *Plum Bun* entitled “Market,” Angela is referred to in metaphors that link her subjectivity to the camera. Her physical break with Virginia and blackness now ostensibly complete, she continues to see and be seen by other subjects throughout the novel; however, black subjects and their strategic placing in crucial scenes determine Angela’s development, or regression. Rachel Powell proves of significant import for Angela by the end of the novel.

In the above lines, the construction of the sentence should not elide the fact that even as these characters “made a photograph” on Angela’s mind, she is also photographed and captured by the screen in her identifications. Although she unfortunately thinks of herself in complete mastery of her situation, it is precisely the break with her sister that promotes her full development to subject-of-gaze in this section of the novel.. In New York her knack for the visual is intensified; she is “visual minded...[s]he saw the days of the week, the months of the year in narrow divisions of space.” (*PB* 128). Angela’s inner eye is divided like a strip of negative film, “narrow divisions of space” organize her experience of time. Once in New York and after having met Roger Fielding, the white man she decides to marry, her past is figured through the projective light of a film camera whose sole purpose and whole meaning has been to bring Fielding, the white man, into her view:

She saw the past years of her life falling into separate, uneven compartments whose ensemble made up her existence. Whenever she looked back on this period from Christmas to Easter she saw a bluish haze beginning in a white mist and flaming into something red and terrible; and across the bluish haze stretched the name: Roger. (*PB*, 128-129).

Her past “fall(s)” to the cutting-room floor in the editorial room, “separate and uneven;” the “bluish haze in a white mist” forms the light projecting from the apparatus that throws into relief her desire (“something red and terrible”) and “the name: Roger.” From a position in the future, Angela remembers her “past years,” and “this period from Christmas to Easter” in temporal terms of change. The lines imply that her memory is imprinted in terms that can potentially demystify that which she spends the balance of the novel mystified by: the lure of escape from social oppression through an idealizing identification.¹⁵⁶

When earlier in Roger’s company, Angela is again metaphorized even more directly in terms of the camera. Roger desires in Angela the special quality she possesses, literally, the ability to reflect light and make the photograph:

“Roger found her delightful. As to women he considered himself a connoisseur. This girl pleased him in many respects. She was young; she was, when lighted from within by some indescribable mechanism, even beautiful; she had charm and, what was for him even more important, she was puzzling. In repose, he noticed, studying her closely, her quiet look took on the resemblance of an arrested movement, a composure on tip-toe, so to speak, as though she had stopped in the swift transition from one mood to another. And back of that momentary cessation of action one could see a mind darting, quick, restless, indefatigable, observing, tabulating, perhaps even mocking. She had for him the quality of a foreigner, but she gave this quality an objectivity as though he were the stranger and she the well-known established personage taking note of his peculiarities and apparently boundlessly diverted by them (*PB*, 122-123).

The complex interplay of gaze and look is at work in Roger’s “connoisseur” perception of Angela, as are competing metaphors for vision. In this moment the couple forms a “romance of the market in machine culture,” in a nation whose citizens are ostensibly “made” and not born.¹⁵⁷ Fielding’s consumerist appreciation for the

¹⁵⁶“If the camera/gaze performs a memorial function, the look is allied to something which is ostensibly related to that function, but which is in fact very different: memory. Memory is all about temporality and change. It apprehends the other less as a clearly delineated object than as a complex and constantly shifting conglomeration of values and images.” *TVW*, 157

¹⁵⁷ On the romance of the market in consumer culture and the “project(ed) fantasy of perfect reciprocity—the coordination of the desires of the market and the disciplines of the machine process: through a coupling of bodies and machines” Mark Seltzer, *Bodies and Machines* (New York: Routledge, 1992) 49, 58.

object of his affection belies the sexual trafficking that structures the novel; he also literally wants to see the “mechanism” of her interior state. In that a mechanism is mapped within Angela’s body the registers of body and machine are confused. His attraction to her is precisely in her luminousness, characterized as an “indescribable mechanism.”

Herein, behold the apparatus of the camera, which in Lacan’s account is metaphorized as the gaze. His reception of “her quiet look” is complicated by the “resemblance of an arrested movement, composure on tiptoe...as though she had stopped in swift transition from one mood to another.” This is an interesting juxtaposition between the “mechanism” that lights Angela from within and the “arrested movement” he apprehends in her “quiet look.” Angela’s mechanistic look is perceived as if she is dancing, and then stopped, or paused, “on tiptoe;” acquiring the gaze that fascinates Roger and lights her from within. Her look, however, which so fascinates Roger also “freezes.” This is the gaze whose arrested gesture signifies mortality, stasis and death. When the subject “arrests” its movement it is mortified. The gaze “kill[s] life.”¹⁵⁸

The traditional relations of power are inverted for Roger as Angela’s “mind dart[s], observing, tabulating” the value of her partner. Roger experiences Angela’s taking him into account as an othering that defamiliarizes him from his own “established” authority, “[s]he had for him the quality of a foreigner, but she gave this quality an objectivity as if he were the stranger and she the well-established

¹⁵⁸ “Take those dances I mentioned—they are always punctuated by a series of times of arrest in which the actors pause in a frozen attitude. What is the thrust, that time of arrest of the movement? It is simply the fascinator effect, in that it is a question of dispossessing the evil eye of the gaze, in order to ward it off. The evil eye is the fascinum, it is that which has the effect of arresting movement and, literally, of killing life. At the moment the subject stops, suspending his gesture, he is mortified. The anti-life, anti-movement function of this terminal point is the fascinum, and it is precisely one of the dimensions in which the power of the gaze is exercised directly” (*FFC*, 117-118).

personage.” Ultimately, what could be more “objectively foreign” than the apparatus’ imbrications within the human form; the transformation of a human function into that of a machine?

The dangers here are many, of course, since Roger’s reading is manipulated by his own gaze, itself imprinted by the screen when he interprets Angela as a “mocking” female. And while Angela does “mock” him, in the sense that she shapes her fantasy of escape from what her racial identity represents to her out of what white, privileged masculinity represents, she does not “mock” (as in ridicule) his “peculiarities,” in this moment. To the contrary, she is wholly unaware of how he interprets her at this time “[of] all this Angela was absolutely unaware” (*PB*, 123). She is, however, perfectly aware of her social trespass and transgression. “Stolen waters were the sweetest” (*PB*, 123).

By so fully desiring to be in the picture and to master it, Angela fully places herself in the seat of real danger. Despite her lit-up quality, Angela has become a camera; the mechanism of the gaze operates towards her mortification. In this way the gesture of her look threatens both Angela and Roger, in completely different ways. Roger is “fascinated” and threatened by her look, Angela in turn is threatened by her assumption of the gaze and what is read there. The gesture of her quiet look, “the resemblance of an arrested movement, a composure on tip-toe,” is like a defensive action meant to guard against attack in battle. Roger may not know it consciously but he is in a fight of some proportion. The context of the “arrested movement” aligned with the mortification of the gaze, metaphorically the click of the camera shutter, is cultural and mimetic.

In Lacan’s analogy, the pause takes place on a stage. In what is a clear gesture towards violence and cultural difference—albeit problematic—Lacan explains the gesture’s frame:

What is very remarkable in the Peking Opera—is the way fighting is depicted. One fights as one has always fought since time immemorial, much more with gestures than with blows. Of course, the spectacle itself is content with an absolute dominance of gestures. In these ballets, no two people ever touch one another, they move in different spaces in which are spread out whole series of gestures, which, in traditional combat, nevertheless have the value of weapons, in the sense that they may well be effective as instruments of intimidation. Everyone knows that primitive peoples go into battle with grimacing, horrible masks and terrifying gestures. You mustn't imagine that this is over and done with! When fighting the Japanese, the American marines were taught to make grimaces as they. Our more recent weapons might also be regarded as gestures. Let us hope they will remain such (FFC, 117)!

The mimetic, gestural drama retains its efficacies in the modern wartime procedures benefited by imperial technologies; we now have better and more efficient ways to kill each other. Since they are both subjects of the gaze, Angela and Roger occupy the dance floor, and the theater of war, through their mutually mortifying looks; Angela attempts to ward off Roger's inquisitive and acquisitive gaze (the evil eye) while he attempts to fix her so that she can take her proper place amongst his collectible souvenirs. Angela never gives into her desire with Roger in this way, despite their torrid love affair with him, she never divulges her "secret" to him (although the point of the novel suggests there is "no secret," ultimately, since 'race' is not an essence or empirical object to be sensually known.) In the following scene, we discover to some degree why Angela needs to maintain her guise undercover.

Dinner With Roger, The White Supremacist:

Another represented social scene clarifies the extent to which Angela/Angéle is subject-of-gaze. On her first date with Roger, a black family enters the New York restaurant. Seated at their table, Angela faces Roger, whose back is to the wall above which a mirror is located. Upon the black family's entry, Roger goes berserk and insists to the headwaiter that they be escorted out. After a brief and "acrid"

conversation, “the three filed out.” Throughout Roger’s viciously racist harangue, during which he regales Angela/Angéle with stories of having on numerous occasions, “spoked the wheel of various coloured people...” Roger continues his narrative of racial obstructionism:

He had blackballed Negroes in Harvard, aspirants for small literary honour societies...I wasn’t going to have them in here with you, Angéle. I could tell that night at Angela Burden’s by the way you looked at that girl that you had no time for darkies. I’ll bet you’d never been that near to one before in your life, had you? She was silent, lifeless” (*PB*, 133). Angela/Angéle remains speechless. At the end of the evening, perplexed at her subsequent coldness towards him, Roger thinks, “Now what the devil! I’d have sworn she liked me tonight. Those damn niggers! I bet she’s thinking about me right now” (*PB*, 134).

Roger’s interpretive faculties are shaped by his racist prejudice that racial difference is irreducible and can be known visually. He misreads Angéle’s identifications with legibly black subjects, “I could tell by the way you looked at that girl you had no time for darkies.” He only understands visual focus as a violent aggression, as opposed to what Angéle/Angela actually experiences: a complex identification which is part aggression and part desire. And he imagines after he leaves her that Angela “is thinking about him.”

Of course, Angela is “thinking about the coloured people” (*PB*, 134). The specular scene is centrally organized by the mirror behind Roger, through which the family is made present to Angela’s gaze:

There were a girl and two men, one young, the other the father perhaps of either of the other two. The fatherly-looking person, for so her mind had docketed him, bore an expression of readiness for any outcome whatever. She knew and understood the type. His experiences of prejudice had been too vast for them to appear to him as surprises...In the mirror behind Roger she had seen them entering the room and she had thought: ‘Oh, here are some of them fighting it out again. Oh God! Please let them be served, please don’t let their evening be spoiled...the young fellow was nervous, his face tense—thus might he have looked going to meet the enemy’s charge in the recent Great War...the girl in whose shoes she herself might so easily have been! She was so clearly a nice girl...To Angela watching her intently and yet with the indifference of safety she recalled Virginia, so slender, so appealing she was and so brave! Ah, that courage! It affected a gay hardihood: “Oh, I know it isn’t customary for people

like us to come into this café, but everything is going to be all right.” It met Angela’s gaze with a steadiness before which her own quailed, for she thought: “Oh, poor thing! Perhaps she thinks that I don’t want her either” (*PB*, 135-136).

It bears repeating that even as we look, we are always in spectacle and always looked upon. To repeat how the gaze works, it’s the function is to “look” back at us from the site precisely where we are not located. We are therefore never in control of how we are seen, since the mediating function of the screen photographs subjects in the gaze found in the already available images in the representational order.

First, Angela sees the black family in their mirror reflection behind Roger’s back. Since Roger is between Angela and her initial view of the family in the mirror, this placement further emphasizes the force of the gaze. Roger effectively operates as the image/screen that takes the picture in the mirror and through whose perception Angela identifies and is identified.

At the same time, the family substitute for Angela’s own legibly black father, sister and boyfriend (Junius, Virginia and Matthew Henson), all left behind in Philadelphia.¹⁵⁹ In their substitutive function, the trio is metonymically connected to Angela in that they are figures for her own body in pieces. Also, this is Angela’s first date with Roger and the demand of maintaining the idealization is necessarily challenged. The compositional coherence of what the mirror should reflect, so jubilantly experienced in the misrecognition of the infant in “The Mirror Stage,” takes on a different aspect; the illusion of coherence is fractured not only by one figure in the mirror’s reflection, but by three.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁹ Junius and Mattie Murray pass away early in the novel and I address the details of their deaths in Chapter Two.

¹⁶⁰ Although Lacan’s infant in the mirror is implicitly gendered male and white, he never takes up how identifications might fail to secure narcissistic pleasure, at least in “The Mirror Stage.” However, he does call “the fantasy of the body in bits and pieces” the result of a failure of an indefinite sustaining an identification with ideality. See Jacques Lacan, “Some Reflections on the Ego” in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* 34 (1953): 13.

Fauset uses this moment to clarify the impossibility of Angela's romance of identifications as subject of gaze: the positions are mutually exclusive and they work towards the re-fragmentation of illusory totality.¹⁶¹ Also, Angela seems to think that simply because legibly black subjects have been so devalued in the proliferating repertoire of cultural images, that they are necessarily incapable themselves of being subject to the screen and the gaze and the look. Having already encountered Hetty, we know this is not the case. The family is not just in the restaurant with Angela, they function as a condensed and displaced version of Angela as an imago, which always remains stubbornly exterior, and which always looks right back at her.

The family is also a metaphor for the community of subjects Angela imagines she has successfully disavowed. When she thinks "here are some of them again fighting it out," Angela identifies the violence of the social battle and her perceived distance from it. Having made the physical break from her legibly black family and friends and having submitted to the fantasy of escape based upon a naïve, assumed mastery of the visual, she is incapable of trying at a collective level to alter the screen's images at this point in her formation. As such, she is completely in thrall to the gaze despite the shocks that position affords her, and therefore incapable of working to de-idealize the images of white authority captured there, although she got close when drawing Esther Bayliss's "shrewdish face full of a dark, mean character" (*PB*, 70).

Angela always forgets that she, too, is looked at. As a part of the spectacle, Angela fixes her gaze upon the young black girl who reminds her of her sister, "watching her intently and yet with the indifference of safety she recalled Virginia." The young woman in return "met Angela's gaze with a steadiness before which her

¹⁶¹ Whereas the impossibility of approximating an ideal image is apprehended by the subject through the fantasy of bodily disintegration, the successful imaginary alignment with an image evokes values like "wholeness" and "unity" *TVW*, 20.

own quailed.” That Angela can only remember her sister “with the indifference of safety,” is here figured as physical distance from her; however, in another instance of identification, Angela continues to “watch intently” Virginia’s substitute. And in turn, the young black woman “met Angela’s gaze” steadily until Angela’s “quail[ed].” This scene crystallizes and repeats a much earlier moment in which Angela resists and invites identification with a legibly black subject. I focus upon that moment in Chapter Two.

Although the screen is powerfully managed by authoritarian images that dehumanize blackness, one of Angela’s more misleading mystifications is that the anonymous black subjects in the field of vision do not also photograph her. As such, the gaze that is returned to her by the part of herself she is ashamed to look at fixes her as much as she fixes the young girl “so much like Virginia,” and much more forcefully than Roger’s.

This fact is magnified by the location of the exchange in the mirror situated behind Roger. Angela “sees herself seeing herself” and her gaze “quails.” Shame functions here as a consequence of the spectacle. Angela desires to separate herself from de-idealized images of blackness, and at the same time risks in her identifications the exposure of that desire upon the social scene, which is actually a desire to parade her desire, in front of Roger’s, and the black family’s gaze.

Like the voyeur in Lacan’s account, she is ashamed of the public scene of exposure to which she implicates herself as audience. Also, the family and in particular the girl, are parts of Angela’s own disavowed self constitutive of the white supremacist visual regime that Angela, who is a subject of mimicry as much as she is a subject of the gaze, assumes she can fully escape.

The “mask” she shows Roger is reflected in the mirror image of the black family. Her blackness is “thrown” into the mirror like a “thrown-off skin, thrown off

in order to cover the frame of a shield.”¹⁶² In her fantasy of escape from the gaze that constitutes herself as other, despite her visual “illegibility” as such, Angela constantly gives herself away in battle, and, if Roger were not so blind in his own assertion of mastery, he would see what is reflected in Angela’s eyes: “the presence of others as such.”¹⁶³

Roger’s violent reaction to the splitting of Angela’s image in the mirror, his response to the black family, is his response to the lure of their conflict. And in this way, although Caillois’s theory of mimicry is not primarily based upon the organism’s sense of protecting itself, Angela receives enough information about his pathological violence to head for the hills. Roger embodies the “evil eye” against which Angela defends and parades her desire to hide from exposure, as does Angela. In her “silent, lifeless” aspect in the restaurant and her “immobilized” mortified posture in the armchair in which she experiences the evening’s vexed “triumph,” she also most clearly possesses the “fascinum” of the evil eye. This is also the case when Roger sees her take on the “resemblance of an arrested movement, a composure on tiptoe;” there too her mortification is connected to the evil eye and the gaze that kills life. In Angela’s continued struggle to surrender the gaze for the look, and so assume a more liberated position within discourse, she must work harder throughout the narrative to “get the man off her eyeball.”

¹⁶² *FFC* 107.

¹⁶³ *Ibid* 84.

Chapter Two: Tales From the Crypt

Her mother had never seemed to consider it as anything but a lark. And on the one occasion that terrible day in the hospital when passing or not passing might have meant the difference between good will and unpleasantness, her mother had deliberately given the whole show away. But her mother, she had long since begun to realize, had not considered this business of colour or the lack of it as pertaining intimately to her personal happiness. She was perfectly satisfied, absolutely content whether she was part of that white world with Angela or up on little Opal Street with her dark family and friends. Whereas it seemed to Angela that all the things which she wanted were wrapped up with white people. All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had the power and the badge of that power was whiteness, very like the colours on the escutcheon of a powerful house. She possessed the badge, and unless there was someone to tell she could possess the power for which it stood.

--Plum Bun; A Novel Without a Moral

Among the derivatives of the unconscious instinctual impulses, the character of which we have just described, there are some which unite in themselves opposite features. On the one hand, they are highly organized, exempt from self-contradictoriness, have made use of every acquisition of the system Cs, and would hardly be distinguished by our ordinary judgment from the formations of that system. On the other hand, they are unconscious and are incapable of becoming conscious. Thus they belong according to their qualities to the system Pcs, but in actual fact to the Ucs. Their origin remains decisive for the fate they will undergo. We may compare them with those human half-breeds who, taken all around, resemble white men, but betray their coloured descent by some striking feature or other, on account of which they are excluded from society and enjoy none of the privileges of white people. Of such a nature are the phantasy-formations of normal persons as well as neurotics, which we have recognized as preliminary phases in the formation both of dreams and of symptoms, and which, in spite of their high degree of organization, remain repressed and therefore cannot become conscious.

--"The Unconscious"
Sigmund Freud

The different meanings that an urban free person of color and rural former slaves attributed to land were only one manifestation of the political differences among black people as they gained the vote and took their places in legislative, judicial, and occasionally executive offices. Whether they pressed for civil rights or mechanic lien laws, access to land or to public accommodations, their actions reflected the generations of captivity as well as the revolutionary changes that accompanied their emancipation. The freedom generation could no more escape its past than previous generations of black men and women. Like those who came before them, they too had no desire to deny their history, only to transform it in the spirit of the revolutionary possibilities presented by emancipation. Their successes—and failures—would resonate into the twenty-first century.

--Generations of Captivity
Ira Berlin

The second epigraph to this chapter represents the problematic of fantasy in an unorthodox rhetorical turn. In his endeavor to define the differences between conscious and unconscious fantasies, Sigmund Freud explains in his essay “The Unconscious”, rather, the similarities between the two systems.¹⁶⁴ The dissolution of boundaries between conscious and unconscious fantasies is organized, in Freud’s definition, by their identity with each other.

However, the focus upon difference returns. Surprisingly, the organizing metaphor upon which he props his explanation is located in *racial* difference, figured in the human “half-breed” of “mixed race.” His racialized metaphorization of the twin origins of fantasy inversely resituates an interior, psychic process upon the exterior, human body. According to Freud, to understand the qualitative and factual differences between fantasies in the conscious or the unconscious, one must consider the question of a doubled origin. Indeed, Freud’s account metaphorizes the place of fantasy as variously chiasmic, crossing back and forth among the unconscious and conscious systems, in the figure of *mixed* racial origins. Yet, the unconscious fantasy, like the human “half-breed” must at some point “betray...coloured descent by some striking feature or other.” Compared with the “human half-breeds” whose betrayal of origins “excludes them from society” and the “privileges of white people,” unconscious fantasy is “repressed;” we know, however, that there is no successful repression¹⁶⁵. Despite their “qualitative,” (conscious) characteristics, veritably indistinguishable from “factual,” (unconscious) features, fantasies, like racial identities, as Freud

¹⁶⁴ Sigmund Freud, “The Unconscious,” *Collected Papers Vol. Four*, trans by Joan Riviere, (London: Hogarth Press, 1950.) 123. Phantasies are “(a)n imaginary scene in which the subject is a protagonist, representing the fulfillment of a wish (in the last analysis, an unconscious wish) in a manner that is distorted to a greater or lesser extent by defensive processes. Phantasy has a number of different modes: conscious phantasies or daydreams, unconscious phantasies like those uncovered by analysis as the structures underlying a manifest content, and primal phantasies.” J. Laplanche and J.B. Pontalis, *The Language of Psychoanalysis*, trans. by Donald Nicholson-Smith (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1973) 314.

¹⁶⁵ Sigmund Freud, *Five Introductory Lectures*, trans. & ed. James Strachey (N.Y.: W.W. Norton & Co., 1989) 18-27.

narrates in this 1915 essay, are fated, in one way or another, to speak and make visible their unconscious origins.

Of course, this is Freud's own fantasy. His visual metaphor of the "human half-breeds" who "resemble white men" yet who *necessarily* "betray coloured descent *by some striking feature or other*," asserts the old story that racial identity, figured as difference, is epistemologically "known," and can be so known, by the faculty of sight. Indeed the logic of sameness and difference in Freud's estimation insists that racial identity in its difference is primarily captured in the field of the visual. His estimation is, in fact, wholly subsumed by the logic of racist discourse which understands "whiteness" as sameness (in this instance "the conscious"), the standard against which all difference (in this instance "the unconscious"), indeed, all "others," is measured¹⁶⁶. If the unconscious origin of fantasy is aligned with the body of the "human half-breed," Freud argues that the racialized unconscious, "other" to the conscious, must inevitably write itself *visibly* in the fantasy, *as other*.

Why does Freud rely upon the rhetoric of vision as perceived through racial difference when he is apparently interested in asserting the similitude between the systems in relation to fantasy? More important, why does he choose the "human half-breed," synonymous with the figure of racial passing in Harlem Renaissance novels, as the figure of transparent truth, when this figure signifies, conversely, the very lack of such a transparency¹⁶⁷? Although the metaphor exteriorizes, corporealizes and

¹⁶⁶ I draw both the introduction and the epilogue of "*Race*," *Writing and Difference* in order to indicate the culturally variable and ideologically constructed nature of "race" and the discourse surrounding it. Henry Louis Gates, Jr., ed. "*Race*," *Writing and Difference*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1985).

¹⁶⁷ Of course, the entire goal of psychoanalysis is to lend stability, credence and efficacy to a subject's fantasy life. Freud did not want to locate fantasy in any one topoi, he refused to choose between any one mode of fantasy scene; for example "primal fantasies," as opposed to the "family romance." In his efforts not to prohibit the production of fantasy from any one topographical schema, that is, to not insist upon fantasies' origins with the conscious, preconscious or unconscious, Freud uses a racial metaphor which should signal lack of transparency. And yet, he insists that "race" emerges, and "features" a tell-tale sign.

racializes an interior psychic process, it nevertheless also possesses a complicated relation to any direct route towards “truth” in the figure of the “human half-breed.”¹⁶⁸ On the one hand, Freud abjures transparency and directness for elliptical routes to oblique origins; on the other, his theorization of the origins of fantasy is also ultimately grounded in an irreducible difference that returns from the unconscious in the metaphor of the half-breed’s “betrayal by some striking feature or other.” Freud’s metaphorical, “raced” reading of the unconscious illustrates the difficulties of defining origins, fantasized or racial, and fantasized *because* racial. When Freud insists upon the “betrayal by some..feature” he conflates the operations of the unconscious with racist ideological discourse. This racialized moment displaces the unconscious fully upon the raced body of difference.

As the first epigraph reveals, Jessie Fauset’s work also focuses upon the question of mixed origins, fantasy and their organization in the visual, social world. In this epigraph, the relation to whiteness is theorized by Fauset in terms similar compared to those of Freud. “Whiteness” is a “badge” that signifies white people’s “power,” Fauset’s demure way of signaling white supremacy. Angela Murray, the protagonist of Fauset’s novel, like Freud’s “human half-breeds,” possesses the same “badge:” a white skin. As an African American woman, the revelation or suppression of Angela’s mixed origins, can abet or prevent her assumption to “power.” Like Freud, although from an entirely different position, Fauset is concerned with the relation between sameness and difference as they are played out between the fields of the visual, social

¹⁶⁸ Although Freud’s discussion uses metaphor as a way to mark “racial” difference upon the physical exterior, the trope functions as a synecdoche in that it references “the part” (a racialized “other” unconscious) for the whole (a conscious identified with whiteness). Kenneth Burke defines synecdoche as that “figure of speech wherein the part is used for the whole, the whole for the part, the container for the thing contained, the cause for the effect, the effect for the cause, etc.” *The Philosophy of Literary Form: Studies in Symbolic Action*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State UP, 1967.) Lee Edelman assigns synecdoche the status of a “master trope of racism” in his essay “The Part for the (W)hole; Baldwin, Homophobia and the Fantasmatics of “Race,” in *Homographesis: essays in gay literary and cultural theory*. (Routledge: London, 1994). 42-75, 44.

worlds and the unconscious/conscious interiority of subjects. However, in a marked divergence from Freud's theorization of unconscious fantasies, this chapter argues that Fauset's project is concerned with "racial" identity only in as far as it references history and a historical relation to language. In Fauset's Harlem Renaissance novel of racial passing, it is not the "raced" body which "betrays some feature," or "tells;" rather, in her estimation, what "speaks" decisively is a *rhetorical* feature and a *linguistic* predicament whose referent is the material history of enslavement.

With a few notable exceptions, Fauset's work is routinely dismissed, purely based upon a critique of form¹⁶⁹. Literary historians and critics contemporaneous to the Renaissance and over the course of the twentieth century view the perceived confusion and transgressions of form as a sign of structural weaknesses in Fauset's work. In Fauset's case, these weaknesses are read as a reflection of her authorial decisions (to focus in her fiction upon the black "middle" classes), and betray her own "desire to be white;" her focus upon black life is historically received as a betrayal of the representations of an "authentically" black culture¹⁷⁰.

These assessments would be the final word on Fauset. However, in a different commentary upon Fauset's work, Ann duCille reads the question of Fauset's form in concretely positive terms:

The Chinaberry Tree, like most of Fauset's fiction, displays the same fundamental confusion of form, and this, I would argue, may be its greatest strength. For Fauset is indeed writing neither realism or naturalism; nor is she

¹⁶⁹ The list of literary critics and historians who are at best ambivalent about Fauset's work is long. For examples, see David Levering Lewis, *W.E.B. Du Bois: Biography of a Race, 1868-1919*, (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1993), 764. David Littlejohn, *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes* (New York: Grossman, 1966), 49-50, Deborah MacDowell, "The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Redmon Fauset," in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction and Literary Tradition*, ed. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1985) 87, Cheryl Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), 66, and Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America*, 1958; rpt. (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972), 97, 101.

¹⁷⁰ Hazel Carby argues that Fauset's protagonists "revise the irrelevant history of their parents, a history tied to the consequences of slavery." *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987) 167.

falling back on pure romanticism. She is interrogating old forms and inventing something new. This rewriting, recreation, this confusion of genre, is indeed fundamental... in this instance this “confusion” is Fauset’s particular, though unacknowledged, gift to modernism.¹⁷¹

Hortense Spillers also directs attention to Fauset as an example of a 20th century author whose work should be read to consider the “place...of fantasy, desire and the ‘unconscious,’ of conflict, envy, aggression and ambivalence in the repertoire of elements that are perceived to fashion the lifeworld.¹⁷²” Identified by Spillers as one of the Harlem Renaissance authors whose “staging of the mental theatre” attempts to consider the “place of fantasy, desire and the unconscious,” and by DuCille as an “inventor of forms” I will now turn to a reading of *Plum Bun* which addresses the complex relation between language, history, identification and the staging of the structures of the unconscious for the black female subject in the Harlem Renaissance novel of racial passing.

Dispossessed Genre

Plum Bun simultaneously signals the realm of childhood in the work’s title, its epigraph¹⁷³, and the first paragraphs of the narrative:

Opal Street, as streets go, is no jewel of the first water. It is merely an imitation, and none too good at that. Narrow, unsparkling, uninviting, it stretches meekly off from dull Jefferson Street to the dingy, drab market which forms the north side of Oxford Street. It has no mystery, no allure, either of exclusiveness or of downright depravity; its usages are plainly significant,--- an unpretentious little street, lined with unpretentious little houses, inhabited, for the most part by unpretentious little people...In one of those houses dwelt a father, a mother and two daughters. (11)

¹⁷¹ Ann du Cille, *The Coupling Convention; Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women’s Fiction*, (New York: Oxford UP, 1993) 100.

¹⁷² Hortense J. Spillers. “All the Things You Could Be By Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race” in *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003) 377.

