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## HERE, THERE, AND IN BETWEEN: TRAVEL AS METAPHOR IN MIXED RACE NARRATIVES OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

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HERE, THERE, AND IN BETWEEN: TRAVEL AS METAPHOR IN MIXED RACE  
NARRATIVES OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

A Dissertation Presented

By

Colin Enriquez

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

May 2014

English

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Here, There, and In Between: Travel as Metaphor in Mixed Race Narratives of the  
Harlem Renaissance

A Dissertation Presented

By

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## DEDICATION

To Joyce and Henry, the parents who gave me the spark of life.

To Philip and Kathryn, the siblings who share that spark.

To Perry, who has always sparkled at my side.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

More than one person brings a dissertation to fruition. Of the cast to whom I am indebted for their assistance with this project, I want to start by thanking my chair, Professor Laura Doyle, a person of great intellect, strength, and generosity who provided steady guidance throughout every phase of the dissertation process. I am also tremendously grateful to my committee members, Professors James Smethurst and Emily Lordi, who enthusiastically joined my journey during the proposal phase and used their areas of specialization to enrich the conceptualization of the dissertation.

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Daniel—the friend, aide, inspiration, role model, and fellow traveler who matched me step for step during the entire pilgrimage of the PhD degree.

## **ABSTRACT**

HERE, THERE, AND IN BETWEEN: TRAVEL AS METAPHOR IN MIXED RACE

NARRATIVES OF THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE

MAY 2014

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Created to comment on Antebellum and Reconstruction literature, the tragic mulatto concept is habitually applied to eras beyond the 19<sup>th</sup> century. After the turn of the century, the tragic mulatto has become an end rather than a means to questioning racist and abolitionist agendas. Rejecting the pathetic, selfish, and self-destructive traits inscribed by the tragic mulatto label, this dissertation uses geographic, cultural, and racial boundary crossing to theorize a rereading of the mixed race character of Harlem Renaissance literature. Focusing on instances of train, automobile, and boat travel, the study establishes a distinct relationship between the character, transportation, and technology whereby the notion of race is questioned. Furthermore, the dissertation divides travel instances into departure, interstitial, and arrival phases. Because of their ability to extend perception and experience, media is also interpreted here as transportation. Using figurative and literal travel, the selected texts shift the narratives between racialized localities to allegorize 20<sup>th</sup> mixed race subjectivity. Being socially

ambiguous and anonymous spaces, interstitial moments suspend the normative performance of race. With this premise, I demonstrate that the selected authors use transitional moments and arrivals to investigate race binarism. After the introduction establishes a theoretical frame composed of transnational and migration studies methods, the ensuing chapters demonstrate the interpretive function of travel in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, and Walter White's *Flight*. This reading is aided by the connection between modernism and mixed race identity as expounded upon in the works of Robert E. Park, Mark Whalan, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, Jeanne Scheper. However, it differs from these in its assertion of travel as an interpretive mode for mixed race literature as a tradition. Following the cues given by the selected works, each chapter explores a different application and outcome of travel.

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## INTRODUCTION

### **Mixed Race Travelers of the Harlem Renaissance**

In 1892, Homer Plessy boarded a “white” train car in New Orleans bound for Covington, Louisiana. As an act of civil disobedience arranged by the Citizens' Committee of New Orleans, Plessy admitted to being “black” according to the state standard at the time, even though he was seven-eighths “white.” Violating a newly instituted segregation law of Louisiana, Plessy was arrested at the next station. The resulting case and U.S. Supreme Court appeal, *Plessy v The State of Louisiana* and *Plessy v Ferguson*, became the legal precedent for the “separate but equal” doctrine that held until repudiated in 1954 in *Brown v The Board of Education*. Plessy's protest, occurring at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, is symbolic of the relationship of movement and mixed race identity that would emerge in the following decades. But, the Plessy case also reflects the predilection and limitation of mixed race studies, which has been the tendency to give privileged attention to near-white appearance or present the near-white subject as representative of mixed race identity. While passing for white deserves scholarly attention, equally deserving of study a visible mixed race subjectivity whose level of black authenticity is measured by an American color calculus that assigns psychological traits to physical features. Nonetheless, the Plessy case reveals a post-Reconstruction climate in which the federal government acquiesced to the polarization of race and restrictive control of black movement. Together, Plessy and the train—in motion—comment powerfully on the relationship of travel and mixed race identity in a 20<sup>th</sup> century context. Travel, I argue here, is a theme that has been largely overlooked in the mixed race narratives and one that can unify much of the mixed race literary tradition.