¹⁷³ “To Market, To Market,/To Buy a Plum Bun;/Home Again, Home Again,/Market is Done.” Jessie Fauset, *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1990.) Hereafter cited as “PB.”

Fairy-land, as one critic has stated, is the world inverted, the other side of the mirror, the opposite.¹⁷⁴ The genre of the fairy tale is organized through a series of inversions. Understood as the “world inverted” the fairy tale is like a “camera obscura;” it is a narrative which must be read for its figurative and ideological distortions, and for the relation between figure and ideology.¹⁷⁵

In a rejection of a strict dualism between realism and fantasy, childhood and adulthood, illusion and reality, Fauset’s representation of the processes of identification which subtend a contested subjectivity enable her protagonists to pass through the mirror, and thereby manipulate it.¹⁷⁶ Jacqueline Rose, in her theorization of the place of the feminine in relation to violence and psychic life, insists upon understanding fantasy and its attendant working through of traumas as antithetical to the “rigid dualism” of total separation.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Michael Butor, “On Fairy Tales” in *European Literary Theory and Practice*, ed. Vernon W. Gras, (New York: Delta Books, 1973) 352.

¹⁷⁵ Marx and Engels metaphorize the relation between illusion and reality in their argument of the material relations of (re)production to history thus: “If in all ideology men and their circumstances appear upside-down as in a *camera obscura*, this phenomenon arises just as much from their historical life-process as the inversion of objects on the retina does from their physical life-process.” Karl Marx & Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* ed. & intro. C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1981) 47.

¹⁷⁶ Subjectivity is necessarily contested because it always must confront its own failure. I am here drawing on Jacqueline Rose’s reading of feminism and psychoanalysis at the juncture of identity formation. She states: “The unconscious constantly reveals the ‘failure’ of identity. Because there is no continuity of psychic life, so there is no stability of sexual identity, no position for women (or for men) which is ever simply achieved. Nor does psychoanalysis see such ‘failure’ as a special-case inability or an individual deviancy from the norm. ‘Failure’ is not a moment to be regretted in a process of adaptation... (i)nstead, ‘failure’ is something endlessly repeated and relived moment by moment throughout our individual histories. It appears not only in the symptom, but also in dreams, in slips of the tongue and in forms of sexual pleasure which are pushed to the sidelines of the norm. *Feminism’s affinity with psychoanalysis rests above all, I would argue, with this recognition that there is a resistance to identity that is at the very heart of psychic life.*” Jacqueline Rose, *Sexuality and the Field of Vision*, (London: Verso, 1991) 90-91. The “resistance to identity” is a key formation in the structure of Fauset’s novels and it is upon this formation that my argument focuses to great degree.

¹⁷⁷ “For if psychic life has its own violence; if there is an aggression in the very movement of the drives; if sexual difference, because of the forcing it requires, leaves the subject divided against the sexual other as well as herself or himself; if the earliest instances of female sexuality contain a difficulty not solely explicable in terms of the violent repudiation with which the little girl leaves them behind---if any of these statements have any force... then there can be no analysis for women which sees violence solely as an accident, imposition or external event. *Only a rigid*

Nor is fantasy set up in distinct opposition to the real in Fauset's work. To the contrary, they are, in Fauset's estimation, two sides of the same coin; in so doing, she prefigures in her work one of the main features of the contemporary feminist intervention in psychoanalysis, as figured by Jacqueline Rose. I will demonstrate that Fauset stages "the mental theatre" as a place of fantasy that is not located in opposition to the real. Fauset's use of the literary fairy-tale inverts and displaces received notions of the relation between the "real," exterior world and a "fantasized" interior life of subjects.

It is by now a commonplace that the figure of racial passing destabilizes categories of essentialized, biological accounts of racial difference¹⁷⁸. Some critics have read Fauset's mapping of Angela's adventures of racial passing as both a critique of "color prejudice" within the black community and a theorization of the intersection of race, gender and class oppression.¹⁷⁹ It is, however, necessary to read the scenes dramatized in the very beginning chapters of the novel through the mirror of the unconscious, at the threshold of childhood, and in the repetition of the "fairy-tale," whose rhetorical features undo themselves in the gaps of the narrative.

The scenes which organize Angela's development are a signifying chain whose substitutive economy of exchange orders the black American female subject's relation to history and is, therefore, constitutive of her subjectivity. In her employment of the novel, Fauset uses the gaps between narrated scenes, the ellipses in the text, to signify a literal and figurative violence. Fauset is ultimately concerned with the connection

dualism pits fantasy against the real; only an attempt to reduce the difference between them by making one a pure reflection of the other has, finally, set them so totally apart." Rose, 16.

¹⁷⁸ See, for example, Samira Kawash, *Dislocating the Color Line; Identity, Hybridity and Singularity in African American Literature* (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1997) esp. Chapters One and Four, and Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) esp. Chapter Six.

¹⁷⁹ See Jacqueline Y. McClendon, *The Politics of Color in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset and Nella Larsen* (Charlottesville: Virginia UP, 1995) and Barbara Christian's *Black Women Novelists: The Development of a Tradition, 1892-1976* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1980) for these respective critical positions.

between language, history, identification, “race” and gender, as these formations are played out in the “mental theater” of a necessarily challenged black, feminine subjectivity. Her precise concern is with the history of slavery and her protagonist’s relation to that history.

RAC(E)ING THE CRYPT

Angela Murray fits the bill as the heroine of a text of racial passing. After reaching adulthood, Angela, recently orphaned with her sister Virginia (who is legibly black, and cannot “pass” for white) leaves Philadelphia for Greenwich Village, New York, where she chooses to live her life as a “white woman,” thus severing all ties to her past and kin. Angela’s decision to live her life as a white woman, and have an affair with a wealthy white man who ultimately rejects her as “marriage material,” is often characterized as the organizing section of the novel. If we turn to earlier moments in the development of both the narrative and this character, a different, albeit connected, reading of the work emerges.

By Chapter Four, Angela is “high school age.” She has realized that despite her ability to pass for white, the knowledge among her white classmates with whom she has grown up that she is a member of a black family causes increasing isolation¹⁸⁰. The childhood games they all used to enjoy have faded into the past and Angela finds herself without even a modicum of companionship, until a new girl arrives at school named Mary Hastings. This girl is represented as a “power¹⁸¹,” a “popular and important... well-bred girl” that, although “not quick in her studies” possesses an

¹⁸⁰ “There were no other colored girls in her class but there had been only two or three during her school life, and if there had been any she would not necessarily have confined herself to them; that this might be a good thing to do in sheer self-defence would hardly have occurred to her.” Fauset, 39.

¹⁸¹ Mary’s “power” must be read through the privileged “badge” of her whiteness; she speaks French perfectly, and, although “stupid” in her other subjects, rules the school with a “supercilious” air.

“air¹⁸².” She immediately chooses Angela as her best friend, without knowing Angela’s racial identity. For a brief while, Angela enjoys the pleasures of unconditional friendship.

Eventually “discovered” to Mary by another classmate, and suffering the usual rejection, Angela’s racial “outing” causes a wound from which she seems unable to heal, and is fated to endure in silence:

During the day she had been badly hurt; *she had received a wound whose depth and violence she would not reveal even to her parents*,--because, and this only increased the pain, young as she was she knew there was nothing they could do about it. There was nothing to be done but get over it. Only she was not developed enough to state this stoicism to herself. She was a little like a pet cat that had once formed a part of their household; its leg had been badly torn by a passing dog and the poor thing had dragged itself into the house and lain on its cushion patiently, waiting stolidly for this unfamiliar agony to subside. So Angela waited for the hurt in her mind to cease. (38)¹⁸³

Angela’s “blackness,” revealed to Mary by another girl, causes an unspeakable rift between the two friends. Angela retreats from “Mary Hastings’ accusing face, hearing Mary Hastings’ accusing voice: ‘Coloured! Angela, you never told me that you were coloured!’” The force of the accusation causes Angela’s retreat, and is the cause of the subsequent dissolution of the friendship.

The description of the “wound whose depth and violence she would not reveal even to her parents” possesses all the earmarks of an encrypted place within the psyche.¹⁸⁴ However, the crypt is characterized by “grounds so disposed to disguise and hide: something, always a body in the way. But also to disguise the act of hiding and

¹⁸²Fauset, 37-42.

¹⁸³ Fauset rewrites this famous DuBoisian moment of childhood rejection by a white, female friend through the lens of the black feminine subject. W.E.B. Du Bois *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. Henry Louis Gates Jr., (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999).

¹⁸⁴ “A crypt hous(es) the departed love-object in secret because the survivor is being deluded into behaving as if no trauma or loss had occurred.” Karl Abraham and Maria Torok *The Shell and the Kernel*, ed., trans. and intro. by Nicholas T. Rand, (Chicago: UP Chicago, 1987) 104. Hereafter cited as *SK*. Abraham and Torok’s theorization of encryption in their reading of melancholia applies to this moment of transition in Angela’s life.

to hide the disguise: the crypt hides as it holds.¹⁸⁵ It would seem, therefore, contrary to the logic of its structure that it would enjoy full narration, indeed full revelation, in the space of the text. Since this moment of wounding is fully articulated and represented in the narrative, it would seem that it refers back to a *former* “wound whose depth and violence (Angela) would not reveal.”¹⁸⁶

Although the moment of Angela’s racial “unveiling” in the eyes of her best and only friend, Mary Hastings, is described as the “violent wound” that silences Angela, it is in actuality the repetition of an even older and more secreted Murray family memory. This former wound’s identification marks are that of a silence, a gap in the subject and the text itself.¹⁸⁷ Before turning to these other moments in the signifying chain of familial history, a fuller discussion of the “fantasy of identifying empathy” in the crypt of the subject is necessary. According to Abraham and Torok’s theorization of melancholic psychic topography, should a child have parents with ‘secrets,’

parents whose speech is not exactly analogous to their unstated repressions, the child will receive from them a gap in the unconscious, an unknown, unrecognized knowledge—a nescience—subjected to a form of repression before the fact.¹⁸⁸

The “*buried speech of the parent*” will be “a dead gap without a burial place for the child.¹⁸⁹” This unknown phantom *returns from the unconscious of the parent, that is from the unconscious of the previous generation, to haunt its host, the child.*¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁵ Jacques Derrida, “Fors,” *The Georgia Review* Vol. 31.1 (Spring, 1977) 67.

¹⁸⁶ In Abraham and Torok’s reading of encryption and inclusion in the psychic realm, the architecture of the crypt is created through the “memory” (and subsequent loss) “of an idyll, experienced with a valued object and yet for some reason unspeakable.” Abraham and Torok, 141.

¹⁸⁷ “The fantasy of incorporation reveals a gap within the psyche; it points to something that is missing just where introjection should have occurred. (Abraham and Torok, 127.) In his theorization of cryptic formation, Derrida states: “(t)he crypt is thus not a natural place..., but the striking history of an artifice, an architecture, an artifact: of a place comprehended within another but rigorously separate from it, isolated from general space by partitions, and enclosure, an enclave.” Derrida, *Fors* 67.

¹⁸⁸ Abraham and Torok, 140.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.

¹⁹⁰ “The phantom is a formation of the unconscious that has never been conscious...it passes—in a way yet to be determined—from the parent’s unconscious into the child’s.” Abraham and

Although Abraham and Torok argue that the psychic code passes from the parent to the child “in a way yet to be determined”, one way in which to understand how the transfer of the wound is routed would be *as a text*. In her work on the family photo album, memory and mourning, Marianne Hirsch suggests that memory and postmemory are coded in the photograph, a “ghostly revenant” which functions as a “particular instrument of remembrance, since they are perched at the edge of memory and postmemory, and also, though differently, between memory and forgetting. Hirsch continues in her discussion:

I propose the term “postmemory” with some hesitation, conscious that the prefix ‘post’ could imply that we are beyond memory and therefore perhaps...purely in history. *In my reading postmemory is distinguished from memory by generational distance and from history by deep personal connection. Postmemory is a powerful and a very particular form of memory precisely because its connection to its object or source is mediated not through recollection but through an imaginative investment and creation.* This is not to say that memory itself is unmediated, but that it is more directly connected to the past. *Postmemory characterizes the experience of those who grow up dominated by narratives that preceded their birth, whose own belated stories are evacuated by the stories of the previous generation shaped by traumatic events that can neither be understood nor recreated”*.¹⁹¹

Hirsch further connects her idea of postmemory to Kaja Silverman’s discussion of heteropathic identification which this discussion will also engage. Using Hirsch’s idea

Torok, 173. Abraham and Torok’s reelaboration of the relationship between introjection and incorporation are crucial to an understanding of the way such a cryptic psychic field is formed within the self. Introjection, in their estimation, is not to be assimilated with the process of incorporation; in the structuring of the crypt, incorporation and introjection must be radically opposed. Incorporation is formed in silence, as a way to trick the subject that it actually experiences introjection when, in fact, that is absolutely not the case. Introjection is the process which, eventually, allows us to speak about loss. “Introjection (literally cast(ing) aside) is the widening of the self that takes into its boundaries the lost object, the idea that the psyche is in a constant state of acquisition, involving the active expansion of our potential to open into our own emerging desires and feelings as well as the external world.” Incorporation, on the other hand, is the magical fantasy that deludes the subject into refusing to mourn. “Incorporation is the refusal to reclaim as our own the part of ourselves that we placed in what we lost: incorporation is the refusal to acknowledge the full import of the loss, a loss that, if recognized as such, would effectively transform us. In fine, incorporation is the refusal to introject loss.” Abraham and Torok, 100; 127.

¹⁹¹ Marianne Hirsch, *Family Frames: photography, narrative and postmemory*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997) 22.

of postmemory in the context of Abraham and Torok's utilization of the phantom and the crypt, and, along with Spillers's notion of the generational transfer of exterior markings/brandings, the Middle Passage mutilation of black bodies, passed down through "symbolic substitutions" whose "efficacy of meanings repeat the initiating moments"; one finds oneself where one ultimately "began", in the textuality of the discourse out of which all foundations are written, insecurely, yet nevertheless, written. In other words, the silence of the parent covers an experience of trauma which is inherited by the child as an inability to articulate a loss. That "silence" and the "inability to articulate" is always textual; it is constitutive of the discourse which produces it. Postmemory is a text and therefore it is "as full and as empty, certainly as constructed, as memory itself" (Hirsch, 22).

Abraham and Torok theorize that the "wound which cannot be spoken" is a "memory buried without a legal burial place." This illegitimate grave covers over the memory of an idyllic event and its silencing. Abraham and Torok state:

The (buried) memory is of an idyll, experienced with a valued object and yet for some reason unspeakable. It is memory entombed in a fast and secure place, awaiting resurrection. Between the idyllic moment and its subsequent forgetting, there was the metapsychological traumatism of a loss, or, more precisely, the "loss" that resulted from the traumatism. *This segment of an ever so painfully lived Reality—untellable and therefore inaccessible to the gradual, assimilative work of mourning—causes a genuinely covert shift in the entire psyche. The shift itself is covert, since both the fact that the idyll was real and that it was later lost must be disguised and denied. This leads to the establishment of a sealed-off psychic place, a crypt in the ego. Created by a self-governing mechanism we call inclusion, the crypt is comparable to the formation of a cocoon around a chrysalis.* Inclusion or crypt is a form of anti-introjection, a mechanism whereby the assimilation of both the illegitimate idyll and its loss is precluded (140-141).

The crypt is formed through identification with and an incorporation of the lost parent. The loss of the love object, however, is also indistinguishable from the secret occasioned by the loss. It is the secret of the parent that is passed down generationally

that marks the loss of the parent by the child and which creates in the child a “psychic tomb,” a “crypt.”

Although the loss of Mary Hastings’s trust and friendship is an undeniable blow to Angela’s psyche, this moment is a repetition of an earlier traumatism which resulted in a loss. Angela does not discuss this particular event, her publicized racial “outing” at the schoolhouse, with anyone. Her muteness is characteristic of an “encrypted psyche” in Abraham and Torok’s theorization of how an ego experiences loss. However, the evidence of a previous wound is revealed to the reader/audience in the voice of the free-indirect narrator. For her friendship with the Hastings girl is represented as that which “*in the dark and tortured spaces of her difficult life had been a lovely, hidden refuge.*” (38.)

If the trauma of the loss of Mary Hastings’s friendship is actually the original trauma endured by Angela, then what constitutes the “dark and tortured spaces of (Angela’s) difficult life” which *predate* Mary’s entry into her world, and for which the friendship with Mary obviously covered over like a salve? What event structures this more primary wound, the “psychic tomb,” or “crypt,” in Angela’s psyche? The clue to this puzzle lies in the historical past of the Murray family and, in particular, with the figure of the mother, Mattie Murray, in her relation to the children.

Angela and her mother, both capable of passing for white, form their identification as mother and daughter, as kin, around the activity of racial passing. Mattie Murray’s “playacting” is imparted to the daughter who looks like her as she and her husband Junius, who is legibly black like their daughter, Virginia, pair off, each with a very young daughter, for Saturday afternoon excursions¹⁹². Virginia,

¹⁹² It is established early in the narrative that Mattie enjoys, with her husband’s permission, the pleasures of “playacting” as racial passing. It is also established by Junius early in his courtship of Mattie that as long as “no principle (is) involved” she should not “give up her harmless pleasure.” Fauset, 32.

Angela's sister, is uninterested in the pleasures of socializing and shopping after her mother's fashion, as much as Angela finds her father's cultural excursions around Philadelphia "bor(ing.¹⁹³)"

The text makes clear that Mattie Murray's "maternal instincts" were "sound;" she does not begrudge time with "brown Virginia" even if her younger, darker daughter's company "curtails her movement." However, despite the mother's delight in the black community whose company is, to Mattie's mind, equal to the pleasures of passing, Angela as a young child

draws for herself certain clearly formed conclusions which her subconscious mind thus codified: ...the great rewards of life—riches, glamour, pleasure—are for white-skinned people only. Secondly, that Junius and Virginia were denied these privileges because they were dark... (PB, 17-18).

These "conclusions" are cast in psychic cement one day in young Angela's life. Outside a hotel, elevated on the steps as they put on their gloves, Mattie and Angela watch their family members, Junius and Virginia, pass by:

A thin stream of people constantly passing threw an occasional glance at the quietly modish pair, the well-dressed, assured woman and the refined, no less assured daughter. The door-man knew them; it was one of Mrs. Murray's pleasures to proffer him a small tip, much appreciated since it was uncalled for. This was the atmosphere which she loved. Angela had put on her gloves and was waiting for her mother, who was drawing on her own with great care, when she glimpsed in the laughing, hurrying Saturday throng the figures of her father and of Virginia. They were close enough for her mother, who saw them too, to touch them by merely descending a few steps and stretching out her arm. In a second the pair had vanished. Angela saw her mother's face change—with trepidation she thought. She remarked: "It's a good thing Papa didn't see us, you'd have had to speak to him, wouldn't you?" But her mother, giving her a distracted glance, made no reply." (19)

Reading this moment against Angela's traumatic loss of Mary Hastings's friendship, one can see the formation of Abraham and Torok's metaphor for encryption, the "cocoon around the chrysalis." The cocoon is formed in this *prior* moment, in which

¹⁹³ Fauset, 17.

an even younger Angela is traumatized by her mother's transgression. Mattie's transgression and Angela's loss occur contemporaneously.

However, for the balance of the rest of the novel, Angela does not acknowledge this moment for what it is, a moment of loss. This is the fateful characteristic of the "fantasy of identifying empathy" which founds the "crypt" in the psyche. As such, this moment is the one which is never fully realized by the child as a "wound."

For in this moment Angela is inscribed in the signifying chain of historical kinship relations which alienate her from a traditional, unified family structure. By misreading her mother's mute face and her "distracted glance," Angela's interpretation is a metonymy for the inability to read appearances as if transparent; in addition, her reading adds to that which causes the rupture, the gap that organizes her identity¹⁹⁴. Later that evening, Angela is not privy to the conversation her parents share. During this exchange between mother and father, Mattie confesses her transgression, her "guilt" and subsequent "shame" about her own disavowal:

I was at my old game of playacting again today, June, passing you know, and darling, you and Virginia went by within an arm's reach and we never spoke to you. *I'm so ashamed.*

But Junius consoled her. Long before their marriage he had known of Mattie's weakness and its essential harmlessness. "My dear girl, I told you long ago that where no principle was involved, your passing means nothing to me. It's just a little joke; I don't think you'd be ashamed to acknowledge your old husband anywhere if it was necessary."

"I'd do that if people were mistaking me for a queen," she assured him fondly. But she was silent, not quite satisfied. "After all," she said, with her charming frankness, "*it isn't you, dear, who make me feel guilty. I really am ashamed to think that I let Virginia pass by without a word. I think I should feel very badly if she were to know it.* I don't believe I'll ever let myself be quite as silly as that again." But of this determination Angela, dreaming excitedly of Saturdays spent

¹⁹⁴"The fantasy of incorporation reveals a gap within the psyche; it points to something that is missing just where introjection should be." Abraham and Torok, 127.

in turning her small olive face firmly away from peering black countenances was, *unhappily*, unaware (19).

To the degree that Angela is “*unhappily..unaware*” of her mother’s “determination,” (to “never let herself be that silly again”) she is “*unhappily*” *aware*, at a different register, of her mother’s “shame” and “guilt.” This is evidenced in the young girl’s participation in Mattie Murray’s disavowal of her legibly black husband and daughter (who are also Angela’s legibly black father and sister) that fateful day in the streets of Philadelphia. Although Angela misreads her mother’s distraction in that moment, in that she believes her mother acts without regret towards Virginia and Junius, she correctly understands that a secret has passed between them. What Angela and her mother share is Mattie Murray’s guilt and shame, communicated in the silence and “distracted glance” with which Mattie addresses her daughter’s query: “It’s a good thing Papa didn’t see us, you’d have had to speak to him, wouldn’t you?”

It is also true that Mrs. Murray’s disavowal of the one, legibly black daughter is a disavowal of both the maternal role and also of the child with whom she can enjoy her “play-acting;” the daughter who does not “curtail..movement.” What can it mean in her confession that night to her husband that she is sorely “ashamed” and “guilty” at the possibility of the one daughter, Virginia, “knowing,” that is, realizing, her mother’s disavowal, when another child, Angela, stood as witness to the same disavowal? Fauset represents Mrs. Murray’s concern directed towards only one of her children. Part of the secret that passes between Angela and her mother is that Mattie does not mind Angela having testified to her regrettable action. She feels neither shame nor guilt that Angela has witnessed and participated in the disavowal of the other members of the family.

For Angela, the “idyll” that is “covered over” in this moment of disavowal is complete identification with and ownership of her mother, objectified in the security of her mother’s love. Angela enjoys this relationship to Mattie until, ironically, the

very act which should seal her identification with her mother (the *shared* disavowal of the family in the moment of racial passing) performs the “break” between mother and daughter (in that Angela’s identification ensures her loss of Mattie), and the epistemological “break” in the text, as well as the split in Angela’s subjectivity.

Later that evening, Mattie’s *expressed* concern is for Virginia, and not for Angela; and she repeats, in a performance of maternal concern, the result of her action on the steps of the hotel. In her conversation with Junius, *she acts as a mother* to only one of her daughters, the one who does not share her transgressions¹⁹⁵.

The scene outside the hotel represents the model of identification and the subsequent trauma with which Angela struggles throughout most of the novel. However, Angela’s identification, grounded in the mimetic work of racial passing, has a history, as does Mattie’s own series of identifications. The key to understanding these histories is in the tension between a mimetic mode of identification which contains within its structure powerful anti-mimetic tendencies.

In the Freudian theorization of psychic life, mimesis as a model of identification is traditionally understood as that which follows desire for an object, as opposed to later definitions of desire that understand the shaping mechanism of identification as precisely the ground of desiring instincts, those which precede desire for an object. Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen reexamines the Freudian trajectory of objectal desire and identification as follows:

Desire (the desiring subject) does not come first, to be *followed* by an identification that would allow the desire to be fulfilled. What comes first is a tendency toward identification, a primordial tendency which then gives rise to a and this desire is, from the outset, a (mimetic, rivalrous) desire to oust the incommensurable other from the place the pseudo-subject already occupies in fantasy...If desire is satisfied in and through identification, it is not in the sense

¹⁹⁵ Mattie’s performance of maternal concern for Virginia is an attempt to assuage her guilt and recuperate her disavowal of her role *for Junius*, the paterfamilias, who, like his daughter Virginia, cannot “pass.” In her recuperative performance of maternal love, however, she again disavows Angela.

in which a desire somehow “precedes” its “gratification,” since no desiring subject, (no “I,” no ego) precedes the mimetic identification: identification brings the desiring subject into being, and not the other way around¹⁹⁶.

To put it simply, desire does not come first; rather, the initial inclination is towards identification. And the initial inclination in the model of identification organized by mimesis is directed towards the mother. Mimesis has primarily to do with the mother, the maternal and the feminine. In so far as this identification with the mother is necessarily ambivalent and at times takes the form of aggression, Angela’s predicament becomes more lucid.

Mattie Murray’s “playacting,” does far more psychic harm to Angela than to her sister Virginia, who remains blissfully unaware of her mother’s disavowal¹⁹⁷. If, in the space of the social and the field of the spectacular, Angela models herself in this moment on the streets of Philadelphia upon her mother’s own identifications and denials, then the daughter necessarily identifies with the disavowal *and the rupture it causes*.

At some level, Angela knows Mattie’s lack of acknowledgment for Virginia and Junius is also a lack of acknowledgment of herself as a daughter. Angela is the quintessential “motherless child.” In this moment of disavowal, equal to a loss of love *for* the mother, and a loss *of* the mother, in that Mattie refuses to acknowledge (read: love) her family in public, young Angela forms the identifications which will structure her future desires.

The scene outside the Philadelphia hotel is one of identification and incorporation for Angela¹⁹⁸. Her identification with Mattie is necessarily ambivalent

¹⁹⁶ Mikkel Borch-Jacobsen, *The Freudian Subject*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1988.) 47.

¹⁹⁷ Indeed, in as far as Mattie “plays” with her daughter in the public space of the visual field and does not instruct Angela as to the import of her play, Mattie behaves like a child. For play and games are themselves scenes of instruction, however, in this example of mother/daughter identification, the instruction of the game is left unremarked by Mattie.

¹⁹⁸ See footnote 26.

because of Mattie's disavowal; it functions as a dual loss and separation of self from other. However, the same identification is also an enactment of profound dissolution of boundaries. In this moment, Angela *places herself in her mother's place and loses herself there*, so to speak. After Virginia and Junius pass by, she asserts: "It is a good thing Papa didn't see *us*, *you'd* have had to speak to him, wouldn't you?" Angela's participation in the disavowal of the family is also a participation in her own disavowal, by the maternal figure, with whom she identifies. Indeed, her question itself is structured as a disavowal, although Angela does not understand the consequences for herself. The sentence functions doubly. In a position of mastery over the public space of the segregated city of Philadelphia and over her family, Angela both makes clear that she *would not* deign to speak to them, and indeed, that she *could not*; she is wholly bound to her mother and loses herself, grammatically, in the second-person singular.¹⁹⁹

Mattie desires disavowal for her own reasons, and it is this model of identification and desire upon which Angela imprints herself as a desiring subject. Contrary to popular interpretations of the figure of racial passing as the tragic dramatization of a consequent loss of cultural identity as an African American,²⁰⁰ Fauset's argument in *Plum Bun* asserts that identification *as* an African American *is necessarily structured as a traumatic loss* of cultural identities as they are figured in a traditionally gendered and raced family structure.²⁰¹

¹⁹⁹ Angela's elision of her own agency is directly connected to speech. Her orality is in this moment deeply challenged; successful introjection would take place if Mattie herself were not mute. In this scene, Angela inherits and incorporates a lack of language. "However, without the constant assistance of a mother endowed with language, introjection could not take place." Abraham and Torok, 128.

²⁰⁰ Christian, 44.

²⁰¹ In her theorization of family structures produced by enslavement, Spillers critiques the "ungendering" processes reproduced through the system of New World enslavement and visited upon the bodies of New World Africans in her essay "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers, 203-230.

Further, entering into a mode of identification at all for Angela Murray is itself the trauma, for it is simultaneous with the loss of the mother which eventuates the most profound loss, that of Angela's *loss of herself*, rhetorically made visible and articulated at the level of her utterance, in the "blank-space" of the *second-person* singular.

In this way, what causes the split between self and other in Angela is the trauma of her mother's disavowal; with which she, the child, profoundly identifies, and in which she, therefore, dutifully participates, forming the ground of her subjectivity produced in relation to a "lack." As a subject trying to form herself, Angela's "trauma" does not occur later in the text, through her loss of friendship with Mary Hastings, or through any of her romantic relationships with men, least of all Roger Fielding, the white man who she sets out to marry. To the contrary, her trauma consists in identification itself.²⁰² Angela, through identifying with her mother, incurs a loss that she cannot articulate to herself; yet it is this loss which she reproduces, in her attempt to master it, throughout the rest of the novel. Her future muteness regarding her racial identity is also a repetition of Mattie's muteness in this moment. In addition to the failure of introjection signaled by Mattie's "dumb—show" response (she is a tragic *mimos/mime* in this moment), Angela's succeeding grammatical elision of self is a reinscription of her mother's stillness. This is due in part to the complexity of the work of mimesis, which always includes profound anti-mimetic tendencies. For in the scene of specularity and vision, Angela and her mother see each other refusing to see two other, legibly black members of the Murray family.

²⁰² I draw upon Ruth Leys's argument that the mode of identification with the mother per se necessitates an unavoidable trauma. Ruth Leys, "The Real Miss Beauchamp" in *Feminists Theorize the Political*, eds. Judith Butler and Joan W. Scott (New York: Routledge, 1992.) 167-215.

Angela and her mother forge with each other a profound identification which is nevertheless wrought in a profound difference, registered at the level of Angela's utterance, which mirrors the gap of Mattie's muteness and her "distracted glance."²⁰³ In order for the child to love herself, she must "get outside" herself, in the specular logic of the scene. She does so by identifying and imitating with another, her mother, in whom she sees an image of herself: an African American female subject capable of passing for white. The danger of dedifferentiation of mimesis is offset, however, by the immediate recognition of the difference between Angela and her mother. That difference is made apparent in Mattie's disavowal, and, although Angela imitates the action, she does so at her own injury. To reject Virginia and Junius is necessarily to reject, and disavow Angela, *for both mother and daughter*.

The staged loss of the mother is anticipated by the structure of mimetic identification whose radical anti-mimetic tendencies organize the scene as one of undeniable difference as well. The unraveling of the knot of "racial" identification between Angela and Mattie is synecdochically displaced onto de-identification with the rest of the family; one could say that this family does not 'exist' in this moment, or, that its existence depends upon a profound disavowal and disarticulation.

If the fairy-tale discourse of the Murray family narrative is to be taken at face-value and Mattie experiences the zenith of idyllic wedlock, we might ask why she continues to "pass" or "playact" as often as she does²⁰⁴? In what way does Mattie's young adulthood experience in the employ of an actress "(leave) their mark?" (Fauset,

²⁰³ It is of signal importance that in this moment Mattie neither speaks to nor looks at her daughter.

²⁰⁴ In Fauset's work, racial passing is in part represented as a product of repressed artistic instincts suffered by black women who lack an outlet for their creativity. It is no accident that young Mattie Murray works for an actress and imparts artistic ambitions upon both of her daughters. Fauset, 15; 55. Alice Walker argues that black women's spirituality and artistic creation is distorted by the political, economic and social restrictions of slavery and racism. See "In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens," in *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984) 232.

15). We must again turn to the early scenes of the novel in order to understand the staging of Mattie's "mental theatre" as it is connected to modes of identification. Mattie and Junius's courtship takes the form of the fairy-tale genre; however, the origin of their union includes the "beast in the garden" particular to American history²⁰⁵.

When Mattie Murray is a young woman she works for an actress, Madame Sylvio, whose connections are dangerous for the attractive young girl. In the course of her duties, Mattie is sent as messenger to Haynes Brokinaw, "politician and well-known man about town." After having been sent several times on errands to Brokinaw, Mattie tries to beg off her duties in this regard.

When the girl had come to her with tears in her eyes and begged her not to send her as messenger to the house of a certain Haynes Brokinaw, politician and well-known man about town, Madame had laughed out loud. "How ridiculous! He'll treat you all right. I should like to know what a girl like you expects. And anyway, if I don't care, why should you...I hire you to do what I want, not to do as you want..." Mattie was in despair" (29).

Madame Sylvio's callous inattention to young Mattie's safety puts the girl in the path of danger with Brokinaw again. The third and final interaction determines the truth of the relation Mattie bears to Brokinaw. Their interaction originates in the material reality of inherited master/slave relations particular to America's past:

More than once, Mattie had felt his covetous eyes upon her; she had dreaded going to his rooms from the very beginning. She had even told his butler, "I'll be back in half an hour for the answer;" and she would not wait in the great square hall as he had indicated for there she was sure danger lurked. But the third time Brokinaw was standing in the hall. "Just come into my study," he told her, while I read this and write the answer." And he had looked at her with his cold, green eyes and had asked her why she was so out of breath. "There's no need to rush so, child; stay here and rest. I'm in no hurry, I assure you. Are you really coloured? You know, I've seen lots of white girls not as pretty as you. Sit here and tell me all about your mother, ---and your father. Do---do you remember him?" His whole bearing reeked of intention (30).

²⁰⁵ Fauset, 32-33. Mattie reads her daughters fairy-tales that mirror her meeting, courtship and marriage to Junius Murray. However, like all fairy-tale heroines, Mattie must negotiate the perils of the forest before living "happily ever after."

This passage is followed by an ellipsis in the text. In the following scene, it is a week later and Mattie finds herself again in the position of warding off Brokinaw, via Madame Sylvio's orders to deliver another note to the politician. In all of its hesitations and obscurity, and especially for the ellipsis between passages, the scene in which Brokinaw "reeks with intention" should be read within the tradition of the slave narrative. The gap between the passages is a metonymic signifier for the material history of slavery that produced texts such as *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*.

Harriet Jacobs's strategies of the containment of representation have been copiously interrogated; those same strategies are here reproduced in this brief scene during which Mattie Murray surely finds herself in the same predicament as did Jacobs/Brent with her white slavemaster, subject to sexual coercion and rape. Jacobs/Brent narrates her encounters with Mr. Flint in language similar to that of Fauset's representation of Mattie's encounters with Brokinaw:

My master met me at every turn, reminding me that I belonged to him, and swearing by heaven and earth that he would compel me to submit to him. If I went out for a breath of fresh air, after a day of unwearied toil, his footsteps dogged me. If I knelt by my mother's grave, his dark shadow fell on me even there.²⁰⁶

Jacobs's/Brent's narration of these moments of danger are preceded by the ones in which she physically secrets herself away from Flint. As Valerie Smith has argued in her essay "Loopholes of Retreat: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*," Jacobs/Brent uses the "loophole of retreat," most significantly featured in the garret within which she lives for seven years, as both a literal and figurative sign for a way to assert authority over her physical survival and literary agency.²⁰⁷

²⁰⁶ Harriet Jacobs/Linda Brent, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, (Cambridge; Harvard UP, 1987) 27.

²⁰⁷ "I would further suggest that these metaphoric loopholes provide a figure in terms of which we may read her relation to the literary forms that shape her story. Restricted by the conventions and rhetoric of the slave narrative—a genre that presupposes a range of options more available to men than to women—Jacobs borrows heavily from the rhetoric of the sentimental novel. This

The rape of Mattie in its elliptical representation is analogous to Jacobs's/Brent's strategies of rhetorical maneuver. The ellipsis in Fauset's work is the sign for Jacobs's/Brent's "garret." That Fauset makes the same decision in her handling of this moment of sexual violence asserts that the condition of black women in the early twentieth century is not much changed from those conditions endured under the lash of chattel slavery²⁰⁸. And that condition is textual; it may only be "represented" as it is so inherited in the rhetorical figure of the ellipses. Not until Nobelist Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, published in 1989, will an author attempt to bring the black and female slave's body, written upon in violence, perverse hatred and love into full textual representation.²⁰⁹ For Jessie Fauset, this authorial decision also brings into focus the difficulties still present for the New Negro writer/artist in her attempt to represent such scenes of violence for a literary audience. In her invocation of this element of the slave narrative, Fauset asks her audience to read for the "gaps," ellipses and silences, indeed to read the "gaps" ellipses and silences *for what they are*: critical elements of the narrative structure and crucial to a full understanding of the experience

latter form imposed upon her restrictions of its own. Yet she seized authority over her literary restraints in much the same way that she seized power in life. *From within her ellipses and ironies*—linguistic narrow spaces—she expresses the complexity of her experience as a black woman." Valerie Smith, "Loopholes of Retreat: Architecture and Ideology in Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*" in *Reading Black, Reading Feminist, A Critical Anthology*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York; Penguin Books, 1990) 210.

²⁰⁸ Mattie runs to the arms of her dark coachman, Junius, after Madame Sylvio sends her Brokinaw's way for the last time. In so doing, she secures the safety of a legibly black husband. Typical of literary fairy tale discourse, their courtship lasts an entire paragraph. Junius's racial identity inverts the stereotypes of dangerous black masculinity; to the contrary, Mattie loves him *because* of his color, which for her connotes a certain safety.

²⁰⁹ Morrison foregrounds the features of the traditional slave narratives against whose grain she wrote the story of real-life escaped slave Margaret Garner, fictionalized in the narrative of *Sethe*, *Denver* and *Beloved*: "Over and over, the writers pull the narrative up short with a phrase such as, 'But let us drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate.' In shaping the experience to make it palatable to those who were in a position to alleviate it, they were silent about many things, and they 'forgot' many other things. There was a careful selection of the instances that they would record and a careful rendering of those that they chose to describe." (303). Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory" in *Out There: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, eds. Russell Ferguson, Martha Glover, Trinh T. Minh-ha and Cornel West, (Cambridge; MIT Press, 1990), 299-305.

of black femininity. Therefore, within the gaps of the fairy-tale form, we as readers are asked to interpret the ellipses as interruptions inscribed in the genre. The fairy-tale in Fauset's hands formally operates as both a mask²¹⁰ (like all fairy-tales meant to conceal the more disturbing, violent elements of the narrative), and, in its more traditional form, as a narrative of instruction.²¹¹ Mute, these ellipses and gaps are invested with meaning, as is the case of Mattie's mute response to her daughter.

The ellipsis in this scene is a sign for the secret and the secluded, which, in the black woman's historical experience and textual representation of slavery, is at once the sign of her lack of agency and her empowerment. Jacobs/Brent employs the garret as a space from which she inverts the traditional forms of dominance and power to which she is subjected as an enslaved woman. The garret as a physical space of secrecy and enclosure resurfaces in the ellipsis of the work of racial passing; the garret's spatial enclosure acts as a historical repetition, textually inscribed in the blank space of Fauset's ellipsis. The garret is encrypted in the psyche of both Angela and her mother; in addition, it locates itself in the public space of a socio-political world ordered by Jim Crow segregationist politics.

What is of equal importance in this scene, however, are the specifics of Brokinaw's queries, the effect of the rape that takes place off-stage for Mattie, and her future identifications as they are reproduced in her daughter, Angela. Brokinaw (a politician, who is literally "The Law") asks after Mattie's parents; specifically he asks if she "remembers" her father. This clue to the genealogical narrative Fauset

²¹⁰ MacDowell argues that the narrative of passing in the form of a fairy tale marriage plot is a "mask" Fauset assumes in her work "as a subtle vehicle through which to wage her critiques against those genres." Deborah MacDowell, *"The Changing Same": Black Women's Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995) 76.

²¹¹ As such, Fauset's fairy-tale is like the work of introjection, which situates "the psyche in a constant process of acquisition, involving the active expansion of our potential to open onto our own emerging desires and feelings as well as the external world." Abraham and Torok, 102. In a way, introjection functions as a heuristic psychic model that, like the fairy-tale, educates the young psyche into healthier relations with itself and the world.

constructs directly references Spillers's reformulation of the African American "family romance."²¹²

Brokinaw's "intention reeks" literally, in his sexual coercion signified by the ellipsis and, figuratively, in the suggestiveness that Mattie's parentage, in particular her father, falls under the sign of "disparate currencies...linking back to a common origin of domination and exchange."²¹³ In the ellipsis that immediately follows, we can read Mattie's submission to Brokinaw's sexual coercion and also the cause of his action: it is the "genetic link" which figures Mattie as nothing more than a "material possession." As such, her status is linked to her inheritance in the symbolic economy whose origins lie in the slave inheritance of a dispossession of a "properly" gendered self. Spillers states:

Fatherhood, at best a supreme cultural courtesy, attenuates here on the one hand into a monstrous accumulation of power on the other. One has been "made" and "bought" by disparate currencies, linking back to a common origin of exchange and domination. The denied genetic link becomes the chief strategy of an undenied ownership, as if the interrogation of the father's identity—the blank space where his proper name would fit—were answered by the fact, *de jure*, of a material possession." (221)

The ellipsis that follows the final narrated encounter between Brokinaw and Mattie is reproduced in the narration of the family history in which Angela and Virginia are treated as children. Although they are told of the "difficult childhood of their parents," it is clear that among the "trials and difficulties," Mattie's encounter with Brokinaw is not included. And in this way, the silence that masks the violence of her early adulthood as an unprotected black woman is only referenced by Mattie's affirmation

²¹² Spillers, 224-225.

²¹³ *Ibid.*, 218-224. Spillers argues that the invasive and pervasive force of property relations under the system of enslavement destroys traditional kinship relations, and, therefore, traditional gendered categories in the New World African family and their posterity. Indeed, it is the "condition" of the mother, and the "absence" of the father, which is visited on New World Africans's "remotest posterity."

that “(m)y girls shall never come through my experiences.²¹⁴” Of equal importance is the silence, itself a form of “ellipsis,” with which Mattie receives her daughter Angela’s question about the public disavowal of the other members of the Murray family. This silence, a figure for Mattie’s “secret” is born as the psychic phantom of Mattie’s youthful past, which she passes down to Angela, with its inextricable connection to her historical inheritance of enslavement.²¹⁵

Mattie’s vulnerable status in the field of the social hinges upon the fact that her racial identity is known. That which the ellipsis in the text signifies, Mattie’s submission to Brokinaw, is also part of the inherited secret bequeathed to Angela. The question remains why does this secret only affect Angela and not Virginia? An answer to this lies in the work of mimetic identification between mother and daughter.

Mattie continues to engage the act of racial passing, “to playact,” after she leaves Madame Sylivo’s employ, identifying to some degree with her former employer’s role as actress. However, Fauset frames the act itself in complex terms which again reference Jacobs’s/Brent’s use of the garret. Valerie Smith argues that Jacobs/Brent “uses to her advantage all the power of the voyeur—the person who sees but remains herself unseen.” (215) Passing for white, Mattie and, subsequently her daughter

²¹⁴ This silence is equally affirmed by the fairy-tale ending of Mattie’s assertion that she and Junius lived “happily ever after.”

²¹⁵ “In point of fact, the words used by the phantom to carry out its return (and which the child sensed in the parent) do not refer to a source of speech in the parent. Instead, they point to a gap, they refer to the unspeakable...(t)he phantom is summoned therefore, at the opportune moment, when it is recognized that a gap was transmitted to the subject with the result of barring him or her from the specific introjections he or she would seek at present. The presence of the phantom indicates these effects, on the descendants, of something that inflicted narcissistic injury or even catastrophe on the parents.” Abraham and Torok, 174. Spillers also makes the argument that the physical violence enacted on New World Africans during the birth canal of the Middle Passage and the subsequent period of enslavement transfers from one generation to another. “These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctions come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments?” Spillers, 207.

Angela, occupy the same position, that of “voyeur,” in their ostensible mastery over the social scene. They are “invisible” as “black” women, when “passing.”

The difference in mastery and the assumption of power that exists for the position of the voyeur in this 20th century instance is that physically, Jacobs’s/Brent’s rhetorical strategy is inverted in Fauset’s representation. Hidden, secluded and secreted away physically in the garret, Jacobs/Brent manipulates those who would dominate her. In an inversion and displacement of geographical space and the human body, the physical space of the garret exists, for Fauset’s characters, *out in the open*, in the space of the social, public world. Angela and her mother carry the garret upon and their bodies and within their psyches, in their revelation of identity or its clandestine withholding.

The garret as a metonymical figure in Jacobs’s/Brent’s text is inverted in Fauset’s narrative; what is displaced upon the public scene is the body of the black woman, at once “secluded” and “out in the open;” acting as artistic agent of her own destiny and active/passive “voyeur.” However, despite the productive “playacting” in the specular field of the social, what challenges both mother and daughter is their mutually shared *linguistic* predicament, formed in the origins of their identification with each other as kin. Both Mattie and Angela, through their historical inheritance, experience the prohibition of language that throws them constantly upon the stage of a mute show.

Without language to fill the void of the loss, without words to fill the mouth and to tell the whole story, all Mattie and her daughter have to fall back upon is a mimicry of introjection, repetitively played, over and over again. Fauset’s “moral,” if she has one in *Plum Bun*, is that her audience learn to read the ruse of genre and the blank spaces of silence as the inherited marks of violence that brand black female subjectivity from within, and without. The Murray family, members of what Ira

Berlin, in the third epigraph to this chapter identifies as the “freedom generations,” cannot escape their past; their task, as Fauset represents it, is *to articulate* their relation to that past, in its profundity of loss and struggle.

Revelation of racial identity is the linchpin of survival for Angela and Mattie; Mattie is coerced by Brokinaw because he knows she is “colored.” The ellipsis in Fauset’s text is the sign for racial identity as experienced by the subject of racial passing. The blank space must accede to interpretation, yet not through orthodox means, for as a blank space, like Mattie’s and Angela’s “blank” silences, it is not immediately available to legibility. The “blank space” is both present and absent. Like the figure of racial passing in her rhetorical utterance and historical identifications, the ellipsis exists as a necessary supplement to the “whole” narrative²¹⁶. It is in this “blank space” that the historical inheritance of black women, regardless of epidermal schema, is “written;” *sui generis*, it is a rhetorical figure, a sign. As opposed to the (ostensibly) visible “racial” body, the “blank space” is the “striking feature” which “reveals” and “speaks” itself in the whole narrative of American history.

In Angela’s refusal to reveal her racial background in the field of the social space, she hides her sources, so to speak. Angela’s struggle in the novel is often presented in terms of knowledge and secrecy. Time and again, when confronted with the fact that she does not identify herself as a black woman, as “colored,” Angela’s response is deceptively simple. “Of course I didn’t tell you. Why should I?”

²¹⁶ I refer here to Derrida’s notion of the supplement. “The supplement adds itself, it is a surplus,...but (it) adds only to replace...the supplement is an adjunct...(a)substitute, it is not simply added to the positivity of a presence, it produces no relief, its place is assigned in the structure by the mark of an emptiness...the sign is always the supplement of the thing itself.” Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. & intro. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976) 144-45.

Chapter Three:

Strange Blood

If the family, on this historic occasion, describes, for all intents and purposes, a site of interdiction and denial, we could go so far as to say that the mark of incestuous desire and enactment—a concentrated carnality—speaks for its losses, confusions, and, above all else, its imposed abeyance of order and degree.

Hortense J. Spillers, “In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers”

Part One:

Who Is Afraid of Jessie Fauset?

Although Jessie Fauset’s fiction is almost universally critiqued on the grounds of form, politics, and narrative complexity, there is no doubt that her fiction treads dangerous territory, even by contemporary standards.²¹⁷ When not neglected (which is often) by the literary establishment during and after the Harlem Renaissance, Fauset’s novels are either summarily dismissed or grudgingly regarded in both their literary merit and properly black political aspirations. There is perhaps no other Renaissance writer so categorically cast out of the literary traditions by her contemporaries and later 20th century critics of literature as is Jessie Fauset.

Successful editorship of *The Crisis* and enthusiastic reception of her first novel *There is Confusion* do not protect her from subsequent scathing critical reception. Leading the Harlem Renaissance school of critical excommunication would have to be Alain Locke, whose review of Fauset’s last novel, *Comedy, American Style* (1933), judged it “too mid-Victorian for moving power today.”²¹⁸ Claude McKay’s observation that “she was away over on the other side of the fence” among “that

²¹⁷ On this point, see Gary de Cordova Wintz, quoted in the only book-length study to date on Fauset’s life and work by Carolyn Wedlin Sylvander, *Jessie Redmon Fauset, Black American Writer*, (New York: The Whitson Company, 1981), 14. Hereafter cited as *JF*.

²¹⁸ See Alain Locke, “The Saving Grace of Realism,” in *Opportunity*, (January, 1934): 9.

closed and decorous circle of Negro society, which consists of persons who live proudly like the better class of conventional whites” certainly does not return the favor of Fauset’s own careful judgment in her reviews of his work.²¹⁹

During the Black Arts period, Robert Bone is one of several male critics who define Fauset as a member of the “Rear Guard who lagged behind,” ostensibly for clinging to “established” literary conventions. The “Rear Guard” were considered the “imitative” black writers who supposedly drew their source material from the black middle class in an effort “to orient Negro art toward white opinion,” and “to apprise educated whites of the existence of respectable Negroes.”²²⁰

For Bone, Fauset’s purported emphasis on the black middle class results in novels that are “uniformly sophomoric, trivial and dull.”²²¹ David Littlejohn has no time for her “vapidly genteel lace curtain romances,” none of which “rises above the stuffy, tiny-minded circulating--library norm.”²²² Addison Gayle goes so far as to accuse Fauset of sacrificing “racial uniqueness and individuality for ‘American

²¹⁹ McKay continues to posit a strangely ambivalent critique of Fauset: “Miss Fauset is prim and dainty as a primrose, and her novels are quite as fastidious and precious. Primroses are pretty. I remember the primroses where I live in Morocco, that lovely melancholy land of autumn and summer and mysterious veiled brown women. When the primroses spread themselves across barren hillsides before the sudden summer blazed over the hot land, I often thought of Jessie Fauset and her novels.” McKay, reviled by W.E.B. Du Bois for exploiting the literary primitivism practiced by his white peers, notably Carl Van Vechten, likens Fauset to a “primrose,” as “fastidious and precious” as her work. The shift to the “melancholic” North African city Morocco, a “land of autumn and summer” displace the English garden “preciousness” of the primrose with an earthy abundance, in spite of the “barren land” made all the more intriguing by the “mysterious veiled brown women” Claude McKay, *A Long Way From Home* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970) 112-13.

²²⁰ Deborah E. McDowell has noted this trend in Fauset criticism in *The Changing Same: Black Women’s Literature, Criticism, and Theory*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), hereafter cited as *The Changing Same*, and in her essay “The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Fauset” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition* (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), 86-104.

²²¹ Robert Bone, *The Negro Novel in America* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1972), 97, 101.

²²² Littlejohn, David, *Black on White: A Critical Survey of Writing by American Negroes* (New York: The Viking Press, 1966), 50-1.

standardization,” and surrendering “black cultural artifacts in an attempt to become American.”²²³

As Deborah McDowell suggests, however, these positions compose “three of the most popular and simultaneously distorted, partisan, and inaccurate critical works on Afro-American literature.”²²⁴ What the history of this criticism reveals is that the terms of the debate are themselves reinscribed by a Manichean racial and gendered absolutism that organizes essentialist, masculinist politics, and which flirts with a vulgar scientific racism that reads “race” in terms of authentic purities and inauthentic imposters. As McDowell argues, the answer to “who is afraid of Jessie Fauset?” is to be discovered in the “impregnable case of *critical mimesis*” of such “surface oppositions.”²²⁵

On the whole, the critical reception of Fauset’s work is worried by the precise antinomy borne out by the command for an essentialist, authentic, racial identity towards which the productions of the Harlem Renaissance is launched. It is worth repeating here the exact project of the Harlem Renaissance. As a movement, it was meant to produce representative works by the “New Negro,” whose artistic production would act as proof against the racist claims that these 20th century African Americans, “New Negroes,” bore no relation to culture and were thereby incapable of producing culture.

However, the contradiction of the movement is reflected in its dual aspect: while the “New Negro” was meant to produce an entirely new and original art borne of an

²²³ Although Gayle’s critique points to some of the critical moments in Fauset’s texts, for example, her argument about the concepts “racial uniqueness,” “individuality,” and “American standardization,” his opposition to her work collapses under the weight of racial essentialism and thinly veiled misogyny. See *The Way of the World: The Black Novel in America* (New York: Anchor-Doubleday, 1976), 115.

²²⁴ See “The Neglected Dimension of Jessie Fauset” in *Conjuring: Black Women, Fiction, and Literary Tradition*, eds. Marjorie Pryse and Hortense J. Spillers, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1985), 87.

²²⁵ *The Changing Same*, 62.

authentic racial essence organically produced by black American folk traditions and/or through a direct and transparent transmission of ancestral, as opposed to contemporaneous, African cultures, these artistic expressions are also, simultaneously, meant to intercede in the construction of “race” and racial difference by offering new representations of “blackness;” such representations would shed light on the constructed features of racial categories, and, simultaneously, rearticulate racial difference in the service of diverse national goals through the performance of an idea of Africa and the Southern folk. In this equation, the “primitive” held great sway and ultimately provided Harlem Renaissance artists fertile material with which to ironize their blackness in relation to white and mainstream American culture.

However, the crosshairs of the alternative Renaissance modernisms were ironically stitched through iterations of the primitive and its discursive polar opposite, racial uplift: a program whose “origins were in antislavery efforts among enslaved blacks, as well as the network of institutions for group elevation established within antebellum free black communities. Barred from white churches, schools, and public and social facilities, free blacks in the North, including Canada, and the urban South, formed their own institutions, providing for themselves a space for fellowship, solidarity, mutual aid, and political activism.”²²⁶

Unfortunately, neither the Dionysian ecstasies of primitive expressions nor the tightly bound vicissitudes of Apollonian racial uplift provided a position within discourse from which the black woman subject could represent her complex experiences; to the contrary, both discourses structured exactly that which could be properly articulated, or must be properly silenced for the New Negro who was a woman. This predicament is precisely what Fauset writes about in their own take on

²²⁶ See Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics and Culture in the Twentieth Century*, (Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 1996), 31.

the Du Boisian “contradiction of double-aims;” among the many things her novels reference, they reference no less the very limits of discursive referentiality constitutive of their production.²²⁷

When McKay accuses Fauset of membership among “that closed and decorous circle of Negro society, which consists of persons who live proudly like the better class of conventional whites” he accuses her of failing to live authentically as a black woman; the “closed and decorous circle of Negro society” must identify with “the better class of conventional whites” since they live like them so “proudly.” When Gayle asserts that her work is guilty of “sacrificing racial uniqueness and individuality for “American standardization,” and that it surrenders “black cultural artifacts in an attempt to become American” we are confronted with the real problem of understanding the dual aspect of the Renaissance project represented by a black woman in all its complexity.

Ad hominem attacks upon Fauset claim, in effect, that she “wants to be white;” this criticism is inextricable from the even more damning interpretations of her work which sound the bell of racial betrayal. This is a problem we continue to encounter today in the stifling discourse of positive versus negative images; despite the fact that “the tom-cries and the tom-tom laughs... We know we are beautiful. And ugly too.”²²⁸ It is as if for the critics of Fauset’s work, there is no realism, only a specific and policed reality; in the case of this black female subject in the business of representing black life, there is no manipulation of form, only rude fact. In the domino-effect

²²⁷ See W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and Terri Hume Oliver, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1999), 11.

²²⁸ When Halle Berry and Denzel Washington won Best Actress and Best Actor awards in 2002, the hue and cry of “negative images” was heard across national radio stations, in television interviews, and in debate amongst academic intellectuals. Despite the fact that both characters each actor portrayed were complicated portrayals of black humanity—equal parts ugly and beautiful, to emphasize Langston Hughes’s injunction in “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.” The debate quickly devolved into the well-worn canard about “negative” versus “positive” images. See Langston Hughes, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain,” in *African American Literary Theory*, (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 27-30.

produced by a century's worth of vicious attacks upon Fauset, we are presented with a snapshot of the "contradiction of double aims" from the position of a black woman; and the gender and sexual politics of the project of the Harlem Renaissance is thrown into relief.

Deborah McDowell claims that "(I)n reconstructing the history of Fauset's critical reception, one is struck immediately by the essential sameness in the reader's responses." The "sameness," like the "critical mimesis" she critiques is produced by the gendered positions of the critics, those most overwhelmingly dismissive are, time and again, male.²²⁹ But what happens to an understanding of Fauset's text when one reads against this uniformity in critical reception?

The masculinist order of the Manhattan Civic Club dinner placed everyone, especially Fauset, "appropriately" and in their "proper place." The gender and power dynamics of that "dress rehearsal" to the Harlem Renaissance has been rehearsed numerous times.²³⁰ In so doing, this historical register of mimetic fear excludes and is simultaneously dependent upon, once again, the feminine. Later in the critical history, her work is assigned mere decorative status.

Jessie Fauset is responsible, according to Black Arts critics, for the degradation of race loyalty, values that would support race unity and produce properly "black cultural artifacts." Fauset's work is apparently also accountable for the degradation of aesthetic standards which produce work that is, according again to Robert Bone,

²²⁹ The critiques of Fauset's work focus upon the themes of gender difference and bourgeois values; her novels are simultaneously "too feminine," "too bourgeois" and ultimately, too "white." For a full discussion of the "black middle class" as a conceptual problematic, see Deborah E. McDowell's Preface to *The Changing Same, Black Women's Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Bloomington, Indiana UP), 1995 xi-xviii. On the humiliation of the Civic Club dinner, ostensibly organized in celebration of Jessie Fauset's first novel *There is Confusion*, see Cheryl A. Wall, *Women of the Harlem Renaissance*, (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1995), Chapter Two, esp. 69-71.

²³⁰ See, for example, Cheryl A. Wall's interpretation of the Civic Club dinner in her *Black Women Authors of the Harlem Renaissance*.

“sophomoric,” “trivial” and “dull.”²³¹ Fauset’s writing is judged wholly inappropriate by the (male) critics of the Black Arts Movement.

This response to Fauset repeats itself again later in the twentieth century on the part of the black, male critical establishment in response to works published in the 1970’s and 1980’s by Gayl Jones, Alice Walker, and Toni Morrison. Ann du Cille reports this history and interrogates the “phallus(ies) of interpretation” that guide assumptions inherent in the subject-position one assumes.²³² We will find that the phallus and its empowerment, or lack thereof, is precisely what has so disturbed the predominantly black and male critical audience, hence its repudiation of black women’s texts that tread this ground.