From the beginning to the end of Harlem Renaissance, travel is a central theme in its literature.<sup>1</sup> Although some critics have examined representations of migration in black literature, notably Farah Griffin and Melvin Dixon, very few scholars have looked to travel as a heuristic for mixed race narratives. In fact, the study of mixed race identity in historic narratives has seemed to slow, for scholarly interest has stalled at passing and the concept of the tragic mulatto. Furthermore, some criticism inadvertently stunts the field of mixed race studies by making facile references to the tragic mulatto motif, which inscribes the character as inept, perfidious, or self-destructive. Extending the implications of black diaspora and transnational studies, this dissertation views travel and boundary crossing as acts that bring the ontology of mixed race identity full circle. That is, just as ambiguous racial identity is created by the crossing of racial and geographic boundaries, its performance and development returns to, is sustained by, and perpetuates the crossing of physical borders. Observing the circularity of the interracial position, I employ the term perpetual possibility to consider this continual state of evolution and transformation. Also, in my reading, select narratives demonstrate the navigation, and sometimes vexation, of polarizations of race by employing what I call parallax perspective, a term borrowed from the fields of perception studies and astronomy. Some may see this project as threatening the stability of African American studies, either by adding to the intellectual fragmentation resulting from emerging interests within the field of race studies or by diverting some of the limited political and financial support in academia. While there is some truth to this, this study is consistent with the *raison d'être* of race

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<sup>1</sup> Early examples are *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (1912/1927) and *Cane* (1923), and latter examples are *Not Without Laughter* and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* [1937] respectively),

studies, which is the critical examination of the intersection of race and power, and how this is interpreted and represented in literature.

*Here, There, and In Between* contends that an application of travel analysis, beyond Middle Passage and Northern Migration contexts, will reinvigorate interpretations of mixed race identity as much it has impacted the fields of postcolonialism, African diaspora studies, and Women's studies. Thanks to Atlantic and Diasporic studies, we can readily accept that early 20<sup>th</sup> century narratives about black culture in America are distinctly marked by changes in industry and travel. Yet, there are few works that analyze the effect of technology on black identity during this period, and even fewer consider these in relation to mixed race identity. As machinery and technology are central themes for modernity, it behooves us to pay attention to how they inform race and gender identity development in Harlem Renaissance texts. The implications of this study—touching as it does on travel, machine, and media cultures—have wide-ranging import because of the number of overlapping fields and concerns it traverses. Some of these are critical race theory, gender studies, migration studies, transnationalism, and modernism. Because of this, the current study has implications for literary works not directly dealing with mixed race, such as *The Blacker the Berry*, *Home to Harlem*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and *Dark Princess*, works which narrativize the relationship between racial subjectivity and modern travel. In the current study, mixed race is separated from black not to say that they are exclusive fields but to highlight the points of ontological divergence that results from social practice. Although Du Bois's two-ness can be applied to all of black society during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, cultural polarizations within both white and black societies magnified the effect on multiracial

individuals, creating a confluence of centrifugal and centripetal forces. If we can bring ourselves to see mixed race figures this way, then we can draw several useful conclusions that further deconstruct the binary opposition of black and white within the modernist discourse. The dissertation consists of three chapters that analyze respectively Jean Toomer's *Cane*, Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, and Walter White's *Flight*. As each work is a variation on the theme of mixed race appearance, each chapter teases out a different implication of travel analysis. Ultimately, these works are testaments to the amorphous foundations of race and gender performativity despite claims to the contrary during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Before going any further with my analysis, I would like to briefly recount how I landed on the current topic and argument. My interest in Harlem Renaissance literature began when, as undergraduate at the City College of New York, I was introduced to Jean Toomer's *Cane* by Professor Gordon Thompson. Of the dozen black writers that were discussed, Toomer and his work made the strongest impression on me because I was a young man of black and white heritage, and I fancied myself as artistic and intellectual. I soon found myself identifying with this intense, enigmatic man who had dedicated himself to literary art and an imagined America that, contrary to my own experiences, celebrate mixed race heritage. In *Cane*, I saw a treatment of interracial characters that subtly spoke to my understanding of mixed race identity. During the course, I also had my first encounter with Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*, and I sympathized with the protagonist's frustration with restrictive identification of blackness and the exoticization of mixed race appearance. Years later in graduate courses at the University of Massachusetts, I would be given a fuller repertoire of dialectic, postcolonial, Marxist, and