However, it must be said that even among contemporary black feminist critics, there are few who find admirable qualities in Fauset’s fiction. Cheryl A. Wall, for example, seems as ambivalent in her response to Fauset’s fiction as did Fauset’s contemporaries. While celebrating *Plum Bun* as the strongest of Fauset’s works, Wall implicitly directs her audience to Fauset’s essays, in order that, perhaps, interested readers not waste their time with the fiction, “[h]er personal essays contain her best writing.”²³³

And when the essays are focused upon, most recently by Brent Edwards in *The Practice of Diaspora: Translating Black Internationalism in Harlem and Paris*, their merits seem undermined by a “reticence” that “never pushes issues of gender as far as they might.” Edwards also suggests that MacDowell “strains” when she estimates that

²³¹ MacDowell cites this repetition of dismissal and diminishment as an “impregnable case of critical *mimesis*” Ibid, 62.

²³² See “Phallus(ies) of Interpretation: Toward Engendering the Black Critical ‘I’” in *African American Literary Theory*, ed by Winston Napier, (New York: NYU Press), 443-460.

²³³ *WHR*, 48.

Fauset's use of the "convention of the novel of manners" could be anything but what "most critics" identify as a "conservative aesthetic."²³⁴

In addition, there is in the criticism a telling repetition exemplified in the complete collapse between the author and her protagonists, as well as mourning for the fact that Fauset never wrote about folk expression or in the voices of the folk.²³⁵ These positions have most recently been addressed by other critics who find in Fauset's work the elements valorizing what Harlem Renaissance, Black Arts, and more contemporary critics find wanting; indeed, "a close reading of [Fauset's texts] reveals a real confluence of folk, bourgeois, and proletarian aesthetics, as well as formally interesting intermingling of generic conventions."²³⁶

In this regard one might rewrite Ralph Ellison's first two lines of his famous argument with Irving Howe in "The World and the Jug" as such: "Why is it that when [black male] critics confront the American as Negro [and female] they suddenly drop their advanced critical armament and revert with an air of confident superiority to quite primitive modes of analysis? Why is it that [black male] critics seem to rate literature [by black women] so far below politics and ideology that they would rather kill a novel than modify their presumptions concerning a given reality which it seeks in its own terms to project?" Ultimately, can the black woman subject speak in her own tongue without the critical establishment ritually sacrificing her texts and, thereby, her ability to tell her own story?

²³⁴ See Brent Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora: Translating Black Internationalism in Harlem and Paris*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2003), 134-142. Although Edwards does grant that since *Comedy: American Style*, "places 'race' in a transnational context," readers should not "overemphasize Fauset's conservatism to the point that we no longer recognize the originality of her work on Pan-Africanism and European life," the tenor of his reading of Fauset remains lukewarm in regards to her fiction as a body of work.

²³⁵ Much of the criticism of Fauset seems to stem from the fact that she is not Zora Neale Hurston. See Ann du Cille for a discussion in support of this idea. *The Coupling Convention, Sex, Text and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993).

²³⁶ Sharon L. Jones, *Rereading the Harlem Renaissance: Race, Class, and Gender in the Fiction of Jessie Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston and Dorothy West*, (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 20.

The sacrifice of Jessie Fauset as a writer, as opposed to editor of *The Crisis*, is performed in the long literary critical history of the twentieth century and implied in the notion of her role as one of the “literary midwives” of the Renaissance. If it was to some degree her place to assist in the birth of 20th century black arts and letters, it seems clear from the balance of the critical reception of her texts that she was not supposed to participate as an active, creative member.

Much critical assessment remains to be done on Jessie Fauset’s life and work. It is my aim in this chapter to tap into the “contradiction of double aims” that a black, female subject who assumes a position within discourse contends with in own her representational strategies. In reading beyond and behind the “protective mimicry” and “deflecting mask” of her realistic form, we find another world behind breathing behind the deflecting masks; in that world there is quite a lot to fear for the male subject wedded to a particular version of masculinity in the representational models of Jessie Fauset’s texts.²³⁷

Part Two:

Bad Blood

In her last two texts, *The Chinaberry Tree* and *Comedy: American Style*, her project begun in *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, is extended. If *Plum Bun* sought to inscribe the African American female subject through figures of visuality that critique the epistemological foundations of identity through a series of metaphors for vision, ultimately in the service of a decolonizing project, these two final novels unearth the inchoate dynamics of the theatre of representation through which the black subject in America articulates her and himself.

While *Plum Bun* employed the features of 19th century narratives of “race” through the destabilizing threat of the figure of racial passing and its correlate revenge,

²³⁷ “The Neglected Dimension,” 87.

the lynching of a black man, *The Chinaberry Tree*, for one, provides deeper insight into the familial relations of naming and community inherited from the histories of enslavement; it both disavows and affirms, under great stress, the incest prohibition. And *Comedy: American Style* theorizes the proleptic, suicidal death of black masculinity enforced in the realm of the social as a result of a racial self-hatred imputed by the figure of the maternal. It is, however, the incest prohibition as experienced in the African American case with which these last texts are principally concerned.

The disavowal of the prohibition against incest functions as a sign throughout Fauset's work for the saving grace of difference uniquely denied the African American subject. This disavowal takes form in the shape of a barely missed marriage, and thereby sexual encounter between half brother and sister Malory Forten and Melissa Paul in *The Chinaberry Tree*, and, through the representation of the perverse relationship between Olivia Blanchard Cary and her son, Oliver, in Fauset's final text, *Comedy: American Style*.

The incest prohibition is most dramatically taken up in the later twentieth century African American novel; from the middle of the century towards its last years the function of father-daughter incest is represented in texts as diverse as Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*. Fauset's handling of incestuous desire in her later novels prefigures the poetic and problematic Trueblood episode in *Invisible Man*, which is rewritten with particular attention to the penetrative aspects of the rape of the daughter, Pecola Breedlove, by Toni Morrison in *The Bluest Eye*. (Both representations of incest and the implied masculinism of Houston Baker's

enthusiasm for the scene is critiqued by Ann du Cille, “Morrison’s portrait of incest complicates what it seems to me both Ellison and Baker have oversimplified.”²³⁸

In Fauset’s texts the relationship whose familial borders are dangerously traversed is that between brother and sister, most apparent in *The Chinaberry Tree*. And in *Comedy: American Style*, although the primary problem exists between mother and son, it is sister Teresa’s betrayal of Oliver’s love, expressed in her own inability to name him as family at a crucial moment, that pushes him towards death by his own hand.

How are we to understand the symbolic economies of the Oedipal complex in the African American context, and how to do so in the example of Fauset’s later work which performs the anxieties of “fictions that provide an enclosure, a sort of confessional space between postures of the absolute” through the relation of brother and sister?²³⁹ I read her handling of incestuous desire as a displacement of the parent/child (primarily father/daughter) incest plot handled in later novels of the twentieth century.

However, the displacement of desire upon family members who are siblings, as opposed to parent and child, functions as a sign of an even more heightened sense of the repressions that organize the symbolic field of language for African American subjects in the early part of the twentieth century. For if in *Comedy: American Style*, Olivia despises her son Oliver because he bears the mark of Otherness, a legibly black, male body, her daughter, Janet, functions as a displaced signifier for this distorted and thwarted maternal incestuous desire. In the case of Melissa Paul and Malory Forten,

²³⁸ “Phallus(ies) of Interpretation,” and see Houston Baker’s *Blues, Ideology, and Afro-American Literature: A Vernacular Theory*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1984), 172-199.

²³⁹ See “In the Time of the Daughters and the Father” in Hortense J. Spillers, *Black, White, and In Color*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003), 231.

their desire for each other reveals that they just “can’t help havin’ that Strange blood.”²⁴⁰

The injunction to maintain the incest taboo is understood in both novels broadly, and as a feature of legitimacy hard-proven and hard-won on the parts of their characters. The terms of the structure of the relations represented may be understood in the Lacanian psychoanalytic framework. Indeed, the gesture that reinforces Melissa Paul as “a sister,” “a bastard,” and finally (and most ironically), “a good girl,” all stem from the well-known Lacanian account of the subject in/of language.²⁴¹ However, in the African American example, the recuperation of Melissa as a proper sister necessarily and immediately exposes her illegitimacy. Literally she must end up a bastard outside the Law, yet properly so (mis)named within the Symbolic. Malory’s revelation of their relationship reinforces the slippage towards illegitimacy inherent in their desire for each other.

The importance of maintaining the mediating effects of Otherness in the African American heterosexual relationship is apparent in Malory’s revelation; however, to what degree is the text attempting to work out what are the positive effects of castration, despite the compelling resistance these effects currently face within the sphere of the social? In the African American example such effects are clearly a response to the “destructive loss of the natural mother...[and] the ambiguity of his/her fatherhood” in the destruction of gender and sexual categories through the systems of enslavement.²⁴²

²⁴⁰ Jessie Fauset, *The Chinaberry Tree and Selected Writings*, (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1995), 25. Hereafter cited as *CT*.

²⁴¹ *CT*, 131, 74 and 78. See also Jacques Lacan, “Subversion of the Subject and Dialectic of Desire” in *Écrits: A Selection* (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1977), 281-324.

²⁴² See Hortense J. Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” in *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003), 221. Hereafter cited as *BWC*.

The emphasis upon the love affair between half-brother and sister for the balance of *The Chinaberry Tree* flirts with the idea of a direct and unmediated access to a fixed and proper parental origin: and this is precisely the trouble of the Symbolic in the African American instance. The estrangement of legitimacy signified by the “bad blood” a childhood friend offers to cut out of Laurentine’s arm impedes the triangulation of desire upon which legitimate (by virtue of their being known) parental origins are established.²⁴³

It is the “paternal metaphor” in the figure of the father that Melissa and Malory share in Sylvester Forten; both possess a relationship to the paternal metaphor as a function of what the mother (either Judy or Mrs. Forten) desires, which is of course what is enjoined in the child’s desire. In the recognition scene between the two siblings what so horrifies Malory is the loss of the fantasy that the phallus secures stability and certainty for the subject; he is revolted that “the phallus [signifier for the father’s law] is a fraud.”²⁴⁴ Herein lies the meaning of castration for Lacan, and Malory’s tortured acceptance of the “lack in the place of the Other:”

His recognition was instant. And sure enough the face he turned on her—oh terrible!—was laughing, --with a horrible, insane laughter... Your mother [Judy] ... with that rotten Strange blood in her... she was never married to any man named Paul; she—she was my father’s mistress, his woman... and you’re his child and my, my sister! He raised his tortured eyes toward the blazing, pitiless sky. ‘Oh God, how could You do it? You knew I loved her... You knew I wanted her... and she’s my sister (*CT*, 330-1)!

In Malory’s indictment of Melissa and her “rotten Strange blood” he of course confesses that he, too, shares in the histories for which the “rotten blood” acts as a sign: his own fantasy of the “dead father who can perfectly master his desire,” an “image of a father who would close his eyes to desire.”²⁴⁵ Despite this fact, the burden

²⁴³ *CT*, 8.

²⁴⁴ See “The Signification of the Phallus” in *Écrits*; see also Jacqueline Rose’s Introduction in *Feminine Sexuality: Jacques Lacan and the école freudienne*, eds. Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose, (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1982), 40. Hereafter cited as *FS*.

²⁴⁵ *Écrits*, 321.

of the indictment falls upon Melissa, the female and black subject, now sister, in this duet. It is in the surrender of this fantasy that castration is established, to recognize the “phallus as a fraud” is to also allow the subject to take its place in the Symbolic, in language, “[t]hus the phallus stands for the moment when prohibition must function, in the sense of who may be assigned to whom in the triangle made up of mother, father, child.”²⁴⁶ Upon recognition of his proximity to the “Strange bad blood,” Malory agonizingly exposes his position within the Symbolic as castrated. However, in the African American family,

a sort of magic pervades in this economy: fathers and daughters (and, I would add, sisters and brothers) are called upon to divide without division, to acquire that difference that no one ever thought was other than difference in the first place.²⁴⁷

What Spillers refers to in the concept of “divide without division” is the other side of the equation of castration: at the very moment the subject possess the function of the phallus, it is signaled (and this is the law) that “having it” only operates at the price of a loss, and that “being it” is actually an effect of such a division.²⁴⁸

Yet the strange issue of castration in its connection to desire is that “the wish for ‘incest’ stands for the...desire to annul the very division [castration/sexual] that has brought desire into being.”²⁴⁹ Therefore, the suspension of the taboo, thrown into full, Technicolor relief by Ellison and Morrison, and prefigured by Fauset, “generates the deepest division, if to signify here is to break up into layers of fragmentation.”²⁵⁰

But in order for the subject to take her or his proper place in the Symbolic (the field of language), the threat of castration is not sometime in the future; it has already

²⁴⁶ *FS*, 40.

²⁴⁷ *BWC*, 248.

²⁴⁸ *FS*, 39-41.

²⁴⁹ See Judith Feher Gurewich, “Is the Prohibition of Incest a Law,” in *Journal for the Psychoanalysis of Culture and Society* 5.1 (2000), 86-90.

²⁵⁰ *Ibid*, 248.

occurred. In this way the Lacanian paradigm builds upon and differs from Freud's model which privileges primary repression in relation to incest. In the Lacanian case, the divergence from Freud turns on the axis of the "paternal;" for Lacan, it is not a "paternal injunction that forces underground the incestuous or Oedipal fantasy. Rather, the Oedipal fantasy is produced as an effect of Symbolic castration."²⁵¹

If the "fantasy of incest is not the cause of primary repression" but is in fact "produced after the formation of the unconscious," we can understand the emphasis upon "Fate" in *CT* as that which is directed by desire. This interpretation of Fate is most apparent in Malory's and Melissa's unknowing, albeit telling, conversation about their origins,

I [Melissa] was born in Philadelphia and went to school there until I came here...And I [Malory] was born here in Red Brook and went to school in Philadelphia until I came back here to live. *So you see Melissa we were meant to meet*" (*CT*, 111).

This is the romance of the text, to be sure, however, it is not the one Malory and Melissa think they seek; "the 'romance' of the African American fiction is a tale of origins that brings together once again children lost, stolen, or strayed from their mothers."²⁵²

Of course, the trick of the eye that sees "something" or "nothing" in the function of castration in the Lacanian framework (a reworking of Saussure's model for the arbitrary nature of the linguistic sign) is sexual difference; and in this way the difference has also already occurred. For it is not as if there could be for the subject a moment *a priori* castration; what castration actually enables is "to allow for the

²⁵¹ See Vincent Hausmann, "Envisioning the (W)hole World 'Behind Things:' Denying Otherness in *American Beauty*," in *Camera Obscura* 55, vol. 19, no.1, (Chapel Hill: Duke UP, 2004.) In Hausmann's brilliant reading of Sam Mendes's film *American Beauty*, he distinguishes between the different emphases in the film's representation of hetero and homosexual aspects of the prohibition against incest.

²⁵² *BWC*, 249.

fantasy of its transgression and condemnation.” And, as Gurewich further notes, “what has become inaccessible thanks to castration returns as the most desirable of all objects.”²⁵³

In the case of the African American subject, representations of incest narratives tend to nevertheless be directly adjudicated by the father; it is the “fatherly fear—on the level of the symbolic—that his ‘cargo’ is hardly sufficient to bring under permanent rein the sexual impulses represented (in his own febrile imagination) by the silent and powerful sexualities of the females within his purview.”²⁵⁴ If the “household” is unstable in the African American example through the erasure of traditional sexual identities and gender categories inherited from enslavement, and if, as Spillers also reminds us, “this stunning reversal of the castration thematic, displacing the name and the law of the father to the territory of the mother and daughter,” which, in turn, “becomes an aspect of the African American female’s misnaming,” is not the father (and son) also, in a sense, not simply absent from “mimetic view as a partner in the prevailing social fiction of that father’s name, the father’s law,” or under erasure, but therefore also “misnamed?”²⁵⁵

What should be the foundation of sexual difference and proper naming within the family and the community that “threatens to slide beneath [the father] in the prohibitive mark itself?”²⁵⁶ For Spillers, the “African American male has been “touched, therefore, by the mother, *handed* by her in ways he cannot escape.” Malory tries to escape from the haunting of his home in Red Brook by running, in blind Oedipal anxiety, directly into the arms of Melissa; he is flies towards his misplaced and misnamed sister, the “honey” who “returns as the most desirable of all objects.”

²⁵³ “Is the Prohibition of Incest a Law?,” 89, 88.

²⁵⁴ *BWC*, 234.

²⁵⁵ See “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book” in *BWC*, especially pages 204 and 228.

²⁵⁶ *BWC* 234.

Malory Forten is so represented in *CT*; his entire project in the text is to perceive himself as a father, as titular head of the future household he fantasizes he will share with Melissa. This is clear in the immediate possessiveness he expresses towards Melissa, and in his paranoia over her perceived sexual abandon, represented tellingly in a scene in which all the black youth of Red Brook dance “the first intimation of the Lindy Hop:”

You hopped, skipped, slid, gyrated, turned, twisted, it seemed to Melissa, all in one. Also, you danced with your whole body and all over your body...The saxophonist played and then moaned something about playing this dance as they did--

‘On the tuba
Down in Cuba’

Melissa was flushed with the heat and the excitement and the wicked music,...[she] hopped, skipped, slid, gyrated, twisted and turned until she was, Jerry Adamson told her, holding her close to his straight handsome figure, as ‘proficient,’ ‘more p’ficient, he mumbled a little thickly...But Malory did not like it (*CT*, 206).

In addition to the reprimand he delivers on the way home, “You know, Melissa...I don’t like your dancing that vulgar dance. That sort of thing isn’t—er—well, Melissa it just isn’t the kind of thing I like from a girl whom I’m expecting to be my wife,” when on their first real date, Malory demonstrates the proprietary castration anxiety of the incestuous father as Melissa directs him to the Romany Road, (Red Brook’s equivalent of Lover’s Lane) in his repeated, sharp questions as to whether she had been there before or not (*CT*, 110-11).

Under different circumstances, Malory’s anxiety might be read superficially as a concern that he be the first to tread this particular territory (Melissa’s body), however, the fact that they are brother and sister lends different weight to his reactions. Indeed, Malory’s immediate and disturbing proprietary anxiety about Melissa is mirrored by Asshur Lane, Melissa’s first beau who returns to restore order at the end of the text. Asshur is represented as quite relaxed in his attitudes towards Melissa’s sexuality; he

does not attempt to constrain her in any way or mark her with his own lack; to the contrary, Asshur freely allows her to make her own decisions. He is represented as “clean,” in direct contrast to the “bad, Strange blood” with which the women are marked, and, in addition, does not divulge Melissa’s illegitimate status to her when he discovers it early in the text. (*CT*, 32, 71-3) Malory, on the other hand, wants to enjoy the full privilege of the man of the house who transgresses, and is condemned, whether he knows it or not.

However, Malory’s house is already headed by three women, his mother and two sisters, whose ghostly, bodiless heads dominate the abode to the point of their brother’s melancholia. In this way, the Forten women whose “ghostly...bodiless heads” always appear at the threshold of the house, waiting to greet Malory upon his every arrival, precisely mirror the way in which Laurentine and Sarah Strange are themselves figured through the eyes of his sibling, Melissa. Laurentine is “suspended apparently without body in the upper-half of the screen door” and behind her Sarah Strange also appears to Melissa’s first view, the “other face, dark and tragic and likewise momentarily bodiless appeared over Laurentine’s shoulder” (*CT*, 17.)

The phallic metaphor established in these “heads” that appear “suspended” and “apparently without body” materializes in these women—all Strange, “phallic ghosts” ultimately—to what Spillers attests is the “displacement of the name and law of the father onto the territory of the mother.”²⁵⁷ The effect of this misnaming must be considered a form of aphanisis, a fading away of the black, female subject from the weight of this misnamed displacement. But what remains in the representation of the Forten women as “phallic ghosts” is “the imaged embodiment of castration.”²⁵⁸

²⁵⁷ Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book in *BWC*, 205.

²⁵⁸ See “Anamorphosis” in Jacques Lacan’s, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, (New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1981), especially 88-89.

No matter how tentative the treatment of incest might be considered in *CT*, the arrangement of the prohibition through the relation of siblings possesses no less power than do the later African American representative examples of parent/child incest; Fauset's representation is also precisely a sign of the inheritance borne by the African American subject. Something is awry in the inheritance of the function of "father," "daughter," "mother," and "son" because the "laws and practices of enslavement did not recognize, as a rule, the vertical arrangements of their family."²⁵⁹

"Strange" is the family name of the women central to the action in *CT*; the first time it appears is in association with Judy, Sarah's (otherwise known as Aunt Sal) sister who visits from their Southern home in Alabama. This fact bears significance upon the events that unravel in the revelation of Malory and Melissa's sibling relationship late in the text. Laurentine, Sarah Strange's daughter by white Colonel Halloway, suffers under the family nominative for similar, yet different reasons. Her parents' illegitimate union results in her birth and subsequent struggle with a lack of social legitimacy; everyone (black and white) in Red Brook participate in the scandal of her origins, "the affair was the town's one and great scandal."²⁶⁰ This would seem to be the focus of the novel. However, the angle of attention quickly shifts (as is always the case in Fauset's texts) to the relationship between siblings; that of the illegitimate Laurentine and the ostensibly legitimate Melissa Paul, Judy's daughter born soon after her departure from a visit to her sister, Sarah, in Red Brook, New Jersey.

The narrative conventions that organize *CT* suggest a confusion with time that mirrors the indeterminacy of origins, "the book has a simultaneous time-sense of about 1930 and about 1895."²⁶¹ This is no accident on the part of the project; Fauset

²⁵⁹ "In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers," *BWC*, 249.

²⁶⁰ The "early misconceptions about 'respectability' and 'decency' that structures the anxieties between the cousins Laurentine and Melissa has been noted by Sylvander as a "developing understanding of the relationship of society's rules to nature's laws." See *JF*, 200.

²⁶¹ *Ibid*, 208.

prefigures *Invisible Man* by representing in the novel the complicated relationship African Americans' bore to modernity; the text performs this complexity through the coalescence of scenes in which women smoke cigarettes in the presence of their parents, men drive "shiny, tricky little dark blue sports model [Ford's]" and black dialect is often preferred to standard English "[Malory], in spite of his fondness for words and literature...liked slang, believing that it had about it an exactness, an appropriateness that nothing, no other form of expression, equaled" (CT, 288).²⁶² At the same time, community skating parties, horse and sleigh rides, walks in the woods all harken back to the late 19th century. The conflation of time figures the psychological character of Negroes "caught in the vast process of change" as Ralph Ellison states in his 1948 essay "Harlem is Nowhere:"

But much has been written about the social and economic aspects of Harlem; we are here interested in its psychological character, a character that arises from the impact between urban slum conditions and folk sensibilities. Historically, the American Negroes are caught in a vast process of change that has swept them from slavery to the condition of industrial man in a space of time so telescoped (a bare eighty-five years) that it is literally possible for them to step from feudalism into the vortex of industrialism simply by moving across the Mason-Dixon line.²⁶³

The haunting of this past is never more apparent than in the combined figure of the Chinaberry Tree itself and the gestures towards Greek tragedy—clearly, the Oedipus tale—that are foregrounded by the text. Although Sylvander suggests that the temporal layering is connected to when Jessie Fauset first heard this actual and true tale fifteen

²⁶² Malory's fondness for black dialect ironically comments upon the nature of the language in which he is produced as a black subject; the "appropriateness" of slang has "about it an exactness;" it tells the truth through an explicit performance of its linguistic distance from the laws of standard English. Born of a man who had an illegitimate affair and child with a woman named Strange, the Forten household itself sits upon shifting grounds, and Malory and Melissa's sexual desire for each other is the sign of those shaky foundations.

²⁶³ See "Harlem is Nowhere" in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. by John F. Callahan, (New York: Modern Library, 2003), 320-328, esp. 321.

years prior to writing it, it would seem that the text is concerned with the peculiar relation African American subjects necessarily bear towards time.²⁶⁴

But it is upon the notion of the family curse in the ubiquitous “bad blood,” and the reversals of recognition, as well as “the Chinaberry tree itself, sometimes known as ‘soapberry,’ . . . used to make soap, suggesting in an oblique way the cleansing or purging of emotion in tragedy” that *CT* most forcefully makes its gesture towards ancient drama in modern, black drag (*JF*, 198).²⁶⁵

Fauset’s preoccupation with tragedy stems from both her personal life and her analysis of African American culture as an intervention into traditional dramatic forms, “to be a Negro in America posits a dramatic situation” (*CT*, xxxi). Born Jessie “Redmona” Fauset on April 27 1882 in Camden County, New Jersey, she was the seventh child of Redmon Fauset and Annie Seamon Fauset. Among her six siblings, only two (both sisters) survived after 1900.

Following the death of her mother Annie Fauset, Jessie’s father subsequently remarried Bella Huff, a widow with three children from a former marriage and “to this marriage were born Redmon Fauset in 1896, Arthur Huff Fauset in 1899, and Marian Fauset” (*JF*, 23). Although biographical analogies are perhaps somewhat suspect as confirmed basis for literary strategies of interpretation, the preponderance of family loss and numerous siblings, half-siblings, and step-siblings are impossible to ignore, considering the content of Fausets’ texts, themselves riddled with losses, half-siblings, and doubles.

²⁶⁴ “The story was heard by Fauset when she was fifteen, which would have made the year 1897 . . . all but the first eighty pages of *The Chinaberry Tree* was written during the summer of 1931 in a park on Riverside Drive after an 8:00 a.m. French class at Columbia University” Ibis, 208.

²⁶⁵ The “Foreword” invokes “the Muses”, “the Furies,” “Fate the Producer,” and “Chance the Prompter” (*CT*, xxxi).

The complexity of the family relation in *CT* is further complicated by the miscegenation taboo inherent in Aunt Sal's strange love for Colonel Halloway; the love they share for each other not only defies the social conventions of Red Brook, it affects Halloway's two white daughters and white wife; also, the "recreant," black Sylvester Forten, the man with whom Judy Strange bears Melissa out of wedlock, not only bears a son (Malory) in marriage, but also two equally "strange" daughters, "Reba and Harriet." Forten and Judy Strange's love affair affects the Forten women, changes them, "mark[s]...permanent[ly]...her and the girls too." Reba and Harriet, along with their mother, Mrs. Forten, "lived like wraiths remote and insubstantial" after Mr. Forten disappears on the heels of Judy (*CT*, 19).

What causes the materialization of the wound figured in the Forten women's bodies as "ghostly wraiths" is not just the sexual relationship Sylvester Forten shares with Judy Strange—mirrored in that of Colonel Halloway's with Sarah Strange—it is their love for each other. The consensual nature of their relationship, that Halloway attempts to honor by leaving Sarah provisions in his will, and that spurs Sylvester Forten to follow Judy back to Philadelphia, does not, however, cover over the historical origins of their relationship.

But it is through the daughters' lives and sexual desires that the drama is played out. Melissa Paul's appearance on the scene in Red Brook reinforces Laurentine's delicate sense of legitimacy, carefully won through the possible union in marriage with Phil Hackett, "son of the wealthiest colored man in town" (*CT*, 20). In addition to the seamstress work her white half-sisters, Phebe and Diane Halloway help her establish in a "strange interview," after their mother's death in which "[n]either side mentioned that strange past," Laurentine teeters on the verge of her much-desired legitimacy through marriage to a respectable member of Red Brook's African American community. Phebe and Diane help Laurentine in an attempt to right the

wrongs their mother committed by squandering Colonel Halloway's fortune "in the net income accruing from his factories" that he leaves to Sarah upon his death (*CT*, 11-12).

The sacrifice of Sarah Strange and her daughter Laurentine on the part of the black community in Red Brook is dealt at the hands of the white mother and wife, Mrs. Halloway, who "had, through her husband it is true, been the possessor of powerful weapons which she had not hesitated to use. Few people would have been willing to encounter the social or economic ostracism which she was finally able to exercise against them" (*CT*). Of course, the "powerful weapons" Mrs. Halloway uses is the function of the phallus, the law, to punish the object of her husband's desire—as opposed to Colonel Halloway himself. She does so by accepting the phallic term, as opposed to refusing it, she "through her husband" has access to powerful weapons.

If, on the other hand, she refused the possession of these weapons, as do her daughters Phebe and Diane in their aid of Laurentine, another space might have been opened; if "the refusal of the phallus turns out once again [not] to be a refusal of the symbolic does not close, but leaves open as still unanswered, the questions as to why that necessary symbolization and the privileged status of the phallus appear as interdependent in the structuring and securing (never secure)...human subjectivity."²⁶⁶ Finally, it is on the back of the Strange women, whose blackness and femininity mark them in a series of substitutive arrangements that estranges them from the "fetish"—the nuclear family, that is, the legitimacy so cherished by the black community in Red Brook—that the cathartic cleansing is repetitively enacted.

As a community, Red Brook conspires to disavow knowledge of their own "illegitimate" past that originates in the disruption of sexual and gender categories inherited from enslavement, and is worked out again and again over the bodies of the

²⁶⁶ *FS*, 56.

Strange women. An early indictment of the lethal responses of the community to Sarah and Laurentine is represented in the narrator's language that references precisely the confusion of sign and signified:

Gradually, like the old definition of a simile, the case of Sal Strange and her daughter, Laurentine, became confused, the sign was accepted for the thing signified and a coldness and despite toward this unfortunate mother and child became a fetish without any real feeling or indignation on the part of the executioners for the offenses committed (*CT*, 22).

Thus, the Strange women are alienated, estranged, and defamiliarized in language and by the community. The sacrifice inherent in the "confus[ion]" of the "sign," gradually "accepted for the thing signified" preserves the functions within discourse that organize the absent arrangements of gender, sexuality, and the limits of family in the African American example. The difference that marks the sign discriminates it from the binary system of signifier/signified in the well-known feature of deferral, and as also a difference, a separation.