transnational theory, methods of analysis that resonated with my mixed race, working class, and transnational heritage.

Much of the literature and race theory that I had come across concentrated on—and for good reason, white oppression of black and brown peoples. This theme was not uncommon to me, having grown up in a working class section of Brooklyn that consisted mostly of black Southern transplants that had moved North during the 1950s and '60s. Even at a young age, I was aware that my neighbors regarded whites with suspicion. However, being raised in an interracial home and having visited some of the borough's interracial neighborhoods, I had also witnessed love, desire, camaraderie, and community building between blacks and whites, not to mention peoples of many other races and ethnicities. Within my childhood home, interracial love did not seem abnormal, and visiting relatives and friends arrived in every shade of skin color. In other parts of Brooklyn, African-Americans, Afro-Caribbeans, Asians, South Asians, Latino/as, Jews, and Italians lived and worked daily side by side. This is not to say that I did not experience prejudice and ridicule, or did not hear about conflict and violence between some of the communities just mentioned. In fact, it was because of these injustices and tensions that Jean Toomer resonated so much with me years later. The resistance Toomer faced when acknowledging the entirety of his multicultural heritage mirrored the anti-mixed race sentiment I had encountered in life, in movies, on television. For instance, during my middle school years, my classmates would sometimes call me Billy D. Williams or some other popular light-skin actor of the day. Sometimes the nickname was meant to compliment my mixed race features, and other times it was meant to isolate me—especially if I was doing or saying anything that was viewed as white or middle-

class. Later, after Spike Lee's *Jungle Fever* was released, the sight of my mother, my family, or me was enough to inspire some reference to the movie, as though we were carriers of a virus. For the most part, the interracial characters that appear in Spike Lee's films epitomize the popular view of multiracial identity—a personality marked by cultural confusion or self-conceit. In the course of my graduate studies, it dawned on me that such popular views were merely late 20<sup>th</sup> century terms for the early century labels “tragic mulatto” and “dictie.” This realization led me to wonder if it were possible to return to the origin of the stereotype to challenge it by relabeling its key characteristics. Thus, this project began as an investigation, in addition to finding alternative examples of interracial identity, to see whether the tradition of the tragic and conceited character could be reversed. The Harlem Renaissance seemed like an ideal period with which to start because it was then that scholars began to recognize the tragic stereotype and because it represents the first major development of black and mixed race authors.

To start this inquiry and argumentation, some contextualization of mixed race subjectivity and some adjustment of existing travel theory are necessary. First, looking at the work of Richard Park, Sterling A. Brown, and several historians, I will provide some background for how the mixed race person has been viewed in history, sociology, and literature. With these sources, I trace the notion of travel within the mixed race discourse, and I relate this discourse to racial and modernist concerns. Second, I trace several developments in travel and transnational studies, in particular the methods and insights related in the work of Carol Boyce Davies, Stephen Clingman, James Clifford, and Laura Doyle. With these, I make a case for modifying travel analysis in order to discuss mixed race identity.

**The Marginal Man and Tragic Mulatto: The Development of a Mixed Race  
Discourse**

The role of geopolitics and travel has been a subtext in interracial studies from its inception. The earliest piece of scholarship that influences the course of this dissertation is Edward Byron Reuter's sociological study from 1918, arguably the first systematized statement on the role and social standing of the mixed race subject.<sup>2</sup> Reuter strove to understand the American mixed race identity by conducting an international comparative study of interracial identities. Robert E. Park's work in 1928 affirms that migration and mobility creates several consequences for society, and the mixed race subject in particular.<sup>3</sup> On one hand, individuals are free to create “new enterprises” and “new associations.” On the other, individuals are faced with living in two diverse cultural groups. This type of individual, not necessarily interracial but predominantly so, Park calls the “marginal man.” In 1937, Park's protégé Everett Verner Stonequist also made a global comparison, juxtaposing the American black-white individual with mixed race classes of other countries.<sup>4</sup> These sociological studies demonstrate the significance of geography and location in comprehending mixed-race identity.<sup>5</sup> For example, during the

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<sup>2</sup> *The Mulatto in the United States: Including a Study of the Role of Mixed-Blood Races throughout the World.*

<sup>3</sup> *Human Migration and the Marginal Man.*

<sup>4</sup> *The Marginal Man: A Study in Personality and Culture Conflict.*

<sup>5</sup> The above studies generally use “mulatto” to refer to mixed race identity. The etymology of mulatto suggests the historically transnational effort to comprehend the reality, fluidity, and impact of mixed race identity. Some etymologies look to the Arabic word, “muwallad,” which identifies someone of mixed Arab and non-Arab ancestry. Most sources have the word being adopted into English from Spanish around 1593. In the centuries that followed, European obsession with degrees of racial heritage was manifested in a detailed taxonomy of black, white, and indigenous American racial mixture, including mustifino, mustifee octoroon, quadroon, cascos, mulatto, sambo, mango, ostensibly from fairer to darker (Davenport). At the time of the Harlem Renaissance, mulatto generally identified anyone of black-white

late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a mixed-race person could expect a relatively more stable identity in the Caribbean than in the United States, because he or she would be part of a clearly defined, acknowledged, and approved third social category. This location-based comparison is even applicable within the United States where a mixed race individual experiences differences in treatment from town to town and city to city. This view supports my proposal that racially mixed characters in Harlem Renaissance literature are inclined toward a peripatetic pattern, but rather than accept this wandering quality unquestioningly or as detrimental, I argue that it is a cultivated attribute.

Unlike the aforementioned travel and geography subtexts, the connotation of tragedy and pessimism of mixed race identity has overshadowed its other qualities. Through the tragic mulatto, the field has been incorrectly and stiflingly bound to Sterling A. Brown's creation of the term.<sup>6</sup> Finding the origins of the character in Civil War era literature, Brown describes pro-slavery authors as assigning the character "a distinctive sub-human nature," whereas anti-slavery authors advanced the notion that "*in given circumstances* a typically human type of response was to be expected" (emphasis added, Brown 74). In the abolitionist argument, black human rights are limited to certain "given circumstances." Thus, both the anti-slavery and the abolitionist traditions suggest an irreconcilable duality or two-ness in which the character either "inherits the vices of both

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ancestry regardless of generations of remove. Toward the end of the century, the term fell out of use because of the Latin origin meaning "mule." For this study, mixed race, multiracial, and interracial are the chosen terms, and they are used interchangeably. In addition, for this study, these terms do not necessarily denote first-generation mixed race status, but a set of physical features that either demonstrably suggest interracial heritage—no matter how many generations removed—or, conversely, obfuscated blackness. By this definition, the mutual problematics of colorism and biracial heritage are shown to overlap. Finally, the dissertation makes no attempt to enter the debate over the political correctness of interracial, biracial, mixed, or multiracial.

<sup>6</sup> In "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" (1933), Brown provides the first identification of the tragic mulatto and six other white authored stereotypes of black identity.

“from his white blood come his intellectual strivings, his unwillingness to be a slave” and “from his Negro blood come his baser emotional urges, his indolence, his savagery” (Brown 76). Although created to describe the stereotyped character, the tragic mulatto concept has outlived its historical origins and become a wantonly applied designation. By Brown’s definition, the tragic mulatto is a white authored, Civil War era, culturally conflicted figure physically marked by internal conflict. In this regard, it is important that we question its application to texts not meeting these parameters. These include black authored 20<sup>th</sup> century works, be they the works of early century authors such as Charles Chesnutt and Langston Hughes, or late century authors such as Toni Morrison and Ernest Gaines. Even applying the tragic mulatto label to white authored depictions in 20<sup>th</sup> century works—those by a William Faulkner or a Philip Roth, say—should be questioned as anachronistic or misapplied, seeing as such works are removed from segregationist and abolitionist directives.