The "apartness of her family" about which Laurentine agonizes is the separation from legal patronymic status figured in the mark of the African American feminine/maternal that recognizes no difference between Aunt Sal/Sarah Strange (through her relation to Captain Halloway,) Laurentine, Judy, and the equally disturbing niece/cousin Melissa, whose strangeness is emphasized in her illegitimate status as the result of an extramarital affair between two black subjects. Difference is also, of course, a deferral of the traces that mark that "apartness" as a sign (*CS*, 19). In this economy, "the various inflections of "mother," "daughter," "sister," "wife"—are not available in the historical instance.²⁶⁷

²⁶⁷ *BWC*, 232.

To confuse the sign for the thing signified is to confuse the play between presence and absence for pure presence, to exploit the productive power of the name “Strange” as a transparent and direct judgment “on the part of the executioners” of the women themselves. It should be repeated that the “thing signified” is itself a signifier; in the Saussurean presentation of the sign system “signifier and signified are indissociable” and a “signified is just a signifier put in a certain position by other signifiers”²⁶⁸ In actuality, what the sign (the recto and verso of signifier/signified) represents is an absent referent. In the Derridean deconstruction of the sign, the “difference between signified and signifier *is nothing*.”²⁶⁹

But there is another confusion to which this line refers. If the referent is illegitimacy itself, the sign of which is the “bad blood” associated with the curse of the Strange family, then the community absolves itself, literally cleanses itself (like the “soapberry” derived from the Chinaberry) of any relation to a past to which they too belong as much as the Strange women; these Strange women ultimately function to veil and unveil the whole living, breathing historical world behind the Chinaberry Tree in the service of the Red Brook community’s own sense of legitimacy.

²⁶⁸ See Geoffrey Bennington, *Jacques Derrida*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 1993), 24-5.

²⁶⁹ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1976), 23.

Chapter Four:
Toying With History

If you would bend a man, abandon all the usual means. Do not bother with psychology or diplomacy or even war; if you would bend a man, not just influence him or sway him or even convince him but *bend* him, do it with ritual.

David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident*

Less and less frequently do we encounter people with the ability to tell a tale properly. More and more often there is embarrassment all around when the wish to hear a story is expressed.

Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller"

My job becomes how to rip that veil drawn over "proceedings too terrible to relate."

Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory"

"You want a story?"

David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident*

The invocation to the ritual of storytelling structures African American memory and history in David Bradley's novel, *The Chaneyville Incident*.²⁷⁰ John Washington's epistemological crisis of the imagination establishes the text's function as an African American, decolonizing heuristic for readers of the African and European Diasporas.²⁷¹

²⁷⁰ David Bradley, *The Chaneyville Incident*, (New York: Harper Row, 1981). Hereafter cited as *CI*.

²⁷¹ My argument locates *The Chaneyville Incident* in the tradition of texts like *Invisible Man*, "By revising and correcting 'blackness' into a *critical* posture, and by distinguishing it from a sign called the 'American Negro', Ellison harnessed 'blackness' to a symbolic program of philosophical 'disobedience' (a systematic skepticism and refusal) that would make the former available to *anyone*, or more pointedly, *any* posture, that was willing to take on the formidable task of thinking as a willful act of imagination and invention. *Invisible Man* made 'blackness' a

As a ritual, the ability to tell a tale possesses particular gravity in relation to the African American experience of time and history; the capacity to imagine and transmit a story functions in this novel as an “incident” that marks the intersection of New World African traditions and modernities.

The incident referred to in the title is both a sign for Moses Washington’s death by misadventure, murder, or suicide; and also the legend of the twelve runaway slaves who escaped north to a town called Chaneyville, in the South County of Pennsylvania, not far from Dinwiddie. It is at Chaneyville that they too, according to legend, die; either murdered by the slave-catchers or as agents of a mass suicide.

Therefore, the incident at Chaneyville is a *lieu de memoire*, a “site of memory:”

[A] *lieu de memoire* where memory crystallizes and secretes itself occur(s) at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn—but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.²⁷²

How the ritual bends a man, and the reader, to a different sense of time, to a different sense of history, and therefore, towards a decolonizing position within discourse, finds

process, a strategy, of culture critique, rather than a condition of physiognomy and/or the embodiment of the auto-bios-graphe” See “Peter’s Pans: Eating in the Diaspora” in *Black, White and In Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture*, (Chicago: Chicago UP, 2003), 5. Hereafter, cited as *BWC*. I would also include in this tradition the neo-slave narratives of the late 20th century, among others, Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*. Gayl Jones’s most recent novels, *The Healing* and *Mosquito*, provide specifically feminist primers which extend the Ellisonian program towards a further decolonizing discursive position that, “running and dodging the forces of history,” successfully tells tales in the novel form.

²⁷² See Pierre Nora, “Between Memory and History: *Les Lieux de Memoire*,” in *Representations* 26, Special Issue, “Memory and Counter-Memory” (1989) 1. Hereafter *Lieux de Memoire*. Nora argues that lieux de memoire “make their appearance by the virtual deritualization of our world—producing, manifesting, establishing, constructing, decreeing, and maintaining by artifice and by will a society deeply absorbed in its own transformation and renewal, one that inherently values the new over the ancient, the young over the old, the future over the past. Museums, archives, cemeteries, festivals, anniversaries, treaties, depositions, monuments, sanctuaries, fraternal orders—these are the boundary stones of another age...they mark the rituals of a society without ritual” 7.

However, as Toni Morrison makes clear, simply having access to the “artifices” and the material is not enough, “[M]emories and recollections won’t give me total access to the unwritten life of these people. Only the act of the imagination can help me” See “The Site of Memory,” in *Out There: Marginalization in Contemporary Cultures*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), 302.

expression in the narrative mimesis with which the protagonist, John Washington, contends.²⁷³ “The Chaneyville Incident” is simultaneously a site where “memory” is “torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory...where a sense of historical continuity persists,” and an event that is reconstructed, and therefore reimagined by both the protagonist and the reader. As a *lieu de memoire* that demands a practice of memory, it is the absent cause that composes the structure of the text. In *The Chaneyville Incident* “the act of imagination is bound up with memory.”²⁷⁴

To briefly summarize the narrative, John Washington is an African American historian who suffers from an inability to access his collective and individual history.²⁷⁵ Although equipped with a great many of the facts that comprise both his local and general past, these facts weave a story of loss and mourning that render it impossible for him to produce a coherent narrative, to actually imagine a story. John’s relationship to loss is foregrounded early in the novel with the loss of his father, Moses Washington, when John is ten years old.

The exact details of Moses’s death remain a mystery; it is rumored that he was either murdered, or that he ostensibly dies by his own hand of a gunshot wound while out hunting. This traumatic experience returns for the protagonist in the loss of his brother, Bill Washington, to death in the Vietnam War; and it returns a third time

²⁷³My argument that *The Chaneyville Incident* must be read as a decolonizing African American novel, follows J. Hillis Miller’s idea of “the ethical moment” that is “genuinely productive and inaugural in its effects on history, though in ways that are by no means reassuring or predictably benign” J. Hillis Miller, *The Ethics of Reading*, (New York: Columbia UP, 1987), 9.

²⁷⁴“The Site of Memory,” 305.

²⁷⁵ Steven Knapp asks the salient question “[w]hy cling to a tradition, the handing down of an ancient authority, when the grounds and content of that authority have been so drastically reconceived?” His answer is found on the grounds of what historical revision proposes to social motivation; that is, the importance of questioning the precise character of traditions and ideologies” See “Collective Memory and the Actual Past,” in *Representations* 26, Special Issue, “Memory and Counter-Memory” (1989), 129.

when Old Jack, committed to paternal surrogacy of young John by Moses upon his death, also begins to make his passage; this event initiates the entire novel.

At a more general level, moreover, loss is figured in John's interpretation of the Slave Trade, the birth canal that inaugurates the Middle Passage. John's interpretation of this particular nadir in early New World history encompasses both the material and metaphysical losses incurred:

For that is what the Slave Trade was all about. Not death from poxes and musketry and whippings and malnutrition and melancholy and suicide; death itself. For before the white men came to Guinea to strip-mine field hands for the greater glory of God, King and the Royal Africa Company, black people did not die (*CI* 208).

At the center of John's quest to understand his individual and collective history is the struggle between two opposed belief-systems, the West African and the colonizing Christian doctrine, specifically in their relationship to the afterlife. In the former, people do not "die...they simply took up residence in an afterworld that was in many ways indistinguishable from (their) former estate" (*CI* 208).

In the Christian version death is represented as "cold and final," and the afterlife is composed by banishment to the tortures of a hell organized for the punishment for earthly crimes—among which the architects and participants of the Slave Trade, it may easily be assumed, enjoyed many. In this passage John outlines a different sense of death coexistent with material and physical mortality: the death of African religious practices and systems of cultural belief that might have served as oppositional sites of memory to Western European modes of religious doctrine.²⁷⁶

²⁷⁶The survival of the West African forms of belief, and the potential decolonizing forces they posed to the mission of the modern Christian Church is never more apparent than in the language of the founder of the University at which I am currently employed. Richard Furman's 1823 text, "Exposition of the Views of the Baptists, Relative to the Coloured Population In the United States In Communication To the Governor of South Carolina," is a document that defends the suppression of African religious systems no less hysterically than it insists upon the spiritual and material necessity of the enslavement of New World Africans. It concludes by connecting Denmark Vesey's 1822 slave rebellion in Charleston to the "immorality" of West African forms of belief:

Ironically, by the 17th century, religious modes of belief in Western Europe had already endured their own crisis, disaggregation and displacement. Michel de Certeau marks this shift in the “formality” of practices whose content, nevertheless, “scarcely changes.”²⁷⁷ The potential consolidation of two cultural traditions organized by different belief systems categorizes John’s torturous relationship to his double inheritance: as a child of both, he takes their antinomic relationship seriously; in so doing, the judgment he levies vexes the very idea of consolidation:

“Because what it all means is that those of us who count black people among our ancestors (they are never all our ancestors) must live forever with both our knowledge and our belief. It is not that we must choose between traditions—that has been tried, and the attempt ended in failure. It is not even that we are caught in some dialectical battle between African thesis and European antithesis—then at least we could hope for the eventual synthesis. No, the quandary is that there is no comfort for us either way. For if the European knowledge is true, then death is cold and final, and one set of our ancestors had their very existence

“It is also a pleasing consideration, tending to confirm these sentiments, that in the late projected scheme for producing an insurrection among us, there were very few of those who were, as members attached to regular Churches, (even within the sphere of its operations) who appear to have taken a part in the wicked plot, or indeed to whom it was made known; of some Churches it does not appear, that there were any. It is true, that a considerable number of those who were found guilty and executed, laid claim to a religious character; yet several of those were grossly immoral, and, in general, they were members of an irregular body, which called itself the *African Church*, and had intimate connection and intercourse with a similar body of men in a Northern City, among whom the supposed right to emancipation is strenuously advocated.”

Italics in the original.

²⁷⁷ Due to the implications of the pluralization of religious beliefs, that is, the fragmentations of faith in one god, the formality of Christian religious practices abutting the Slave Trade are displaced, emptied out into the potentially unifying structures of State politics. In his analysis of the pluralization and division of the Church and its practices at the end of the sixteenth century, Michel de Certeau marks this historical moment of transition, “[i]n order to recover certitude with unity, it is necessary then...to try to seek in *politics*, in science and in still other areas, another ‘way of unifying’ which will hereafter fill the role that religion had been playing up till then...Political institutions *use* religious institutions, infusing them with their own criteria, dominating them with their protection, aiming them toward their goals. So what is new is not so much religious ideology (power imposing a return to Catholic orthodoxy) as the practice which, from now on, makes religion serve a politics of order. The religious investiture accrediting this order is intended to win over existing organizations and to consolidate political unity. On this level the weakened Christian ‘system’ is transformed into a sacred theater of the system which will take its place. It also assures the shift of Christian conscience toward a new public morality.” The impact of the pluralization of Christian practices that accelerated its disaggregation (into other authoritative discourses like politics and science) “is multiplied elsewhere by the discovery of *other religions* in the New World, in Africa, and in Asia” See Michel de Certeau, “The Formality of Practices” in *The Writing of History*, trans. Tom Conley, (New York: Columbia UP, 1988), 150-7. Italics in the original. Hereafter *WH*.

whipped and chained and starved away, while the other set—a larger proportion than any of us would like to admit—forever burns in hell for having done it to them. And if the African belief is true, then somewhere here with us, in the very air we breathe, all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering—all of it—is still going on. (*CI*, 213)

The horror of one alternative coheres in the fact that one's ancestors, on one side of the equation (European knowledge), are suffering infinitely and interminably for having barbarically destroyed generations of their own family members; or, on the other side (African belief), the terrors visited upon New World Africans (“all that whipping and chaining and raping and starving and branding and maiming and castrating and lynching and murdering”) never, ever subsides. On the contrary, if “the African belief is true,” it *survives* in the “very air we breathe.”

The only route through which John can destabilize the binary oppositions of “European knowledge” and “African belief” affords itself in the ritual of storytelling, to which he is apprenticed by Old Jack immediately after the death of Moses. However, despite his initiation into the ritual, John continues to be blocked, well into adulthood, in his ability to transmit for himself an experience through which his worlds coexist.²⁷⁸ He simply cannot imagine how to put it all together. Early in his quest to discover who exactly his father was and what exactly were the details of his mysterious death, thirteen-year old John experiences his first failure of imagination:

²⁷⁸ The structure of Old Jack's ritual is critically important. After Moses's funeral when John is ten, the boy finds his way at night to the old man's cabin. Encircled around the table, after having made the boy a hot toddy with moonshine and water, John is asked if he “wants a story,” and is directed to the other materials of the ritual:

“You want a story? Then fetch me a candle. Bring me the matches, too, he said. There, in the can. Can't have light without strikin' fire.” I took the candle and the can and brought them back to the table, moving slowly, unsure of my footing. He took them from me, opened the can, extracted a match. I stood beside him while he struck it, feeling the acid fumes tickle my nose. He lit the candle and extinguished the match, then he held the candle sideways, over the table. I watched, fascinated, as the melted wax formed a pool on the slate. When he judged it big enough, he set the candle in the pool, held it while the wax hardened. We waited then, while the flame steadied, the light from the candle added to that from the lamp making the room seem almost too bright. He leaned over and blew out the lamp, and the light faded” *CI* 37-8.

Oh, I had seen the facts, there were no shortage of facts; but I could not discern the shape they filled in. There were, it seemed, too many gaps. But what I had feared was that there were not too many gaps; only too many for me, my mind. For I simply could not imagine what I should see. Could not imagine what it was I was looking at part of. I had everything I needed, knowledge and time and even, by then, a measure of skill—I could follow a fact through the shifts and twists of history, do it and love it. But I could not imagine. And if you cannot imagine, you can discover only cold facts, and more cold facts; you will never know the truth. I had seen the future stretching out before me, my life an endless round of fact-gathering and reference-searching, my only discoveries silly little deductions, full of cold, incontrovertible logic, never any of the burning, inductive leaps that take you from here to there and let you really *understand* anything (*CI*, 146).

This blockage is inextricable from his struggle with the inheritance of the metaphysical and material histories that haunt John, figured by his theorizations about “European knowledge” and “African belief.” He must in some way make memory a part of history, and understand how (involuntary, unstudied) memory and (voluntary, deliberate) history can “creatively interact.”²⁷⁹

Midway through the novel, a scene of signal importance occurs in which John’s vexed relation to history and imagination is made strikingly apparent. At thirty-one years of age, John returns to his home on the Hill in Raystown, Pennsylvania, to attend to a dying Old Jack Crawley, his surrogate father and Moses Washington’s best friend.²⁸⁰ During the course of his visit home, the legacy Moses Washington left to John in a folio is revealed to have been kept secret by his mother, Yvette Stanton

²⁷⁹ See the “Introduction” in Geneviève Fabre and Robert O’Meally, eds., *History and Memory in African American Culture*, (New York: Oxford UP 1994), 7.

²⁸⁰ In a 1984 interview, three years after the publication of *The Chaneyville Incident*, David Bradley describes his native South Street in terms much like the Hill in Raystown : “First of all, it was a small town, South Street was a small town. People related to each other, people had histories, people knew each other’s mothers, you know, that sort of thing. Secondly, nobody was an intellectual. People were not prepared to intellectualize their experience all the time, and that was what went on at the University. Even the black people went around mouthing rhetoric; these people on South Street were dealing with real problems. The other thing was that the rhetoric of the time was of the horrible experience of being black in America, of being poor, of being oppressed had irrevocably damaged black people to the point where they were dehumanized, incapable of love, only capable of anger, and directing it towards each other. I didn’t feel that way—and these people on South Street demonstrated love for themselves, as people” Susan L. Blake, “The Business of Writing: An Interview With David Bradley” in *Callaloo* 21 (1984), 22.

Washington. Yvette tries to explain to John why, exactly, she has for thirteen years kept from him his legacy; it includes property in the amount of the entire Hill in Raystown upon which the black community live, a sizeable portion of money, and a folio whose documents prove more precious than anything money can purchase:

See, I know you John. You want to figure everything out. You go crazy when you can't. That's the way you were when you were a baby in your crib. I'd make you a toy and you'd take it and look at it for a long time, you wouldn't even touch it, and then you'd pick it up and poke it and squeeze it and then you'd go to work and tear the stuffing out of it. And when you'd torn the thing to pieces you'd sit there and giggle. Your father used to love that. He'd give you things to tear apart, just to watch you go at it. After a while he started giving you things that were harder and harder to tear apart. He'd bring them in and give them to you and wait and see how long it took you. And one day he finally got one that was too hard. I don't recall what it was made out of—canvas, I think. Maybe burlap. But he made it, and he gave it to you, and he sat there all day watching you while you tried to tear that thing apart. You'd beat it and bang it until you were tired, and then you would go to sleep, and then you'd wake up and you'd beat it and bang it some more. He sat there and watched you do it. And when it finally dawned on you that you weren't going to be able to tear the stuffing out of it, he sat there and laughed while you cried...It almost made me wild, the sound the two of you made, him laughing and you crying. I couldn't stand it. I can't stand the thought of it now. And I couldn't stand the thought of it when he told me he wanted to give you another toy. Because you see, John, he left you a good one. I don't know what it was, but I know he spent all his time tearing it apart, just like you, and he never did. But I bet he went to Hell with a smile on his face knowing he was going to sit by a warm fire and watch you beating yourself to death on it. But I didn't let it happen. I didn't tell you it was there (*CI*, 195-96).²⁸¹

As a scene the childhood drama offers a staple in condensed form of the disturbing historical relation embodied by John's epistemological crisis: how does one approach remembering this history? The toys that Yvette and Moses make act as a bridge to an archaic and sacred relation to time which is forgotten in "human" (that is, historical) time. Indeed, toys (and games in general), all connect to an ancient past in that play and the sacred have long been associated with each other.

²⁸¹ It is notable that here Yvette subscribes to a Western European vision of the afterlife, "I bet he went to Hell with a smile on his face knowing he was going to sit by a warm fire and watch you beating yourself to death on it."

Within modern times the rituals of New Year's ceremonies, baseball games and matrimonial rites all accord to an ancient, ceremonial correlate.²⁸² And the toy itself possesses a singular relation to time; it is a materialization of the playful ritual that destroy the linear fixity of the calendar (as in New Year's ceremonies), if only to secure its regeneration and fixity.²⁸³ And yet while play derives from the realm of the sacred, it also radically alters it:

The potency of the sacred act resides precisely in the conjunction of the myth that articulates history and the ritual that reproduces it. If we make a comparison between this schema and that of play, the difference appears fundamental: in play only the ritual survives and all that is preserved is the form of the sacred drama, in which each element is re-enacted time and again. But what has been forgotten or abolished is the myth, the meaningfully worded fabulation that endows the acts with their sense and their purpose.²⁸⁴

²⁸²“Scholars have long known that the realms of play and of the sacred are closely linked. Numerous well-documented researches show the origins of most of the games known to us lie in ancient, sacred ceremonies, in dances, ritual combat and divinatory practices. So in ball games we can discern the relics of ritual representation of a myth in which the gods fought for possession of the sun; the circle game was an ancient matrimonial rite; games of chance derive from oracular practices; the spinning top and the checkered board were tools of divination” See Giorgio Agamben, trans. by Liz Heron, “In Playland,” in *Infancy and History: Essays on the Destruction of Experience*, (London: Verso, 1993), 69. Hereafter *IH*.

²⁸³ The destruction and reordering of linear, calendrical time is foregrounded by the novel's chapter headings marked by military, maritime figures that indicate the year, month, day, and hour; the text signifies upon the time of the slave ship and its legacies; the “subterranean convergence” of diverse histories erased and distorted by the imposition of a “linear and hierarchical vision of a single History;” the “multiple and converging paths of a unification that is “submarine.” In his discussion of Caribbean discourse (as a methodological assault upon Western History's historiographic procedures that take no account of discontinuities and ruptures characterized by the production of Caribbean cultures), Edouard Glissant suggests that “this expression (‘the unity is submarine’) can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels...(t)hey sowed in the depths the seeds on an invisible presence” See “The Known, The Uncertain” in Edouard Glissant, trans. Michael Dash, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays*, (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press 1989), 66-67. Hereafter *CD*.

Agamben also cites the relation of play within ritual as destructive of calendrical time: “It is a commonplace that rites (rituals) and play organize “cold” and “hot” societies in “a relation of correspondence and opposition between play and ritual, in the sense that both are engaged in a relationship with the calendar and with time, but this relationship is in each case an inverse one: ritual fixes and *structures* the calendar; play, on the other hand, though we do not yet know how and why, changes and *destroys* it” *IH* 69, italics in original.

²⁸⁴ E. Benveniste, quoted by Giorgio Agamben, in “In Playland,” *IH*, 69-70.

In *The Chaneyville Incident*, the ritual of storytelling, through which Old Jack transmits the legendary stories about Moses Washington to his son John, is “preserved;” John’s struggle throughout the novel is to anchor the ritual to a myth of his own “fabulation.”

Once an adult historian, the ritual is transformed by John into the empiricist-rationalist historical narratives he finds it easy to record and rehearse to his audience of university students; however, the empiricist-rationalist Western version of history into which he is inducted at University provides little solace towards a more complex understanding of his past, one which would include the mute presences covered over by this form of historiography.²⁸⁵ As is the case with the burlap toy Moses makes for him, all John can do is “beat it and bang it” in frustration; the insides of this toy, the internal mechanism of its “soul” remain inaccessible. The toy’s “soul” is no more on display upon its inevitable destruction. However, the toys acts upon John as well, one toy is not the same as the other, and his relation to them varies greatly.²⁸⁶

Unlike the toys his mother made which he could destroy (“you’d take it and look at it for a long time, you wouldn’t even touch it, and then you’d pick it up and poke it and squeeze it and then you’d go to work and tear the stuffing out of it. And when you’d torn the thing to pieces you’d sit there and giggle”), thus asserting his dominion if not his masterful understanding of their internal mechanisms, Moses’ toy is as

²⁸⁵ Indeed, it is precisely the conjectural, as opposed to empiricist-rationalist forms of histories, Western and non-Western, that John cannot access; he is blocked, unable to follow either Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s injunction to, in a way, “forget the facts,” most obvious in his *Second Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*; nor can he take Old Jack’s position as storyteller and turn the encyclopedic details he has collected about his individual and collective past into a narrative.

²⁸⁶ In his essay “The Philosophy of Toys,” Charles Baudelaire states: “I believe that children in general act upon their toys; in other words, that their choice is governed by their disposition and desires, vague, if you wish, and by no means formulated, but very real. However, I would not deny that the contrary can occur – that the toy can sometimes act upon the child – above all in cases of literary or artistic predestination” Charles Baudelaire, *The Essence of Laughter And Other Essays, Journals, and Letters*, ed. Peter Quennell (New York: Meridian, 1956), 144.

uninterpretable as John's historical understanding of his past and his father's death. For the fundamental identity of the toy, that which marks its difference from other objects in the world is its place at the intersection of diachrony and synchrony, play and ritual, event and structure. As the object through which the action of play is mediated, the toy registers in both directions, through the opposing forces of play whose structure is ritual, and ritual structured upon an element of play.²⁸⁷ Therefore, the toy is an "eminently historical thing."²⁸⁸

As such, toys are inherently constitutive of narrative; they present themselves as the origins and occasions of fantasy, toys are the "physical embodiment of fiction."²⁸⁹ They also occupy the borderlands between life and death as inanimate objects come to life; toys are this too, the "dead among us."²⁹⁰

To toy with something is also to manipulate it, to play it out in a series of different contexts, none of which are determinative or prescriptive. (But many of our contemporary toys come with their own "instructions" today: manuals that tell us how to "play" with them, this is the difference between Playstation consoles as opposed to Lego Blocks.) When John "beats and bangs" his toys he plays with them in an effort to "figure it out," and the failure of the mission "drives him crazy." The destructiveness of his play represents an attempt to get at the tangibility of human temporality, the "pure differential margin" of a putative narrative, or fantasy, at whose

²⁸⁷ "For if human societies appear in this light as a single system traversed by two opposing tendencies, the one operating to transform diachrony into synchrony and the other impelled towards the contrary, the end result of the play of these tendencies—what is produced by the system, by human society—is in every case a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony: history, in other words, human time...[e]very historical event represents a differential margin between diachrony and synchrony, instituting a signifying relation between them" *IH*, 75.

²⁸⁸ "What the toy preserves of its sacred or economic model, what survives of this after its dismemberment or miniaturization, is nothing other than the human temporality that was contained therein: its pure historical essence. The toy is a materialization of the historicity contained in objects, extracting it by means of a particular manipulation" *IH* 71.

²⁸⁹ Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 56.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid*, 57.

crossroads the toy lies somewhere between the “once upon a time” and the “no longer.”²⁹¹ In this way, John is a subject-in-embryo who plays with history; he wants to, as his mother says “figure it out.”

The problem with history, however, is that one can never really “figure it out” without the ability to tell a story, or narrate an experience. And then one has not figured “it” out as much as personalized it in some way: to “figure out” history means to figure out one’s relation to a story, rather than the thing itself. In this way John’s widely divergent experiences of the toys his parents make for him mark a differential relation to the narratives of history.

Part of the Gordian knot inscribed in the passage is Moses’ psychic torture of his toddler son, itself a miniature performance, so to speak, of modern sciences’ profound mistrust of experience. At the birth of modern science, a recondite anxiety about experience eventually results in the fastening of experience (the imagination) to knowledge, thereby containing it, “the great revolution in modern science was less a matter of opposing experience to authority...than of referring knowledge and experience to a single subject.”²⁹² John’s adult problem is identical to that of his

²⁹¹ *IH*, 71-72.

²⁹² *IH*, 18. In his discussion of an earlier, and separate understanding of experience and knowledge grounded in Aristotelian and medieval formulae, Agamben defines this much earlier “subject of knowledge” as characterized by the separate categories of *noūs* [mind] and *psychē* [soul]; indeed, he states that “knowledge lacks a ‘subject’ in Antiquity in our modern sense of the term, instead, a single individual is ‘sub-jectum’ in which the active, unique and separate intelligence actuated knowledge...[T]he transformation of its subject does not leave traditional experience unchanged. Inasmuch as its goal was to advance the individual towards maturity—that is, an anticipation of death as the idea of an achieved totality of experience—it was something complete in itself, something it was possible to have, not only to undergo. But once experience was referred instead to the subject of science, which cannot reach maturity but can only increase its own knowledge, it becomes something incomplete, an ‘asymptomatic’ concept, as Kant will say, something it is possible only to *undergo*, never to *have*: nothing other, therefore, than the infinite process of knowledge” *IH*, 23.

In a similar vein, although from an entirely different vantage point, Hayden White contends with the same issue: “The eighteenth century lacked an adequate psychological theory. The philosophes needed a theory of human consciousness in which reason was not set over and against imagination as the basis of truth against the basis of error, but in which the continuity between reason and fantasy was recognized, the mode of their relationship as parts of a more general process of human inquiry into a world incompletely known might be sought, and the

infancy at the threshold of language: his inability to narrate a story whose successful transmission would signify that he actually *had* an experience.

This connotation would entail, for John, that he sever his experience (in the modern sense, his imagination) from his knowledge. To some degree this has already occurred and is clearly not working. To allow imagination and knowledge to coexist with each other is the more attractive prospect; however, in order to realize the potentialities of their coexistence he must literally “play” with history. His inability to do so makes him a modern subject of the sort Benjamin mourns in “The Storyteller.”²⁹³

Benjamin’s critique also emphasizes the increasing distance between the storyteller’s actual story (an oral form steeped in his own or others’ experience), and the written novel in modernity. As he perceives the problem, technologies produce a deathly distance among human interaction; it conspires to produce modern subjects’ alienation from experience through a waning proximity to death; this distance rings the death knell upon the modern subject’s ability to tell a tale. In the representation of John Washington’s advance towards a different, albeit no less modern relation to the afterlife, *The Chaneyville Incident* inspires a decolonizing interpretive frame whose tale must be told.

John is not the only subject who is “beating and banging” it, however; “the unconscious and repression originate in the other before they are installed in the child.”²⁹⁴ Moses toys with John; he “knows” how the toy works because he “made”

process in which fantasy or imagination contributed as much to the discovery of truth as did reason itself might be perceived” See *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1990), 51.

²⁹³See “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov” in Walter Benjamin *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn, (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 83-109.

²⁹⁴“After all—and one is slightly ashamed to say so—psychoanalysis with and since Freud has omitted to note that repression and the unconscious exist in the Other before being made present in the child: in the Wolf Man’s parents, in Grusha and in the beating father” See Jean Laplanche “Interpretation Between Determinism and Hermeneutics: A Restatement of the Problem,” trans.

it, so to speak, and indeed, “a child is (also) being beaten.” As do all infantile scenes theorized by psychoanalytic paradigms this scene provides a complex message; it says more than it means to say.

Primarily, the scene functions as a fantasy; although narrated by John’s mother Yvette, it is necessarily enigmatic, as is the question of history for the modern subject. John’s masturbatory “beating and banging” is at least temporarily satisfied when he tears apart his mother’s toy; Moses delights in presenting him toys that are uninterpretable.²⁹⁵ John, as a miniature, represents Moses’s own toy upon whom he (Moses) displaces his aggressions; the father however, also educates the child into a confrontation with historicity that is *inevitably* futile, as Moses structures the encounter.²⁹⁶

In addition, Moses has also been tortured by the new “toy” he leaves to John because Moses himself, in Yvette’s estimation, never “figures it out.” As she states, “I don’t know what it was, but I know he spent all his time tearing it apart, just like you, and he never did.” The “new toy” Moses bequeaths to John is the folio whose documents belong to Moses’ grandfather, C.K. Washington. His own historical quest

Phillip Slotkin, in *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, (London: 1992), 440. Hereafter cited as “BDH.”

²⁹⁵ For a discussion of this passage in the context of the psychoanalytic school of object-relations, see Martin Gliserman, *Psychoanalysis, Language and the Body of the Text*, (Gainesville: University of Florida Press 1996), 156-7. Gliserman argues that the “disturbance in John’s interactions with the toy” are connected to the desire “to open up the mother and tear out her insides...and the child functions as the father’s transitional subject to whom he can transfer his historic frustration and rage.”

²⁹⁶ See Sigmund Freud, “A Child Is Being Beaten” in *Sexuality and the Psychology of Love*, (New York: MacMillan Books, 1963), 107-132. Freud characterizes the three moments of sado-masochistic fantasy in the following schematic:

“My father is beating a child (a little brother or sister), “I am being beaten by my father,” and “A child is being beaten.” Freud makes clear that the first and second stages occupy the same fantasy and that in the second case, the fantasy is never actually made conscious, “But we may say of it in a certain sense that it has never had a real existence. It is never remembered, it has never succeeded in becoming conscious. And the third stage is clearly a conscious fantasy accompanying masturbation and culminating in orgasm.” Laplanche claims that this essay is “exemplary in showing the process of repression at work; and it is exemplary in demonstrating that memory is very different from the unconscious fantasy that has arisen from it, and, incidentally, from the unconscious fantasy of the former “BDH,” 438.

to discover what happened to C.K. is reinscribed in the text's signifying chain of Washington men searching for their fathers.

Another way to think of the problem John inherits is linked to the crossroads of the interpretive problem posed by psychoanalysis, itself a history of the unconscious: how to negotiate between determinism and a hermeneutics? What makes both psychoanalysis (and potentially John Washington) "tick" is not the history of the historiographers. If that were the case, John's professional methodology would have supplied the narrative he desperately needs to tell.

The internal mechanism of the discourse (psychoanalysis) and the interiority of the character (John Washington) are perhaps better worked out in two different, yet connected methodologies. A literary archaeological model of history and memory, whose ancestors are "the antiquary, the traveler, and the robber of graves and monuments," and another version in contrast to that of the historiographers, "a history of the unconscious, or rather of its genesis," provide more strategic frameworks in this regard.²⁹⁷

Such discourses would potentially allow oral narratives and apocryphal histories to speak through them; however, these voices are precisely what John resists and cannot hear in his privileging of the written text. Both John and Moses are formed by the unconscious, "different histories [which] 'subsist' in the same place...[h]ere, past and present are moving within the same polyvalent place;"²⁹⁸ and sites of memory

²⁹⁷ [A] history with discontinuities, in which the moments of burial and resurgence are the most important of all; a history, it might be said, of repression, in which the subterranean currents are described "BDH," 433. The most famous archaeological analogy for the unconscious is of course, the Eternal City, Rome "in which nothing that has come into existence will have passed away and all the earlier phases of development continue to exist alongside the latest one" See Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey, (New York: W.W. Norton, 1961), 18. Laplanche suggests this analogy for the unconscious clings to the "coexistence of fixity and manipulation, of veracity and artifice;" in his 'hyperarchaeology,' Freud's analogy is "not subordinated to history, as modern science would have it, but...subordinates history solely to the reviviscence of the object" "BDH," 436, 437.

²⁹⁸ *WH* 312.

that reconstruct literary archaeologies, “on the basis of some information and a little bit of guesswork you journey to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply.”²⁹⁹ If John cannot translate his memory into an experience, it is in consequence of an insufficient understanding that history is like memory, “material, symbolic and functional;” he must learn to feel history’s pulse on all of these registers.³⁰⁰

The story Yvette tells John at this juncture contains all the elements of the Freudian beating fantasy that says more than it understands, and therefore to some degree fails in its translation. From the child’s point of view in this interaction with the father, loving involves beating and violent attack, and it is this form of the fantasy which survives in John’s “banging and beating” against his combined histories. In this way, his only release will be to alter the method he thinks he has fully translated; to fully access it, and thereby to toy with the ritual in a different way. For John to “dig deep into this memory” he must turn to the ritual of storytelling rather than the facts of history.³⁰¹ The will demand to remember the “unwritten, interior life” of his ancestors inscribes a demand for memory of the apocryphal and the oral, organized by the ritual structure itself.³⁰² By composing himself in a different place in the structure, and thereby to a different relation to play, John will inscribe a decolonizing position within the discourses that produce and oppress him.

²⁹⁹“The Site of Memory,” 302.

³⁰⁰Lieux de Memoire, 19.

³⁰¹Glissant argues that “because the collective memory was too often wiped out, the Caribbean writer must ‘dig deep’ into this memory, following the latent signs that he has picked up in the everyday world” *CD*, 64. Although Glissant’s texts focus upon Caribbean memory in relation to historical discourses, I argue that the same relation to memory applies to African American subjects, for reasons of a shared slave past.

³⁰²“The Site of Memory,” 302.

Ritualizing History: Tracking the Man, Moses

The relationship between ritual and play is one of correspondence and antagonism, “while rites [rituals] transform events into structures, play transforms structures into events.”³⁰³ And yet, what would the ritual as structure (which Old Jack initiates John into with the preparation of the toddy and the lighting of the candle in the dark cabin), actually be without the stories of the mythical Moses, the boy’s father? In fact, ritual and story become almost indistinguishable from each other, for in every rite there is a form of play and in every playtime game ritual aspects exist that make the differences between rituals and play hard to discern.

In terms of history, the synchronic, structural effects of the rite/ritual is supplemental in its relation to diachrony, the event of the story (the game) itself. Yet a history that depends upon pure synchrony and pure diachrony is impossible; although connected, synchrony and diachrony form two opposing tendencies, one constantly transforming into the other, and vice versa. The revolution of structure into event and back into structure produces human, that is, historical time, through the inverse play of these oppositional propensities.

Moses Washington is represented as the gamester par excellence in *The Chaneyville Incident*. His son’s hunt for him begins when John is thirteen and he discovers Moses’s attic full of ordered shelves stocked with books, documents, and, prominently displayed on the clean desk, a bible. Moses Washington is obviously meant to signify upon the biblical figure Moses, with whom African American culture has long identified. Through the ordeal of the Middle Passage, New World Africans found themselves in the peculiar position of leaving a land under forced captivity and in so doing, founding a people in the Americas. Forced departure from Africa enforces

³⁰³ *IH* 73.

for New World African posterity a radical break from the past and an establishment of a history, and a people.

In this regard, there is a twentieth century interpretation of the biblical Moses whose actions enforce the same result of a radical break with the past that also establishes the history of a people. Sigmund Freud's *Moses and Monotheism* perceives the Moses who led the *Hebrews* out of Egypt to become *Jews* in the land of Canaan was not himself a Jew, but an Egyptian.³⁰⁴ An identity that is not singular but double at the origins of the tradition of "the chosen people" analogizes Bradley's representation of the African American epistemological quandary; "in the beginning there was the plural."³⁰⁵

Freud characterizes *Moses and Monotheism* as a "novel" and as such, it is an apocryphal tale, external to the official doxa of psychoanalytic, historical and biblical

³⁰⁴Freud argues that for reasons having to do with the complications of colonial imposition his Moses subscribes to a younger, monotheistic religion, rejecting the polytheistic beliefs of his own people, the Egyptians. Chief among these is the belief in a full and complete afterlife. Freud makes a convincing argument for his own conjectural rewriting of Jewish history in the etymology of the name "Moses," which in Egyptian means "child;" and, in addition, in the resumption of cultural practices, notably circumcision, originally ascribed to Egyptians of this period of antiquity. *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, 24 vols., James Strachey trans. and ed. (London: Hogarth Press, 1964), 1-137. *Moses and Monotheism* was first published in 1939; it was conceived in response to Freud's question, in a letter to Arnold Zweig about the origins of Nazi anti-Semitism. His "historical novel" attempts to explain the "undying hatred of the Jews" Sigmund Freud to Arnold Zweig, September 30, 1934, in *The Letters of Sigmund Freud and Arnold Zweig*, Ernst L. Freud, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1987), 92.

³⁰⁵See de Certeau for an interpretation of the repressed parricide that initiates the doubled origin of the chosen people, the "interioriz[ation], the division that until then had been a 'distinction' in respect to others...[a]nd since the question is posed in terms of a historical foundation, this annihilation must be inscribed at the origin, namely, in the murder of Moses. Identity is not one, but two. *One and the other*. In the beginning, there is the plural" *WH*, 314. According to Freud, perhaps the most obvious difference between the Mosaic religion and that of the other Egyptian religions is the relation to the afterlife. In the establishment of the monotheistic Jewish religion, "the man, Moses," motivated by both political and spiritual directives, expunges all evidence of polytheism and, in a radical move, renounces all claims to immortality; the last factor most surprising since later experiences have shown that a belief in an after-life is perfectly compatible with monotheistic religion. This interpretation of a new relationship to an afterlife is directly linked to Bradley's use of the Moses myth in terms of spiritual imperatives.

discourses. The apocryphal is of central importance to an understanding of *The Chaneyville Incident*, at the level of memories and histories silenced by historical record, and literally in the trace of biblical apocrypha represented in the half-torn slip of paper John finds in his father's attic study. The quote from Esdras 2:14:25, unrecognizable to John well-schooled in the Bible, reads: "and I will light in your heart the lamp of understanding..." The rest of the quote is illegible, absent from the scene. However, Esdras: 2 tells the tale of a "second Moses;" it is a text organized by prophecy, dreams, writing, and censorship. The rest of the quote actually states: "which shall not be put out until what you are about to write is finished."³⁰⁶ The "light of understanding" towards which both Moses and John are drawn is to be told through the ritual structure, not written in text. The fragment breaks off when writing enters the scene so as to buttress the authority and legitimacy of the unwritten, oral narrative.

Several of the elements of this portion of Esdras are reinterpreted by Bradley through the African American topos; notably the "toddy," the whiskey-laden drink that Old Jack uses to ritualize John into manhood, is Esdras' "fire-water," and the rewriting of the laws whose sign is apparent in the oral tradition of storytelling. In this way, writing and speech both necessarily engage with an absence whose law is dictated by death, the deaths of sixty million and more, and the death of spiritual practices, both African *and* European.

The slave trade is the sign of two diasporas and of two deaths; the death of West African and Western European forms of belief. To encounter the African American past is to encounter a metahistorical experience of death; the past is "dead" in as far as

³⁰⁶ The apocryphal books of the Bible were rejected for their suspect origins; however, Esdras 2 foretells the deliverance into immortality of the ten tribes taken as captive from their own land; of the rewriting of the Laws by Esdras, inspired by the Lord's visitation figured by Esdras's dream-prophecy and mediated by the "fire-water;" and the writing of ninety four books of Laws, twenty of which were to be shared, seventy to be kept in secret, censored, and given only to "the wise among your people."

the experiences of masses of people are long gone, and the singular experience of African American history turns upon the difficulty of polyvalent death, of peoples, cultures, religious practices and, as well, the survival of these origins.³⁰⁷

Freud traces the etymology of the Egyptian word Moses (Mose) which means “child;” another of the young John’s first discoveries among his father’s papers is a quote from the Book of Jeremiah centered upon the same signifier:

Then said I Ah, Lord God! Behold, I cannot speak: for I am a child. But the lord God said unto me, say not, I am a child: for thou shalt go to all that I shall send to thee, and whatsoever I command thee thou shalt speak (*CI*, 141.)

And so the child, John, who “cannot speak” must find the words (play with the ritual) that unequivocally “father” the “man,” both Moses and himself. He must in effect “speak as a child,” and play out the story that makes his father and his own history present through the ritual game that reimagines “the Chaneyville Incident.” This decolonizing narrative can only take place when he is capable of shedding the censors of his inheritance and embrace the survival, yet to be understood, of rite and play marked by storytelling. And in so doing, the survival embodied in his putative fabulation necessitates a decolonizing position towards the status of New World African survivals in relation to death.³⁰⁸

³⁰⁷ In her discussion of the repressed murder at the center of Freud’s reinterpretation of the Moses legend, Cathy Caruth argues that it is actually the notion of traumatic survival enforced by a violent separation from the father (from the first Moses) which composes monotheism as “operative in Jewish history only as a tradition that cannot be grasped...it is not simply the return of the past, but of the fact of having survived it...a survival that, in the figure of the new Jewish god, appears not as an act chosen by the Jews, but as the incomprehensible fact of being chosen for a future that remains, in its promise, yet to be understood” *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 71. Hereafter cited as *UE*.

³⁰⁸ John gets close to this position midway through the novel: “Which is not to say that Africa is lost to us—it is not. It cannot be. The Africanisms—the anthropologists aptly call them “survivals”—exist in all of us, independent of our knowledge and our volition. Those of us who have learned about them can recognize them in our own behavior; those of us who were raised under conditions that reinforced the behavior can see it in everything we do. Those of us who know less about Africa than did the European slavers nevertheless tell tales that echo African tales, and sing songs that call on African patterns; nobody may know that the form is called ‘call and response,’ but that’s the way you sing a song. And no matter how light-skinned and

Attic Visions

One notion of a survival which is most obviously censored in the lives of Moses and John as African American men is, of course, their sexuality. In the attic, the room which oversees the rest of the house that Moses built, father and son do their head-work. Moses' attic functions as an architectural space, a closet for the "inarticulate yearnings of black male subjecthood."³⁰⁹ Much has been made in the novel of John's aggressive, heterosexual masculinity; he is educated into it by Old Jack,³¹⁰ he defends it as a young man by raping a white woman upon return from his brother Bill's funeral; and he protects it from Judith, his white lover who becomes critical in the storytelling ritual towards the end of the text. John's struggle to construct a "black heterosexuality, to finally rid the Black consciousness of the dual aspects of effeminacy and interracial homoeroticism" marks his pathological relationship to the feminine.³¹¹ Although "touched by the mother, *handed* by her in ways that he cannot escape," there is a great deal in John's cultural inheritance that wishes to resist such tactility.³¹²

Episcopalian a black person is, he or she will never tell you that a person has died. 'Passed away,' perhaps. Or 'gone home.' But never died" *CI*, 213.

³⁰⁹ See Maurice O. Wallace, *Constructing the Black Masculine: Identity and Ideality in African American Men's Literature and Culture, 1775-1995*, (Durham: Duke UP, 2002), 119. Hereafter cited as *CBM*.

³¹⁰"A man with no say is an animal. So a man has to be able to make fire, has to know how to make it in the wind an' the rain an' the dark. When he can do that, he can have some say...Nothin' *makes* you a man. It means you can be a man. If you decide you want to" *CI*, 42.

³¹¹ See Robert Reid-Pharr, "Tearing the Goat's Flesh: Homosexuality, Abjection, and the Production of a Late Twentieth-Century Black Masculinity," in *African American Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. Winston Napier, (New York: NYU Press, 2000), 605. Hereafter cited as "TGF."

³¹² Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," in *BWC*, 203-230. In this essay she calls for a critical position of resistance to heteronormative claims upon black sexualities; one must simultaneously affirm and claim (say "yes") to the mother, "the female within," and, at the same time, reject the authoritative text of patriarchal heterosexuality.

Moses and Jack collude in the origins of a “(deep) crisis of the racially marked homosexual, the Black homosexual that threw into confusion...the boundaries of a (Black) normality.”³¹³ Old Jack narrates the rudiments of John’s inherited castration crisis in yet another tale from Moses:

Your daddy. He liked you. He was proud a you. An’ he worried about you. That was jest about the last thing he said to me; probably the last thing he said to anybody...Said you was too much your mama’s child. Said he was worried you was gonna end up bein’ a preacher or a sissy or somethin’, on account a the way that woman carried on around you, fussin’ with your clothes and fixin’ you food an’ things that a man oughta be able to do for hisself. Said he wasn’t worried about your brother, there wasn’t enough woman in him for it to be dangerous. But you was different. He said there was a lot of woman in you...He was afraid your mama would do for you so much you wasn’t never gonna be able to do for yourself, wasn’t gonna end up fit for nothing’ cept getting’ turned over to another woman an’ goin’ to work for a white man an’ end up the kinda fool that can’t go to sleep lessen he knows ‘xactly where he’s gonna get his pussy an’ his next pay. An’ he said that was alright for some, but not for you, on accounta you was special. That’s what he said. Special. Said you had a lot of woman in you, but you had one hell of a lot of man to go with it. (*CI*, 34-5.)

Through the injunction to contain and control the “woman” organizing John’s interiority, since he is “too much his mother’s child,” it is no surprise that like father like son, the attic becomes the space of preservation, not only of their intellectual, but also of their sexual identity.³¹⁴ Moses built the house on Vondersmith Avenue with his own hands; as a structure it represents a psychotic’s dream, “a schizophrenic could have lived in the place without ever having to face his alter ego. A paranoid would have found it equally comfortable” (*CI*, 123.)

What is under siege outside the attic for black men is the ability to “have their say;” therefore, in their attempts to assert themselves and the Black community as

³¹³ “TGF,” 608.

³¹⁴ [T]he visible framework of black architecture, like all architecture generally...is, more precisely, the dialectics of an invisible space of interiority covered over by the masquerade of closet-like materiality that the exteriority of black vernacular architectures, in literary and lived experiences alike, keeps discretely guarded. The invisible space of interiority—the soul of the place—is the soul of the man who occupies it *CBM*, 119.

straight, the hysterical demand to cordon off their masculinity from any taint of the feminine is expressed in Jack's, and ostensibly Moses,' "woman-hating and fag-bashing."³¹⁵ The misogyny of Jack's language, "[h]e was afraid your mama would do for you so much you wasn't never gonna be able to do for yourself...an' end up the kinda fool that can't go to sleep lessen he knows 'xactly where he's gonna get his pussy an' his next pay," and the homophobic terror of becoming a "sissy," only reinscribes for John the historical violence constitutive of black sexualities upon the bodies of women, literally in John's rape of the white woman (also a strike against white patriarchy), and in the aggression John expresses towards his mother and Judith throughout the text. Their sexualities are ultimately as constructed and as "paranoid" as the house that Moses built.

It is not just Moses' attic that functions as a preservative, masculine space. Jack's dilapidated old cabin in the woods which incites disgust in Judith when she finally discovers John there is yet another black architectural structure whose materiality functions as a sign of black, male interiority.

However, these structures and their relation to the boys and men inhabiting them necessarily change over space and time. Even for John the childhood romance of Old Jack's shack begins to decay, along with Old Jack's body, when he returns as an adult to nurse the sick man, "now the shack looked as if it might be unfit for human habitation, and not only the shack, but the land around it; the whole scene...foretold disaster" (*CI*, 30.) At the precipice of a new and possibly original experience in and outside of time, John wonders about "the soul of the place and the soul of the man" who occupies it: "[H]ow much of that [decay and death] had to do with the fact that the man who for years had made it all go, who had added life and force and interest to it, was not moving through it, might not be moving at all." In Old Jack's cabin, this

³¹⁵ "TGF," 605.

“improbably ugly structure leaning defiantly against the pull of gravity and the weight of time, the boards of weird grayish-green from the effects of the weather” (*CI*, 29), the site of the storytelling ritual is assembled.³¹⁶ When Old Jack passes on, John’s relation to the ritual and its structural integrity in time and space necessarily, shifts. It too moves, it “lean[s] defiantly against the weight of time.”

Survivals

In the state of Pennsylvania, somewhere around Raystown, in the South county of this area, legend has it that twelve slaves, escaping captivity and headed north to freedom, were finally trapped and caught by the slavecatchers who tracked them at Chaneyville. What happened to those twelve at Chaneyville? What did they do at this site of memory and, as important, why? Were they simply captured and taken back to enslavement, “too scared to fight?” These are some of the tales that float around about “the twelve” at Chaneyville. There are, however, other conjectures.

For Old Jack, they are not dead. Out of the several historical threads that make the weave of John’s life, Old Jack in his role as oral storyteller repeats the story to the boy, a story Moses Washington himself used to like to repeat:

I knew the tale. He had told me the story twenty times by then, but he only needed to tell me once, for at that first telling he had said that it was a tale that Moses Washington had liked to tell, over and over again. And so I could sit by the campfire, hearing the words with only half my mind, filling in the details on my own, telling myself the story of a dozen slaves who had come north on the Underground Railroad, fleeing whatever horrors were behind them, and who had got lost just north of the Mason-Dixon Line, somewhere in the lower reaches of the County, and who, when they could no longer elude the men who trailed them with dogs and horses and ropes and chains, had begged to be killed rather than taken back to bondage. But that night had been different; he had added something new...”Some say they gave up. Some say they quit. White folks say it mostly, though I’ve heard some colored say it too. Bunch a sorry niggers, they

³¹⁶ “The black masculine fondness for the home, the shanty, the underground room, the crypt, and the closet, then—as opposed to the Oedipal dread of them as domesticating, even emasculating, constructions (inasmuch as our cultural logic of sex and space renders the inside place feminine)—speaks for a longing to abscond from the neurotically uncanny experience of social spectragraphia by a retreat from the public sphere where the gaze tyrannizes into the remote interiority of that other construction of space: consciousness” *CBM*, 123.

say, too scared to fight, too scared to run, to scared to face slav'ry, too scared even to kill their own selves; couldn't even get away that way, lessen a white man done it for 'em. An' maybe that's the truth of it, though it seems to me you don't want to be judgin' folks too quick, or too hard...on accounta don't nobody know what happened down there in the South County, or when, or even xactly where. I doubt the killin' part of it myself. On accounta they ain't dead. They're still here. Still runnin' from them dogs an' whatnot. I know, on accounta' I heard em. I aint never heard em that often—maybe five, six times in ma whole life. Funny times. I never heard em anytime when there wasn't snow on the ground, for instance. An I ain't never heard em when I was listenin' for 'em special. Now I think on it, I only ever heard em when I was on the trail a somethin' else, an' I'd be listenin' for whatever I was after, jest settin' there lettin' the sound come to me, an' then I'd hear 'em. Wouldn't be no big noise. Wouldn't be nothin' like them sounds them dumb-butted white folks, don't know a ghost from a bed-sheet, is all the time tellin' you ghosts make. On accounta' they ain't ghosts; they ain't dead. They're just runnin' along. An' the sound you hear is the sound of 'em pantin'. First time I heard 'em, I recall I was caught out in a storm, up along Barefoot Run..." (62)

Most obviously the agency of the slaves in the moment of their entrapment bears the moral weight of the legend. If they are “too scared” to act by taking their own lives, and “begged to be killed rather than taken back to bondage,” this tale may not enroll itself on the historical page of fame; rather, for the unknown descendants of these unknown, black escaped captives, it will be remembered as a historical page of shame. This is the fate of “unknown” people whose lives fall into the blank gaps of historical knowledge.³¹⁷

³¹⁷*The Chaneyville Incident* is not just the title of the text, it is one of those “blank spaces,” or ellipses that John cannot “figure out.” John links the “gaps” and blank spaces in history to the experience of death in a moment of contemplation after his return home to tend to the dying Jack Crawley: “And then I began to think about what a man’s dying really means: his story is lost. Bits and pieces of it remain, but they are all second-hand tales and hearsay, or cold official records that preserve the facts and spoil the truth; the sum is like a writer’s complete works with crucial numbers missing: the works of Macaulay minus the essay on Milton; the Complete Henry Hallam without *The Constitutional History*. The missing volumes are not the most important, but they are the stuff of background, the material of understanding, the real power of history. The gaps in the stories of the famous are filled eventually; overfilled. Funeral eulogies become laudatory biography, which becomes critical biography, which becomes history, which means everyone will know the facts even if no one knows the truth. But the gaps in the stories of the unknown are never filled, never can be filled, for they are larger than data, larger than deduction larger than induction” *CI* 49.

Old Jack provides a competing version of the incident which makes comment upon the oppositional version of history and spirituality to which John, and Moses, is recipient. And he is able to do so *because* of the nature of historical knowledge—it is always, to some degree, “unknown.” Yet, what Jack also knows quite well is that unknown survivals necessitate the play of history and memory, “on accounta don’t nobody know what happened down there in the South County, or when, or even ‘xactly where. I doubt the killin’ part of it myself. On accouta they ain’t ghosts; they ain’t dead. They’re still here.”

Old Jack believes in a narrative oppositional to the Judeo-Christian sense of death. If you can still hear the twelve, “if they ain’t dead, but are just running along,” then they continue to exist in another life (not “afterlife,” *per se*), which is contiguous with the present. Old Jack, “hears them when on the trail of something else,” and “adds something new” to the tale, since he “doubts the killin’ part of it.” To categorize them as “ghosts” invites the Judeo-Christian conceptual frame which is why he insists that “they ain’t ghosts;” and, *because* they are not “ghosts” but rather something else, “they ain’t dead.” However, if they are not “ghosts” they nevertheless haunt in a different way. Jack’s formulation of the twelve provides instruction to the reader: how to ontologically engage an oppositional ontology.

A year after Moses Washington’s death by accident, murder or suicide, Jack tells John this version of the story on his eleventh birthday, thereby firmly grounding it in a spiritual memory that understands other versions of the passage into death in opposition to the state-organized, Judeo-Christian world-view. As a doctrine, the Judeo-Christian narrative suppresses not only African belief systems; in the fragmented sign of Esdras John discovers in Moses’ attic it also censoriously polices what is proper to the interior and the exterior of the text’s legitimate body: “every

story one chooses to tell is a kind of censorship, it prevents the telling of other tales.”³¹⁸

The censorship is also apparent in the slow advance John makes towards the defining experience of his life, the narrative he tells and the act he commits after the ritual is complete. Right up to the moment of ritualistic play with Judith in Old Jack’s cabin, John clings to the misogyny that marks his sexual fears. Despite the fact that his great-grandmother Bijou, one of the slave women his great-great-grandfather C.K. liberates from a whorehouse during his penultimate attempt with the Underground Railroad to change the slave system, is the keeper of C.K.’s personal documents John inherits in the folio, he cannot make room in his tale for Bijou, represented in one of C.K.’s journals as “the darkest of the women” (*CI* 361.) It is left up to Judith, his white lover, to make the valuable connection between Bijou and all the family documents in the folio.

The text demands that the audience understand Judith’s crucial role in interpreting Bijou’s place in the unequal power relations set up by a heterosexual hegemonic economy that privileges masculinity (mastery) over femininity (enslavement.) John reproduces the hierarchy so pointedly in his dismissal of Bijou’s importance to his project that we as readers are implicitly asked how to account for Bijou’s agency in this history; albeit without diminishing the power of the forces that silence her, among them, her own great-grandson?³¹⁹ John’s fear of his own sexuality’s indebtedness to the black feminine marks this suppression; he never once questions his indebtedness to his father.

³¹⁸ Salman Rushdie, *Shame*, (New York: Vintage, 1990), 72-3.

³¹⁹“How do we account for, on the one hand, the inordinate discrepancy of power between master and slave without demonstrating the slave’s defeat, and, on the other, an agency that contravened the master’s will without bestowing in slaves a freedom they clearly did not have” Jenny Sharpe, *Ghosts of Slavery: A Literary Archeology of Black Women’s Lives*, University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 2003, xvi.

Moses' death is the event John has been trying to "figure out" since childhood. In the journey he takes with Judith, he finds the twelve; literally, he "hears them while on the trail for something else," and that something else is C.K., his legendary great-grandfather. While tracking the man Moses, John discovers a layered, polyvalent, and alternative understanding of history. When he is finally able to process all the details he discovered in Moses' attic; in his own University research; and in the maps, diaries and information Moses leaves him in the folio about Chaneyville and his great-grandfather, C.K.; he takes Old Jack's chair in the dilapidated cabin: "[a]nd then I went and sat down in Old Jack's chair. It felt strange—I had never sat in it before" and tells his own tale of the twelve (*CI*, 254.)

In the narrative John finally constructs from Jack's seat, with Judith in his former place as initiate, he reproduces all the elements of the ritual. And, like Jack before him, he "adds something new." John imagines the twelve are runaway slaves his great-grandfather, C.K. Washington, helps escape to freedom in his nineteenth century project to attack the system of slavery where it hurt, through its bodies and their value.³²⁰

In the romance of the slave narrative he tells Judith over candlelight and toddies, he reimagines the identities of the unknown twelve. In them he locates his brother Bill, the daughters of Raystown's prostitute, Cara and Mara, and Azacca, a Haitian slave. In so doing he also locates historical subjects marginalized and forgotten by official histories: black veterans of American wars, black enslaved women, and enslaved peoples of the Caribbean.

³²⁰ In his research, John discovers that C.K., his great-grandfather, is an escaped slave who turns to the Underground Railroad when other political forms of resistance fail. By helping approximately two hundred runaways escape to freedom, he damages the lucrativeness of the system to the tune of tens of thousands of dollars. Removing laboring slave bodies means stealing back the capital theft of enslavement, black lives. His name, C.K., signifies upon Joseph Cinque, the leader of the Amistad Rebellion.

Most importantly, he imagines their passage; women, children and aged, among them his own great-grandfather and the last woman that he loved, Harriete Brewster, a black woman born into freedom and taken into slavery as a result of the fugitive slave laws of the 1850's, who could pass for white. When he and Judith stumble upon thirteen graves, as opposed to the twelve of which legend sang, at the spot in Chaneyville where Moses' body was found, it is clear to John that C.K. was with this coffle of twelve runaways when they are finally overtaken, and that this, too, Moses knew. It is evident that this is the spot where Moses made his passage. And it is confirmed that Moses' quest mirrors his son's; he went there to find C.K. Both go to Chaneyville to find their fathers.

And yet, although the thirteen graves are organized with care, John does not believe that they mark the death of C.K.; "it wasn't a death somebody had marked, it was only a grave" (*CI*, 381), nor does he believe that Moses committed suicide upon this spot. Moses was not a historian, "if anything, he was a hunter." John understands that at the moment of revelation in Chaneyville, Moses still had not "found" his grandfather, C.K. By making the distinction between "finding him (C.K.)" and "finding his grave," John begins to play with the signifiers that organize his historical memory. In order to do this, he must model himself conceptually upon his father's hermeneutic framework, the hunt, and upon Old Jack's storytelling ritual, as opposed to the historical archive. Like any good hunter, and Moses was legendary in this regard, John understands what his father has done—he has gone to the happy hunting ground to track the wild game of history.

Finding the graves of the thirteen at Chaneyville is only the beginning of this quest, for both Washington men. Moses "did what any good hunter does when he's off to trail dangerous game: he left trail markers, so that if somebody wanted to they could follow him, and he more or less made sure somebody would want to" (*CI*, 387). And

John finally comprehends why his “heathen” father spent so much “time in church talking to preachers and reading the Bible because he wanted to be sure the Christians were wrong. You don’t throw your whole life away if you’re not sure the dead really are there, waiting for you” (*CI*, 389). Moses the hunter was not seeking C.K.’s grave, per se, he was “looking for a man...the same way a hunter looks for a hoofprint, or bedding grounds or signs—the grave) was a spoor. And when he found it he did what any good woodsman would do: he put himself in the mind of the game and headed off after it” (*CI*, 388). Moses goes on a hunting trip for C.K. and for history; thus, he makes his passage.

One typically hunts in order to kill something. This moment in which the hunting of history is linked to the hunting of runaway slaves could easily suggest a perverse parallel. However, Moses “hunts” the legendary C.K. in a different way than the slave-catchers hunt the thirteen black subjects; the repression of the murder and death of the father that organizes the Freudian Mosaic myth is here the repression of a different interpretation of death itself, accessed by the father in a decolonizing move that rejects the Judeo-Christian formulation.

John Washington comes to understand through the heroic narrative he tells of C.K., Harriette, and the coffle of runaway slaves that survival is intimately connected to an experience of death. In order for John, his father Moses, C.K., and Old Jack to survive is to shed the orthodoxies of entrenched Christian religious imperatives. It is also, however, to confront the specific trauma of survival.

Analogous to Freud’s model of the Jews’ sense of being chosen (the Jews’ too were “hunted” by the Pharaoh, their “passage” through the “middle” of the Red Sea marked the beginning of a new freedom), is that the sense of an anointed status cannot be grasped in their experience of a belief system that takes hold involuntarily when it becomes a tradition; John *involuntarily* asserts his mastery over the oral and written

tales and histories he has collected through the ritual with Judith, “Africanisms, anthropologists aptly call them ‘survivals’—exist in all of us, independent of our knowledge and our volition” (*CI*, 213).³²¹ And the tradition that takes hold in this moment is the West African sense of “death;” the “writing” established is a decolonizing function; this is precisely what the text suggests it means for a black man to survive. In his own survival, John exceeds the claims of his own consciousness and, therefore, experiences it.

That John has endured numerous traumas in his life is self-evident. It is my argument, however, that what he initially cannot will himself to see as a boy and as a young man is finally realized in the magisterial narrative he still cannot “will” himself to tell, thereby assuming mastery over the traumatic truth of his history and his ancestors’ deaths. The survival of West African religious beliefs is stimulated by the ritual form in its invocation to tell a story. John experiences these beliefs through an “involuntary return of an event,” a “survival” in the traumatic sense of the term. It is in this moment that John achieves the fullest evocation of his humanity, by “having his say.”

When “the Chaneyville Incident” is given form in John’s evocation, he is fully prepared for the implications of the experience of his survival. That survival is linked directly to both the syndetic traditions of West African religious practices, and the promise written in Esdras to the ten tribes, taken as captives from their own land to serve as slaves in another. And it must be a singular incident, as opposed to several, or

³²¹Caruth theorizes Freud’s perplexity at the returning traumatic dream in connection to survival in *Moses and Monotheism*. Survival in the traumatic sense is that which is not understood in terms of any wish or unconscious meaning, but is purely and inexplicably, the literal and involuntary return of an event by the one it inhabits. She states: “What Freud encounters in the traumatic neurosis is not the reaction to any horrible event but, rather, the peculiar and perplexing experience of survival.” Arguing that monotheism is truly operative in Jewish history only as a “tradition,” Caruth reads in Freud’s novel “the sense of being chosen is precisely what cannot be grasped in the Jewish past, the way in which its past has imposed itself upon it as a history that it survives but does not fully understand” (*UE*, 68).

many, for it is the singularity of this confrontation which is repetitively returned to and engaged by John, Moses, C.K.; the line stretches back into the past and reaches forward, towards the child Judith is most certainly going to bear, into the future.

As a black man in America trained in the discipline of history, John Washington's encounter with the legacies of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, lynching violence, and political oppression, figured in the oral histories and textually represented in the slave narratives that shape his subjectivity, form the epic he finally gives voice to in the transferential moment with Judith. Chaneyville as a "site of memory" is "material, symbolic, and functional." "Material" in the documents and objects he inherits, "symbolic" in the repetition of the trauma linked to the hunt for the lost father, and "functional" in the ritual structure. Memories, historical facts, oral and textual narratives form the traditions of enslavement in their subsequent survival, which cannot be grasped by John. But what he can do is let his anointed status grasp him, to let it work and act upon him, to let it "bend" him, as do toys and rituals.

John is literally chosen by Moses; Moses leaves Old Jack as his charge and not as his brother Bill's; John is the inheritor of the oral tales, the written histories, and the folio, as well as the legacy in the attic whose matches are carefully left in place for his first-born son. The death of Moses, suffered by John as a traumatic separation from the father, ultimately leads to a belated attempt to return to the moment before the death. This attempt to return always confronts again the act of violence—the cause of the separation—in the form of a repeated violence coextensive with the mastery of the events. The belated or latent experience of trauma suggests that history is not only the passing on of a crisis but also the passing on of a survival that can "only be understood within a history larger than any single individual or any single generation."³²²

³²² *UE*, 71 Indeed, Caruth further argues that while trauma is described as possession by the past that is not entirely one's own, trauma already describes the individual experience as something which exceeds itself. This notion of trauma also acknowledges that perhaps it is not possible for

Therefore, a particular interpretation of the incident at Chaneyville reaches out towards its past, present, and future audience; and towards John's and Judith's line of descent to witness and understand this survival.

And still the question remains, are Moses and the twelve fugitive slaves he tracked most of his adult life, along with his grandfather, C.K., really "dead," and can we characterize their "deaths" as "suicides?" John decides against this definition, "No, not suicide. The Judge thought it was murder. I thought I had discovered a suicide. But what it really was was a...a hunting trip" (*CI*, 388). Following the logic Bradley maps out in the novel, they are most decidedly *neither* dead, *nor* suicides; the conditions of their survival are keys to John finally having his "say" in more ways than one.

In anchoring the myth of the thirteen ancestors at Chaneyville to a tale of his own fabulation, John inherits and transmits to Judith "the signifying function, which must resist and endure beyond birth and death."³²³ In the dialectic of departure and return, whose knot of representation the cold facts through which John had to break through, the text presents us with a far more complex alternative to the end of this local legend. Through the assumption of mastery in his belated ability to give voice to survivals, the text charts the imaginative leap John and his ancestors before and after him must make. Leaping back over the great divide of the Atlantic, red with blood and destruction, John is finally able to face the fact of his family's "survival:" in this world, they have shifted space and time to return through a different passage. It is no accident that the family name is "Washington," their ritualized action establishes them as the fathers and mothers of another country. The end of the novel repeats John's interpretation of Moses' "death," he leaps towards a doubly decolonized form of belief, hunting for the game that is history.

the witnessing of the trauma to occur within the individual at all; it may only be in future generations that a "cure" or witnessing takes place.

³²³ *IH*, 85.

In this last moment, the books, pamphlets and maps are all put back in their place in Old Jack's cabin, "waiting for the next man who would need them." John burns all of the "tools of his trade" the note cards, pads and pencils and, interestingly, "tuck[s] the folio beneath [his] arm." In making the "small edifice of kindling," he is "a bit careless, and gets some [kerosene] on [his] boots, but that would make no difference." With the folio under his arm and the kerosene on his boots, John strikes his last match in front of the pyre, "thinking about it all one last time" (*CI*, 431-32).

In this act, C.K. and Moses are polyvalent within John, he is a "tangible presence of the mythic past, as palpable proof that the ancestor and his descendant are a single flesh" (*IH*, 79). But how is it that ritually telling a tale to Judith from Jack's chair somehow enforces a proper "experience" for John, one that he is willing to bet his individual and collective futures upon? The ritual structure, the materials in the folio, John's research, and of course the oral tales themselves compose a "single object invested with two opposing signifying functions."³²⁴ Once the ritual function and the accoutrements of its play are located in John's body through ears that can hear and a tongue that can confess, "what was the signifier of absolute synchrony, now freed, becomes invested by the diachrony which has lost its signifier (the embryo of the new individual), and is turned around into the signifier of absolute diachrony," therefore, the signifiers of the "toys" (John's materials that are played with in the ritual), are also "freed;" they too "become unstable," invested with a contrary meaning, at the end of the game (*IH*, 79-80). This is why John burns the folio along with his own body. The next person who finds the books, pamphlets, and maps in Old Jack's cabin will have to construct a "meaningful fabulation" through their own methods, and, in refashioning the material into their own narrative, make their own "burning, inductive leap that can take you from here to there" (*CI*, 147.) Also, upon

³²⁴ *IH*, 79.

his arrival at the happy hunting ground, he and the others might need the folio, especially the maps, if it “is still all going on.” One can also imagine John cross-pollinating the past with a literary archaeology sorely missing in his present, but not in his child’s, future.

In the surrender of a Judeo-Christian political rhetoric John divests himself of entrenched and hegemonic orthodoxies; in casting them off, he is enabled to face the immortal *and adjacent* survival of his father’s line; it allows him the faith to light the match. Leaping across the divide in a rejection of the State driven *politics* of Judeo-Christian hegemonic discourses, as opposed to their *practices*, represented in Esdras, John gives voice to his own “Incident,” in both this and another place. He returns to a belief in a different passage, through practices outlined in Esdras and the practices of the West African sense of “going home:”

As I struck the match it came to me how strange it would all look to someone else, someone from far away. And as I dropped the match to the wood and watched the flames go twisting, I wondered if that someone would understand. Not just someone; Judith. I wondered if she would understand when she saw the smoke go rising from the far side of the Hill (*CI*, 432).

It would seem that besides going to the happy hunting ground, John has collected all of his toys and put them away, hiding them from sight so that their embarrassing residues are invisible to the naked eye watching the scene: his own, the author’s, the text’s, and the reader’s.

Yet, in transmitting the signifying function to Judith in the form of ritual, and by burning the obligatory items in his toybox, John commits what is necessary to burial and also what is necessary to life. He restores the signifiers of diachronic and synchronic discontinuity to the past and to the future by “playing” with them, by sharing his game with Judith, and then by putting them away.

Judith is witness to this history, and has learned to play with the ritual in significant ways that “rend the veil from proceedings too terrible to relate” for the

feminine.³²⁵ Thus, the reader is freed up to participate in the play and toy with the future; one imagines that the next “man” in the Washington line of descent is a queer boy, or preferably a girl child, “playing with dice.”³²⁶ In so doing, the ethical turn on the part of John’s decolonizing ritualistic play, and his attendant experience, allows the reader to engage the decolonizing ritual, “to join the armies of the night who sing: before I’ll be a slave I’ll go home to my Lord and be free;” she joins them in this “voyage through death, to life on these shores.” Listen, closely. In the quiet, one night, when you are tracking something else, you can hear them, for they are not dead, they are near, and they are running alongside us.

The Chaneyville Incident tells us that in the beginning there was the Word, the Call, and the Response.

³²⁵ Judith is a descendant of the Powell slave-owning family who most certainly owned, and fathered, some of John’s family. In his final gift to Judith, John solders together these two worlds.

³²⁶ Agamben comments upon the Heraclitus fragment that translates “*aiōn*, time in its original sense, should figure as a ‘child playing with dice’” *IH*, 72.

Chapter Five:
Empires of Vision: The Photo-postcard
as Souvenir

Introduction:

How To Read a Snapshot of a Soul

On the first page of Nelly Rosario's *Song of the Water Saints*, the reviewer from *Time Out New York*, one voice in a long list of critical acclaim, celebrates Rosario's novel in telling language: "(l)ush and assured...each brief chapter *reads like a snapshot of a soul*."³²⁷ In an overt reference to a dialectics of exteriority and interiority, the reviewer's accolade leads to the question: what would it *mean* to "read a snapshot of a soul?" How does one imagine, and image forth, an ineffable interiority? Apparently, through an image, photographic or otherwise, as opposed to words; it is through the image that a more immediate route to viewing an object is promised. As one theorist has noted, "an image brings forth a presence in a way words never do."³²⁸

The interpretation of a descriptive text through a representation of a visual image is precisely one of the projects Rosario's novel undertakes. *Song of the Water Saints* approaches this intersection of literary language and visual image through an initial use of ekphrasis that structures the entirety of the novel. W.J.T. Mitchell defines ekphrasis as "the verbal representation of visual representation" (Mitchell 702).

³²⁷Nelly Rosario, *Song of the Water Saints* (New York: Vintage, 2002), frontispiece. Hereafter cited as *SWS*.

³²⁸In a useful analysis of three "phases" of ekphrasis ("ekphrastic indifference", "ekphrastic hope", and "ekphrastic fear") W.J.T. Mitchell persuasively argues that the "indifferent" phase marked by the "impossibility" of ekphrasis must be circumvented, despite the fact that "(a) verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can "cite" but never "sight" their objects." *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 152.

Etymologically the term literally means “giving voice to a mute art object.” (Mitchell 153). I will argue that Rosario’s use of ekphrasis structures the epistemological foundations of her novel and, simultaneously, destabilizes those same foundations; if her work “reads like the snapshot of a soul” it does so by interrogating the rhetorical play produced by specific sorts of ekphrastically described visual media—specifically the photograph-postcard—in their relation to the function of the souvenir. My concern is to trace the ekphrastic moments in the novel that question a Western European epistemology of the visual; to read the oppositional spaces and revisions of ekphrasis produced by Rosario’s structuring of those moments as both a recreation of and a reference to different forms of “seeing” as historical knowledge. However, it is first necessary to explore the question begged by the *Song of the Water Saints*: what is the ekphrastic relation of the image to the word, and to what use is that relation put in the service of telling the story of the Caribbean on the island of the Dominican Republic during the course of the twentieth century?

Ekphrasis is described as a minority genre of literary figuration whose minor status has not prevented it from developing a formidable critical repertoire.³²⁹ As a figure ekphrasis vexes the difference between text and image; in describing a visual object it figures forth that object as a presence. The object is not, of course, physically present; it is *made* present to the mind’s eye in its representation. Since ekphrasis is so completely bound up with the visual and visual cultures, postcolonial and emergent literatures have taken it up as a field of inquiry into those specific forces of

³²⁹ A few examples of works that focus on ekphrasis as a literary genre include Murray Krieger’s book-length study *Ekphrasis: The Illusion of the Natural Sign*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1992); W.J.T. Mitchell’s *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and *Picture Theory* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); Françoise Meltzer’s *Salome and the Dance of Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); and Page DuBois’s *History, Rhetorical Description and the Epic* (D.S. Brewer: London, 1982).

domination and disciplinary power organized by the visual.³³⁰ As a literary figure that focuses on the exchange and circulation between the visual and textual modes of representation, ekphrasis functions as a sign of the visual itself, whose production historically has often been put to the service of women's oppression, and, in addition, all those culturally produced as "other."

Ekphrasis is also perhaps the literary figure that most obviously stages a literal conflict between self and other; it is structured by the written word that produces, and enlists to its discursive power, a visual image. Yet as others have theorized, the dance between text and image is illusory, impossible, and seductive. During his discussion of ekphrasis, Mitchell excavates the tension between "ekphastic hope" (in which the division between image and text is traversed and a verbal icon or imagetext arises in its place), and "ekphrastic fear" (the moment marked by a realization that the difference between the verbal and visual representation might collapse, and the figurative, imaginary possibility of ekphrasis might be realized literally). As Mitchell states, if ekphrasis is constitutive of a social relation shot through with political, disciplinary or cultural domination, it "takes on a full range of possible social relations inscribed within the field of verbal and visual representation" embodied in an imagetext. The 'self' (ie: narration) is understood to be an active, speaking, seeing subject while the other is projected as passive, seen and usually silent object. Like the masses, the colonized, the powerless, and the voiceless everywhere, visual representation cannot represent itself; it must be represented by discourse."³³¹

Therefore, imagetexts provide narrative ground through representation, and yet,

³³⁰ Postcolonial examples of ekphrasis include Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*, and Michelle Cliff's *No Telephone to Heaven*; African American novels which utilize ekphrasis include among the Harlem Renaissance authors, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* as well as middle to late twentieth century texts such as James Baldwin's *Go Tell It On the Mountain* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*, to name a few.

³³¹ *PT*, 157, 162.

simultaneously, resist and elude narration.³³² As such, the imagetext in *Song of the Water Saints*, in fact, all the souvenirs collected in the novel by its protagonist, Graciela, functions as metonyms for a specifically Caribbean encounter with Western “History;” the ground of engagement both eludes a temporal “nonhistory” and produces the possibilities for experiencing alternative histories, thereby establishing a collective, historical consciousness.³³³

This exploration and revision of visual modes of representation pose a vexed problem for the author of emergent and postcolonial literatures; in the long history of representational and technological disciplinary strategies at the service of colonial and neo-colonial Western powers, the project of the author who would destabilize such representative regimes runs the risk of reproducing the hierarchies already set in place. However, it is precisely to the field of the visual in the form of ekphrasis to which Rosario returns. In her revision of the classical literary examples of the form, the image text provides an oppositional way of seeing and reading the visual archives that produce the Caribbean black, feminine subject as “other” to the white, Western, imperial male gaze.³³⁴ In so doing, oppositional forms of vision are advanced towards another reading of Caribbean histories.

³³² Marianne Hirsch. *Family Frames: photography, narrative and postmemory* (Harvard, UP: 1997), 271.

³³³ “History’.... [with a capital *H*] is a highly functional fantasy of the West, originating at precisely the time when it alone ‘made’ the history of the world. If Hegel relegated African peoples to the ahistorical, Amerindian peoples to the prehistorical, in order to reserve History for European peoples exclusively, it appears that it is not because these African or American peoples ‘have entered History’ that we can conclude today that such a hierarchical conception of the ‘march of History’ is no longer relevant.” Edouard Glissant. *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (Virginia: University of Virginia, 1989).

³³⁴ In this construction I am drawing on Mary Louise Pratt’s notion of the “imperial gaze.” *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992).

Part One:

Ekphrastic Models:

Traditionally ekphrasis is characterized by an attenuated trajectory of famous examples that stretch from ancient epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid*, to more modern novelistic and lyric examples like Henry James's *Portrait of a Lady*, John Keats's *Ode On A Grecian Urn*, and *My Last Duchess*. What these celebrated moments of ekphrasis in Western literatures share in the first two examples is their role in epic narratives of conquest and empire-building that construct masculine, nationalist identities; and, in the latter two, the ways in which represented feminine images and bodies are objectified, circulated, and thereby, marked as an object d'art whose status as property also constructs the masculine. Both *The Iliad* and *The Aeneid* possess ekphrastic moments of tremendous critical note: the description of Achilles's shield in the former and Vergil's reproduction of Aeneas's own shield by Vulcan in the latter. In *Portrait of a Lady*, *Ode on A Grecian Urn* and *My Last Duchess*, a mute, feminized object is made to speak, to varying degrees of success and with varying degrees of violence.

I want to look at one of Rosario's ekphrastic descriptions in particular and link it to the resulting narration that organizes the rest of the novel. The story begins in 1916, at the height of World War One in Santo Domingo, Republica Dominicana. Its chapter head is entitled "Invasions", meant to signify upon the United States occupation of the island at the height of U.S. imperial dominance in the Caribbean and South-East Asian theatre of war. Prior to the beginning of the narrative, however, an "invasion" of another sort has already occurred. A description of a photograph precedes the formal narrative.

Rosario arranges the text thus:

SCENE AND TYPE #E32

WHITE BORDER-STYLE POSTCARD

COUNTRY UNKNOWN, CA. 1900

PRINTED BY: PETER J. WEST & CO./ OTTO NATHER CO.

HAMBURG, GERMANY

They are naked. The boy cradles the girl. Their flesh is copper. They recline on a Victorian couch surrounded by cardboard Egyptian pottery; a stuffed wild tiger, a toy drum, and glazed coconut trees. An American prairie looms behind them in dull oils. Shadows ink the muscles of the boy's arms, thighs and calves. His penis lies flaccid. Cheekbones are high, as if the whittler of his bones was reveling when She carved him. The girl lies against the boy. There is ocean in her eyes. Clouds of hair camouflage one breast. An orchid blooms on her cheek.

To begin a novel with a representation of a visual image is to cue the reader that the realm of the visual itself is under review. Ekphrasis is always political, it represents a field of contestation between the visual and verbal arts as to which can tell the more effective or more accurate story; it reflects a struggle for intellectual and material property. As a poetic mode, ekphrasis is also the form which would "give voice to a mute object," literally, to make us see, and hear, through language. In her use of this photograph, Rosario introduces to the reader the subject of how an "effective story" is constructed. The initiating function of the imagetext in the novel foregrounds the question of who controls the narrative. In this case, the audience is introduced to how a historical narrative is crucial to the mode of construction itself.

In addition, the photograph rests in the margins of the novel. The description initiates and unofficially propels the audience into the "proper" narrative; in so doing, it raises the question of the relation between image and text, margin and center, improper and proper models of knowledge. The photopostcard is *parergonal* in its marginal status to the rest of the novel. The notion of the margin as *parergon*, that which behaves as conventionally extrinsic, external and supplementary to the "center,

is also intrinsic to the entire body of the work; in as far as the relation between margin and center is organized completely by their essential, and necessarily oppositional relation, to each other.³³⁵ Occupying the margins, the image is simultaneously at the service of the narration, a metonym for the subjection of image to narrative, and constitutive of the force that propels the story. However, the parergon also decenters what it appears to comprehend, shifting the story of the image to marginal status even as it contains and completes the story. Conventionally extrinsic, supplementary, and ostensibly inessential to that which it borders, a parergon is simultaneously intrinsic and essential, inasmuch as the priority of the center depends entirely on the oppositional relation of center to margin. Yet to call attention to this margin is to destroy its marginal status, for the parergon is what it is by virtue of disappearing, sinking into, and obliterating itself, just as it expends the greatest energy. To call attention to the margin is to render it no longer marginal, and consequently, to collapse the center in a general unsettling of oppositional hierarchies.

In this way the novel begins with a specific sort of a “lack”, what has been named the *illusory* nature of the “natural” sign.³³⁶ However, Mitchell challenges the “masquerade” of the “natural sign” in his suggestion that although the ekphrastic image behaves at a certain level like a “sort of unapproachable and unrepresentable ‘black hole’ in the verbal structure, entirely absent from it, but shaping and affecting it in different ways” it is all “a kind of a sham...the “genre” of ekphrasis is distinguished...not by any disturbance or dissonance at the level of signifiers and

³³⁵The parergon comes against, beside, and in addition to the ergon, a work done (fait), the fact (le fait), the work, but it does not fall to one side, it touches and cooperates within the operation, from a certain outside. Neither simply outside nor simply inside. Jacques Derrida, *The Truth In Painting* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 54.

³³⁶“Not only do these objects not exist independently of their verbal depictions, but the narrative-the before/after character of their described images defies any attempt by the plastic artist to produce an object that is totally answerable to the words as their visual equivalent. From the first, then, to look at ekphrasis is to look into the illusionary representation of the unrepresentable, even while that representation is allowed to masquerade as a natural sign, as if it could be an adequate substitute for its object.” Ekphrasis, xv.

representational media, but by a possible reference to or thematizing of this sort of dissonance. (Mitchell 158).³³⁷ However, the photographic image of the nude boy and girl on the Victorian couch is also superimposed on a *postcard*. As a photographic postcard, it is subject to transfers, exchange and travel, the photo postcard also bears a particular relation to memory in its proximity to the “souvenir.” This photographic image refers at least doubly within its frame.

Since the novel begins with the chapter “Invasions,” Rosario imagines the lives of the boy and girl pictured in the photograph as subjects of a United States occupied Dominican Republic. The photograph itself, whose country of origin is “unknown,” operates as a metonym for the massive archive produced by the institutional structures of United States and other Western imperial and neo-imperial forms of domination. Exemplary as one among many of the sorts of photographs taken in regions dominated by the West at the turn of the century, the photo belongs to an archive of visual images produced with the Caribbean, Latin America and the South Pacific peoples as subject.³³⁸ They provide a virtual library that tells a story of how imperial institutions

³³⁷ In Krieger’s analysis, “the poem, must convert the transparency of its verbal medium into the physical solidity of the medium of the spatial arts;” for Mitchell, this is to risk falling into the “misleading metaphor, ‘the medium is the message.’ As Mitchell further states “(e)kphrastic poems speak for, to or about works of visual art in the way that texts in general speak about anything else...(e)kphrastic poetry may speak to, for, or about works of visual art, but there is nothing especially problematic or unique in this speech: no special conjuring acts of language are required...(s)ometimes we talk as if ekphrasis were a peculiar textual feature...but no special textual features can be assigned to ekphrasis...” *Ekphrasis*, 107, *PT*, 158-57.

³³⁸ Javier Morillo-Alicea cites the role of the Caribbean subject in the U.S. colonial imagination in his exploration of photographs taken on the island of Puerto Rico post-1898. His argument follows Ann Stoler’s call to “analyze carefully the functionings of the colonial archive, the manners and institutions through which colonial powers collected and created information about their possessions.” In so doing he understands the “U.S. empire as integrated into the global history of modern empire...Puerto Rico (like the Dominican Republic, I would argue) and the United States should be thought of up against the European colonies and metropolises not because they are merely ‘comparable’ situations but rather because they are an integral part of the same kinds of global processes that created the modern Age of Empire.” “Looking for Empire in the Colonial Archive,” 129-144.

In her essay on postcards from the South Pacific, Caroline Vercoe interrogates how, along with the other by-products of W.W. II, emerges the establishment of the thriving photographic and sex work industries. She theorizes the “staged...ironic faux reenactments” of photographic studios set up in order that servicemen have their photograph taken with “generic hula girls,” whose

produce their racialized others. That the actual photographer of the image Rosario uses to organize her narrative is named “Peter West” serves as a serendipitous nominative to solidify this point. Her ekphrastic description dramatizes the author of this visual production as “West;” the Western imagination that organizes *this* site of fantasy is singularly “West(ern).” At the same time, “peter”, vernacular slang for “penis”, is synonymous with the phallicism of the Western gaze Rosario sets out to critique.³³⁹

Rosario’s use of the photo also showcases the double bind postcolonial writers face when engaged with the processes of the imagination: how does one avoid replication of the epistemologies, and strategies of containment, that have constituted the colonial/imperial other as desired fantasy and interiorized scene of imaginative play? How does one separate oneself from the histories of a technologized, consuming global capitalism and its effects? How can one also separate oneself from the “imperial eye” of colonialist practice and discourse? Since colonial and neocolonial power reproduce themselves forcibly through the realm of the visual and visual technologies, whereby commodified images of the colonized and neo-colonial national territories threaten to eradicate the potential destabilizing forces of the imagination and oppositional strategies of the visual, writers of the post colonies and emergent literatures turn directly to the figurative devices through which visibility is narrated.

This turn in itself exposes the constitutive processes of identity and difference, and the differentials of power organized by the colonialist/neo-colonialist imagination;

mise-en-scene “worked to fix Islanders in a timeless paradigm, erasing any signs of acculturation or change.” She states: “(b)y the mid-century, film and photography had allowed a form of virtual travel that blended fantasy and reality.” “Where Truth Ends and Fantasy Begins: Postcards from the South Pacific,” 371-379.

Although Rosario’s novel is set at the beginning of the twentieth century, her use of the photograph postcard illuminates the role of both the archive and the staging of the primitive other whose production *and circulation* constitutes the transfer of global capital, rhetorical and fiduciary. Both essays in *Only Skin Deep: Changing Visions of the American Self*. (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2003).

³³⁹ For the seminal feminist critique of Jacques Lacan’s phallic gaze (in which the mediating linguistic term of the human body in subjection should be male), see Jacqueline Roses’ *Sexuality in the Field of Vision* (London: Verso, 1991), 49-81.

in Rosario's example, the turn to the visual critiques hierarchies inherited by the West; in addition, *Song of the Water Saints* presents another imaginative space, another way of seeing, as an oppositional discourse of vision figured by the character La Gitana, the palm-reader.

The postcard, mailed through national governmental agencies of transfer and communication, also operates under the rubric of the souvenir, an object that again produces a history of the relation between self and the other. A postcard is sent from one person to another; usually the "exotic" location, cite, or object possesses an "intimacy" of "distance." Susan Stewart theorizes the qualities of the souvenir in relation to the "primitive/exotic" and "civilization":

In the cultivation of distance which we find in the uses of the souvenir...--the third facet is distance in space—the souvenir of the exotic. Just as authenticity and interiority are placed in the remote past, the exotic offers and authenticity of experience tied up with notions of the primitive as child and the primitive as an earlier and purer stage of contemporary civilization... (t)o have a souvenir of the "exotic" is to possess both a specimen and a trophy; on the one hand the object must be marked as exterior and foreign, on the other it must be marked as arising directly out of the immediate experience of its possessor. It is thus placed within an *intimate distance*; space is transformed into interiority, into "personal" space, just as time is transformed into interiority in the case of the antique object." (Stewart 146-7, emphasis mine).³⁴⁰

The entire scope of the novel narrates the stories and the voices of these mute and anonymous immortals, the representation of two Caribbean children captured in the Western frame "circa 1900."

Although the photo is taken by "Peter West," the phallic eye, Rosario's description of the image incorporates the accoutrements one imagines "West" needs

³⁴⁰ One of the earliest and most modern interrogations of the savagery of Western modes of barbarism in relation to "others" is Michel De Montaigne's "Of Cannibals"; Michel de Certeau's essay "Montaigne's 'Of Cannibals': The Savage 'I'" argues that the place of the "Cannibals" is necessarily emptied by De Montaigne's own text's "*meta-discourse* that produces the space of the journey... which constitute(s) language in its relation to that which it is unable to appropriate." For a comprehensive examination of the production of the primitive over and against the modern see Maria Torgovnick's *Gone Primitive*, James Clifford's *The Predicament of Culture* and Hal Foster's *Recodings*.

to produce a colonialist fantasy of the “other;” simultaneously, she complicates how one should read the “photographic” scene. Although an “American” prairie looms behind the children, the mise-en-scene is littered with a hodge-podge of objects from other cultures and parts of the globe: “cardboard Egyptian pottery” and a “stuffed wild tiger.” Drum and coconuts could easily belong to any one of several regions on the globe; the use of Egyptian pottery and the stuffed wild tiger implies the erasure of cultural, historical and temporal difference among all the “others” who exist under imperial rule. In their inclusion, Egypt and the wild tiger also reference blackness and a specifically “African” and “Asian” primitive “other.” This conflation of the “exotic” as seen through Western eyes is meant to suggest several things. The Victorian couch upon which the children recline signifies the prop of empire. However, perhaps the most disturbing elements of the photograph’s scene remains the fact that the subjects of this gaze are *children*. Ann Laura Stoler argues that the link between the savage other and childhood sexuality are constructs (and inheritances) of an eighteenth century civilizing custodial mission and a theory of degeneracy that produced prescriptive definitions of race and class. Images of children and schools provide a surplus in U.S. imperial archives; part of the project was to produce the effect of modernization on the Caribbean islands that moved the populace further away from barbarity. This narrative of progress worked in circular fashion; occupation was necessary to lead people into modernity, also it deflected fears that the youth would grow up and become political agitators.³⁴¹ However, in this example, the children are educated in a different way; their “barbarism” is highlighted by their nudity and the

³⁴¹ See Anna Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault’s History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Duke UP: 1995) 137-165.

amateurish attempt at bordello surroundings. The education of their sexuality is framed by the pornographic.³⁴²

These subjects of the imperial gaze look back at the viewer, however. All attempts at eroticism are undercut by the childlike artificiality of the objects, the *cardboard* pottery, the *toy* drum, and the *stuffed* animal. This is a staged scene, in which “the children” are made to play a part. And since the boy’s penis “lies flaccid”, we know that the scene, titillating or not to the participants, is a constructed “eroticism” clearly for the pleasure of the viewer, both the eye behind the camera and the recipient of the postcard. Ultimately, the eroticism of the scene functions through the overt power relations represented, rather than any specific sexual titillation. Their “primitivism” is constructed by their context within the Western frame of the photo. Their “sexuality” is also staged as a “toy”, a plaything, that which can be “set” and molded, much like the potter molds his or her clay, within the frame of the postcard photo.

In one deft move, Rosario’s use of ekphrasis represents the internal workings, the metanarrative of representation itself. Her description of the photograph locates this image within an archive of visual markers, technologies, and cultures imposed through colonial and neo-colonial regimes of power both disciplinary and representational. She continues her critique of the exchange of the photopostcard by both narrating in the first chapter the actual staging of the scene with Graciela and Silvio in the warehouse, as well as the circulation of the image later in the narrative when its recipient, Eli Cavalier travels to the Caribbean in search of a referent for a

³⁴² Mitchell considers the pornographic element that underwrites ekphrasis as a genre, and as that which overdetermines female otherness as an object of visual pleasure and fascination from a masculine perspective. “Ekphrastic poetry as a verbal conjuring up of the female image has overtones, then, of pornographic writing and masturbatory fantasy...” *PT*, 168.

image. We should now more precisely turn to the narrative content and representational dynamics of these “invasions.”

The Stage and The Scene:

Rosario narrates in Chapter One the profession and travels of “Peter West” and his encounter with Graciela and Silvio. It is primarily Graciela’s journey that is traced through the novel; we are led through the experiences of the women in her family, daughter, granddaughter and great-granddaughter whose own relation to the imagetext and the souvenir continue to reconstitute a different “field of vision.” During a make-out session on El Malécon in Santo Domingo, fifteen year-old Graciela and Silvio find themselves the object of the “yanqui” gaze in more ways than one:

Graciela and Silvio were too lost in their tangle of tongues to care that a few yards away, the yanqui was glad for a brief break from the brutal sun that tormented his skin... (w)ith her tongue tracing Silvio’s neck, Graciela couldn’t care less that Theodore Roosevelt’s ‘soft voice and big stick’ had dipped the yanqui the furthest south he had ever been from New York City. Silvio’s hands crawled back into the rip in Graciela’s skirt; she would not blush if she learned that the yanqui man spying on them had already photographed Marines stationed on her side of the island, who were there to ‘order and pacify,’ in all their debauchery; that dozens of her fellow Dominicans somberly populated the ynaqui’s photo negatives; and that the lush Dominican landscape had left marks on the legs of his tripod. Of no interest to a moaning Graciela were the picaresque postcard views that the yanqui planned on selling in New York and, he hoped, in France and Germany. And having always been poor and anonymous herself, Graciela would certainly not pity the yanqui because his still lifes, nature shots, images of battleships for the newspapers had not won him big money or recognition.” (SWS, 8).

In no time they are approached by amateur photographer Peter West, whose photos of wartime occupation and “lush” landscapes of the Dominican Republic have not garnered him “big money or recognition.” It is clear that neither “picaresque postcard views” nor even yanquis themselves, in “all their debauchery” are sufficient fodder for the West(ern) voyeuristic gaze which continues “spying on them,” and is about to embark on the production of an altogether different sort of image.

The linking of the imperial gaze of West's photography to the physical and cultural violence that the U.S. military occupation enacts upon the Dominican Republic reinforces the relation between vision and empire so thoroughly apparent in the photograph-postcard the audience encounters in the margins of the novel. Graciela and Silvio are publicly caught in the act, "too lost in the tangle of tongues to care" who watches them. Lured to an empty warehouse owned by a "Galician vendor" with the promise of financial reward, the adolescents find themselves in a position similar to the one they occupied on the pier; and yet with different and far-reaching compromising results:

"When West lit the lamps Graciela and Silvio squealed. '—Look, look how he brought the sun in here!—This yanqui man, he is a crazy...' The pink hand tugged at her skirt and pointed briskly to Silvio's pants. They turned to each other as the same hand dangled pesos before them... She unlaced her hair and folded her blouse and skirt. In turn, Silvio unbuttoned his mandarin shirt and untied the rope at his waist... In the dampness, they shivered while West kneaded their bodies as if molding stubborn clay... They struggled to mimic his pouts and sleepy eyes. Instead of wrestling under heavy trees by Rio Ozama... they were twisted about on a hard couch that stunk of old rags. Bewildered, they cocked their necks for minutes at a time in a sun more barbarous than the one outside. Their bodies shone like waxed fruit, so West wiped them with white powder. Too light. So he used, instead, mud from the previous day's rain. 'Like this, you idiots'" (SWS, 11).

The emphasis in the scene is brought to bear by Rosario's focus on the manipulation and artificiality, literally, the stage direction of the "sexual" poses. The artificial light of the camera is mistaken for "the sun" by Graciela and Silvio, in this moment the barbaric side of enlightenment vision is foregrounded for it is a "sun *more barbarous* than the one outside." West is figured as the "artist" who photo-graphs (writes with light) the adolescents, he "knead(s) their bodies as if molding stubborn clay; echoes of a profane version of "the Creator" are inescapable. The physicality of their bodies is undercut by the "still life" metaphor in that they "shone like waxed fruit", and their limbs, racial identity and human expressions are so clearly manipulated, and therefore

produced, that the reader is not easily invited to participate in the voyeurism of the scene without first taking into account the details of its construction. There are no “natural savages” present here.³⁴³ So clearly confused as to what the “crazy yanqui” demands of them, the teenagers are produced by and for the photographic gaze of West as natural “primitives”, and it is all a piece of culture.

West continues in his attempts to elicit the grotesque facial expressions at which he imagines “the others” are so adept. Rosario emphasizes the way in which the scene of the photo that begins the novel is wholly created by West himself. He literally models the animal poses and expressions he wants for his lucrative “creation”:

Where his Spanish failed, West made monkey faces...(t)hen Graciela and Silvio watched in complicit silence as West approached the couch and knelt in front of them. Graciela’s leg prickled with the heat of his ragged breathing. One by one, West’s fingers wrapped around Silvio’s growing penis. He wedged the thumb of his other hand into the humid mound between Graciela’s thighs. Neither moved while they watched his forehead glitter. And just as they could hear each other’s own sucks of breath, they felt piercing slaps on their chins. West ran to the camera to capture the fire on their faces. (*SWS*, 11).

The Western gaze that produces the primitive other is thoroughly deconstructed by the end of this scene. West mimes “monkey faces” and physically manipulates the act of copulation for Graciela and Silvio, (“West’s fingers wrapped around Silvio’s growing penis. He wedged the thumb of his other hand into the humid mound between Graciela’s thighs”); they are literally penetrated by the mechanics of West’s invasive fantasies. The violent pornography of the act is underscored by the slap on their faces meant to produce a simulation of eroticism and passion for both the future photo and for the very present, very aroused West. By handling Silvio, making him penetrate Graciela for his own fantasy, West completely produces both the fantasy and their position within the historically mapped scene, the American prairie. The text forces us

³⁴³ In fact, West boasts to them before the photo session of his other images, “he had accumulated an especially piquant series of photographs: brother quadroons bathed in feathers, a Negro chambermaid naked to the waist, and, of course, he remembered with the silliest grin Graciela had ever seen, the drunken sailors with the sow.” *SWS*, 9.

to confront the unsubtle manipulations behind spectacular fashioning of the primitive other; it also suggests the perverse power dynamics that link the visual and sexual arousal and education. In one way, Graciela and Silvio like being manipulated and watched; they are aroused by the scene they have been placed in by West; on the other hand, as subjects of the Western gaze, they are also ashamed at their pleasure in the manipulation.

However, Rosario's scene also tellingly positions the children in perfect ignorance of how to pose for West's camera. Peter West has to maneuver them for the production of his fantasy not only because he can, but also because they are innocent of the pose required of them. As such, it is Peter West whose "peter" functions as the diminutive signifier of phallic power; the contortions to which he subjects himself in the fantasied pose belong solely to him, as does the image of the primitive he wants the children to model. The adolescents escape complete domination of the phallic gaze expressly through their marginalized position to Westernized forms of pornographic visual technologies; in fact, their marginalization acts precisely as the grounds of destabilization. The narrated scene that mirrors the photographic postcard as both narration and image is marginal: the postcard is formally marginalized in its placement at the margin of the novel, and the content of the scene actually narrated in Rosario's representation is constitutive of the two Caribbean subjects' marginalization.

The scene imagined from the marginalized image-text correspondingly ends in destruction. Silvio's distraction with counting the money West pays them provides an opportunity for the photographer to proposition Graciela. Silvio knocks over the entire apparatus of camera and film plate so that they can escape without further indignity to Graciela's person. Back on the dock and in their struggle over the money West paid

Silvio, the “strange arousal they had felt in the warehouse pumped through them again.”

Graciela and Silvio get married soon thereafter and Silvio eventually becomes a fisherman, ultimately claimed by the imperial dangers of the sea he loves. In fact, the sea that takes his life is the same sea “whose depths contained jewelry unhooked from the wrists of the wealthy, whole bodies of metal sea animals with fractured waists, and hundreds of ball-and-chain bones trapped in white coral.” (SWS, 30).³⁴⁴ In this, one of the few overt references to the slave histories of the Dominican Republic and the Caribbean, Rosario links the complicated and obscured death of Silvio to the obscured histories of the island’s inhabitants. It is intimated that Silvio was involved in resisting the yanqui occupation by running guns to another part of the island for the *gavilleros* who actively fought the United States soldiers.³⁴⁵ Graciela, after having her daughter Mercedes (whose father is Silvio) remarries Casimiro, a light-hearted, sensitive thief. Fed up with the “smallness” and monotony of her world, five years after the “light-box” captures her with Silvio, Graciela one day grabs one of her few treasures, a hat-box with an image of a Victorian lady on the cover, and heads off for adventure to Santiago. It is there that the material, global effects of the circulation of West’s photopostcard are made apparent, in her encounter with Eli Cavalier, European collector and vegetarian:

Postmark: May 5, 1920

Place Stamp Here

This Space For Address Only:

Eli Cavalier

³⁴⁴ A concept of Caribbeaness is explored through the same metaphor by Glissant: “The unity is submarine. To my mind, this expression can only evoke all those Africans weighed down with ball and chain and thrown overboard whenever a slave ship was pursued by enemy vessels and felt too weak to put up a fight. *They sowed in the depths the seeds of an invisible presence.*” CD, 66-67.

³⁴⁵ Rosario also links the early twentieth century oppression the islanders experienced during the United States occupation to the terror of the Nadir in North America, visited upon African Americans in the form of lynching and rape. See SWS, 13-32.

Hamburg, Germany

This Space For Writing Messages:

Dear Friend,

As per your request, this is to acquaint you with the advantage being afforded by the Collector's Club for view card enthusiasts. We specialize in the *exotique erotique* beauty of racial types. Join us.

Members receive a monthly catalogue during the term of their enrollment. Extra Special Offer—I will send you 10 dainty erotic views, excerpts from Carl Heinrich Stratz's stunning "The Racial Beauty of Women," plus a dictionary containing 30,000 words if you will send 25 cents for a year's trial membership in this popular club. Please do so before expiration date stamped hereon.

Peter West, President

New York, N.Y. (*SWS*, 65).

Peter West's photography business is a growing, global concern, the circulation and exchange of "exotique erotique beauty of *racial* types" finds its way to Cavalier's Germany at the close of World War One. A collector of erotica, Cavalier flees war-torn Germany for the Dominican Republic, where he meets Graciela on a train bound for Santiago. Their encounter results in a sexual fling and it is intimated that Graciela contracts syphilis from Cavalier.³⁴⁶

Eli and Graciela are mutually desirous of experience; one has the gendered, racial, social privilege, and capital to acquire racialized sexual pleasure, the other is bound to the island, despite her attempts to explore her own world. In this, their desires are mutually exclusive and yet construct each other. Eli's membership in West's club implies that he erotically collects and consumes the sexual, racial other (the "Racial Beauty of Women") visually, and that his visual consumption is directly connected to the sexual exploitation he plans for Graciela with La Pola, the prostitute whose house they visit in Santiago.

³⁴⁶ Earlier in the narrative, it is also intimated that Silvio has contracted syphilis. Graciela's vulnerability to the disease, contracted through sexual contact with the men in her life, metaphorizes her social and political vulnerability as a black woman in the Dominican Republic.

That Eli Cavalier can purchase “erotic” images of black, Caribbean women from the distance of Germany is constitutive of their actual purchase as exploited sex-workers in their own country. As a *souvenir* mailed by West to Cavalier and other future, putative clients, to possess the photo postcard is “to have a souvenir of the exotic...to possess both a specimen and a trophy; on the one hand the object must be marked as exterior and foreign, on the other it must be marked as arising directly out of the experience of its possessor.”

However, while on this journey we learn that Graciela is a collector of sorts herself. She too acquires a series of objects through her journey that she keeps inside the hatbox. One of them is a photo she steals from the Álváros, the family who hire her as a housekeeper after her brief tyst with Cavalier in La Pola’s Santiago whorehouse.

The book of photographs the young bride Ana Álvaro shares with Graciela reference another kind of photographic souvenir, different from West’s compendium of images and Cavalier’s collection of erotica, yet connected in its representation of its subjects and its relation to the production of sexuality and memory.

Part Three:

Alternative Modes of Vision

While in Santiago, Graciela escapes from La Pola’s whorehouse and seeks refuge at a large house in town. There she meets a girl her own age, Ana, who is the young bride of Humberto Álvaro. The two young women, separated by social class, “race” and region, become closer during the viewing of a photograph album:

Pasted on its pages were panels of various scenes. A man pushed a cart of sugarcane. A woman with voluminous curls tumbling from under a hat held the parasol that so haunted Graciela. There was an enormous house with many stairs and a blue, red, and white flag fluttering from a pole. A man and a woman smiled, their teeth unnaturally white. “¿And these people?” Graciela asked,

passing her hands over the panel to feel beyond the flatness of its scene. Don't. You will ruin my wedding picture...¿Those are you? Graciela said as she moved her head closer to the photograph. Then she sat back and laughed. Yes. Yes. That is us. Your teeth. Your teeth are so white, like horses'. Graciela continued to laugh from behind her covered mouth. She could not understand why Ana was so proud of being inside that panel with such white teeth. We went to the studio in town after the wedding, and, ay, what a glorious day, but I had to ask them to touch up the flowers, ¿see?, and to lighten up Humberto a bit, and then they did the teeth..." (SWS, 90).

Ana and Humberto's wedding day is witnessed by the national flag; as proper, bourgeois, land-owning, Dominican citizens they legitimate the island's national identity. The construction of identity is completed by the man pushing a cart of sugar cane, the national product one can assume composes the Álvaro's family capital, and the woman with "voluminous curls" holding a "parasol," a Western reference presumably used for fashionable protection from the sunshine. All the images in the photo work together to provide the simulacra of a wealthy, European, and "white," national identity, embodied in the young couple.

As was the case with Silvio in the warehouse, when he and Graciela are physically manipulated by Peter West, it is clear that this wedding photo is also a doctored imagetext. Ana "had to ask them to touch up the flowers...and to lighten up Humberto a bit, and then they did the teeth." It seems obvious that Humberto's darker skin had to be whitened, however, whitening the teeth suggests the nature of the couple as both a consumable and labored product—literally "like horses'," in Graciela's astute observation, and the possibility of forestalling the passage of time. To artificially lighten the skin and teeth constructs the image as an eternal present in which the couple are eternally, and artificially "youthful" and "white."

It is telling that along with a saucer, teacup and thimble, Graciela steals the Álvaro's wedding photograph. Photographic images haunt and attract Graciela since her experience in the warehouse with Silvio and Peter West. She tries to "feel beyond the flatness of the scene" in an attempt to experience the moment behind the artifice.

This is Graciela's entire feminist quest throughout the novel, to "feel beyond" the limitations of her life and experience, as she understands them to be. And yet the problem with her history, and her ability to experience it, remains its unknown or repressed character; stories told by El Viejo Cuco of Graciela's "maroon granpai" (*SWS*, 46-47), who she favors in temperament, suggest alternative and resistant, albeit suppressed, historical experiences. It is perhaps these sorts of experiences Graciela attempts to "feel beyond the flatness of the surface." Although many worlds coexist in Graciela, her ability to access them is crippled by the neo-colonial relationship of the Dominican Republic to the United States, this relationship of subordination is congruent to the emergence of visual technologies like photography which reproduce the relations of production, consumption, and power between the exploited island nation and its neo-colonial antagonists. The convergence of suppressed histories is, nevertheless, briefly revealed in Graciela's visit to La Gitana, the gypsy, whose alternative visions do not produce a flattened, artificial image, but something approximating a "snapshot of a soul."³⁴⁷

In her session with La Gitana, Graciela is told more about the particularities of her history than she appears to understand. The spirit work of the gypsy's visions of past and future directly oppose the photographic "flatness" Graciela struggles against throughout her life. If the photo-graph writes with light, the Caribbean subject writes with a subterranean and submarine memory. However, although La Gitana sees differently, and with another kind of vision than the one exploited by Peter West and Eli Cavalier, he does not fully understand the convergence of numerous lines and paths written upon Graciela's hand:

³⁴⁷ In his discussion of "transversality," Glissant states: The implosion of Caribbean history (of the converging histories of our peoples) relieves us of the linear, hierarchical vision of a single History that would run its unique course. It is not this History that has roared around the edge of the Caribbean, but actually a question of subterranean convergence of our histories. The depths are not only the abyss of neurosis but primarily a site of multiple converging paths. *CD*, 66.

Then La Gitana leaned in to examine the daunting system of lines. These lines were a tangled map of roads; some led to dead ends, others ran into each other, then swirled in opposite directions. One path led away toward from a road toward one of the mounts. The Venus, Mars, and Moon mounts melded. ¿What was what? La Gitana managed to find the mounts of Mercury, Sun, Saturn and Jupiter under their corresponding fingers. The major lines on the palm made him question his own gift of seeing beyond, a gift he had always flexed like a natural breath. The lines of the Sun and Fate and Affection contended with each other in a way he had never seen in a palm. Other, lesser lines crosshatched Graciela's palm like an unusual plaid. La Gitana traced and retraced the many lines, refusing to be dizzied by the labyrinth. --¿You ever listen to your own language with strange ears? she asked (SWS, 113).

La Gitana's confusion at the "major lines on the palm" causes him "to question his own gift of seeing." Graciela's history is itself illegible, at least upon first viewing, even to the seer's alternative mode of vision. The complicated process of cultural suppression experienced by the Caribbean finds expression in the lines of Graciela's hand. The cartographies of the past are mapped in their converging ways upon her palm, "(t)hese lines were a tangled map of roads; some led to dead ends, others ran into each other, then swirled in opposite directions." Even La Gitana finds it difficult to "dig deep" into his memory and find adequate expression for Graciela's past and, presumably, her future.³⁴⁸

Although a seer from her own cultural context, La Gitana, like Graciela herself, must often "listen to (their) own language with strange ears." In the project of understanding historical and cultural experiences erased or distorted by the long encounters with Western slave economies and neo-imperialism, both the seer and the seen find themselves initially at a loss. To "hear your own language with strange ears" is to decipher oneself from across the distance of translation that is temporal, and, therefore, linguistic. What is missing for Graciela and La Gitana are the material

³⁴⁸ Because collective memory was too often wiped out, the Caribbean writer must 'dig deep' into this memory, following the latent signs that he has picked up in the everyday world. *CD*, 64.

histories, documents and institutionalized forms of knowing the past, be they oral or written.

Eventually, La Gitana locates the Simian line written on Graciela's palm, "in which Head and Heart lines are one." In addition to the unity between reason and affect, the Simian line connotes the connection to past lives. These numerous and proliferating histories are part of what spurs Graciela's wandering quest for meaning; they operate as the "invisible presence" whose suppression and obscurity, which she never fully understands, spur her actions till her death. In response to the gypsy's question as to why she sought him out, Graciela answers "To see how far I go. How far away I go." Her ability to "feel" and therefore "see" beyond the flatness of her present surface is characterized by Graciela's own alternative vision, subtly represented during the last days of her life when she sees into the future her great-granddaughter, Leila, rebellious and to some degree, reckless, like Graciela herself. Although Graciela dies before the age of thirty from complications due to syphilis contracted through Eli Cavalier, her particular gift for connecting past and future is inherited by her great-granddaughter, Leila. It is through Leila, in Washington Heights, New York City in the 1980's-1990's that Graciela's questing for her history meets a similar spirit; indeed, a point of convergence, and the words spoken to La Gitana in their spirit-session are made real: "(T)he future can be changed. Be not complacent."

Leila, Graciela's great-granddaughter, also possesses a vexed relationship to the imagetext. Although Graciela never actually saw the photo produced by West in the warehouse, Leila is made the object and center of the family photo albums; every birthday is recorded with an image by her grandparents. However, after "her twelfth birthday, it seemed she disappeared. From then on she wanted no more birthday pictures." Leila's suspicion of the visual image emerges at the same age Graciela and

Silvio encounter Peter West: sexual awakening. And when viewing her former, younger self in the photos, Leila experiences a misrecognition:

When she saw herself in pictures, it was as if she were looking at someone else, not the person she remembers being at the time of the photo...Her fingers flipped through the twelve slices of her life. Back then, her stronger sense of self had allowed her to look straight into the camera. A toddler smiled in the opening frame where she reached toward a jeweled cake. Frame by frame, Leila stretched past *Feliz Cumpleaños* streamers (which became *Happy Birthday* by the sixth frame). With each frame, faces filled out, hairstyles flattened, and Mercedes and Andrés wrinkled, while the china cupboard behind them remained unchanged throughout Leila's growth and fading smiles (*SWS* 211-12).

In the family album, constructed by Mercedes and Andrés, Leila's grandparents, otherness is also represented, albeit in a different way from Peter West's crude machinations with Graciela and Silvio eighty years before. As a younger child, Leila's "stronger sense of self allowed her to look straight into the camera." What is it that changes in Leila, and her experience of herself in images, through the years? The photograph does not offer a single, transparent truth; this ambiguity is part of its fascination and pleasure. However, for Leila, it is also a document of unreadability; she is illegible to her own self, "(w)hen she saw herself in pictures, it was as if she were looking at someone else, not the person she remembers being at the time of the photo." Memory works through her experience of the imagetext, to the detriment of her historical understanding. Like her great-grandmother, Leila wants to master her world. As she grows up, her "stronger sense of self" fades in relation to the camera; the photos do not provide a legible understanding of her history or her present surroundings in 1998 Washington Heights.

And although the family album constructs Leila as part of the family, her history as the marginal outsider, so viscerally experienced by Graciela in the Dominican Republic sixty years before, hovers in her memory; she finds in the photos no lessons for how to understand her encounter (and her family's, since their 1980 emigration to New York) with the conflicts and contradictions of the United States. This opacity and

illegibility will not be successfully transcended by neither the imagetext, nor the alternative mode of vision Leila has also inherited from Graciela, the ability to “see how far she goes.” There is in this oppositional sight, however, a connection with the past from which Graciela herself could not benefit but could only bequeath. And this connection is not made available through visual technologies that construct the family photo album.

Leila is the recipient of the narratives told in the family about Graciela. Unlike her great-grandmother, who suffered from a lack of historical, collective memory, the novel’s ending figures the beginnings of an access to memory which will hopefully gird Leila in her struggles in the United States. On her way home from a week of sexual adventure, fifteen year-old Leila experiences “the seed of an invisible presence” in the beating of her heart, (t)he Feeling had started up again. She smiled. It had been a while since she’d had it. The familiar flutter center-left of her chest got warmer...” Graciela’s voice emerges in the text in response to the narratives (“dirty tongues”) about her Leila grows up with:

Waited on a long line to get born. Still, life dealt me a shit deal. Don’t listen to whoever invents magics about me. Always tried to live what I wanted. Never pretended to be a good woman. Never tried to be a bad one. Just lived what I wanted. That’s all my mystery. Forget dirty tongues. They’re next door, in the soup, even in your own head. Some weak soul always trying to slip their tongue inside your mouth, clean as a baby’s pit. You, listen. My life was more salt than goat. Lived between memory and wishes...but ¿how much can a foot do inside a tight shoe? Make something better of it than me (SWS, 242).

Leila benefits from her ability to imagine Graciela’s voice in response to “dirty tongues,” and “weak souls” who are “always trying to slip their tongue inside your mouth.” Graciela’s life provides a historical model for Leila’s nascent feminism and future understanding of her history. Her talent for ventriloquizing to herself Graciela’s lesson of maintaining suspicion of master discourses like photography, in all its productive forms, the souvenir photopostcard and family album imagetexts, will

furnish her with the ability to access voices hitherto unheard, and images hitherto unread. All of this, however, will have to take place outside the frame of the discourses outlined in *Song of the Water Saints*.

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