As much as Brown’s definition shows how the term has been stretched beyond its original 18<sup>th</sup> century meaning and intention, his definition also suggests the particular visual, semiotic, and nomadic aspects of the character. For instance, consider that Brown’s analysis highlights white authors’ attempts to bind race and psychology in the surface physiology of the mixed race character:

The strangest items are attributed to different racial strains: In *No-Nation Girl* a woman cries out in childbirth because of her Negro expressiveness; from the back of Précieuse’s [the protagonist in *No-Nation Girl*] ‘ankles down to her heels, the flesh was slightly thicker’—due to her Negro blood; Lessie in Welbourn Kelley’s *Inchin’ Along* ‘strongly felt the urge to see people, to talk to people ... That was the white in her maybe. Or maybe it was the mixture of white and black.’” (77)

As these examples confirm, white interest in the character consisted of finding the “stain” or “tell” in the mixed race appearance that would reveal racial meaning or to which they could assign racial significance. These assigned features, related to but distinct from the primitivist pseudo-scientific practices exercised on the "pure" black image, exemplify the central problematic of the mixed race figure, a visual treatment that results in a kaleidoscopic set of signifiers and signifieds pertaining to race binarism. Brown’s reference to *No-Nation Girl* also highlights the particular nomadic theme in mixed race narratives. The very title implies the assumed connection between mixed race identity, nation, itinerancy, and citizenship. Or, as Brown describes, mixed race characters are “the proofs of the Negro’s possibilities” (74). Lastly, the previous description points out several additional problematics in mixed race representation. As will be discussed later, an unknown, latent potential and paradoxical admiration and resentment are themes that persist even in black authored versions of the character.

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new type of tragic mulatto appeared. Although this one was constructed by black writers, the outcome is about the same as that of the white authored version. Perpetuating an emphasis on near-white appearance, the black authored character is one who decides to pass and then either dies or returns to black identification. This plot convention reflects changes in black identification resulting from the effects of Reconstruction, black participation in World War I, race uplift movements, and mainstream interest in black culture. Between 1910 and 1930, passing for white characters became a key presence in black writers’ works, which was in large part due to growing race pride and black writers’ desire to popularize black solidarity through failed passing attempts. Or, as Judith Berzon writes, “in the black version, [the passer] is

summoned back to his people by the spirituals, or their full throated laughter, or their simple sweet ways” (63). Berzon’s description, though accurately classifying a majority of texts, does not account for those texts that rejected a simplistic racial polarization or those that resisted an essential folk identity.

Two goals of this study are to honor the works at the turn of the century that contain legibly mixed race characters and to celebrate those works that proposed an alternate mixed race space between black identification and passing. In *Cane* and *Quicksand*, two works discussed in this study, the protagonists are obviously not entirely white nor black. In “Bona and Paul” for example, Toomer’s story ostensibly about passing for white, it is evident that some amount of race legibility—and thus willing suspension of disbelief—is in effect, seeing as whispers run rampant at Paul’s school and at the night club: “What is he, Spaniard, an Indian, an Italian, a Mexican, a Hindu, or a Japanese?” (Toomer 76). Such suppositions indicate that his classmates and club patrons view and interpret him as non-white—Southern European at best—and non-black. That is, he signifies to them, in American race binarism, an other Other. If the state of being read as demonstrably mixed race is our focus, instead of the state of being mistaken for white, then a wider field of interracial heritage, history, and experience is made legible where before there was an assumed or erased history. The cultural loss that transpires when we focus on passing is apparent in the tradition of tragedy that has been attached to mixed race identity. Such cultural loss is demonstrated in Suzanne Bost’s observation, “The figure of the tragic mulatto stands in direct contrast to contemporary celebrations of multiculturalism, postmodern hybridity, and Latino/a *mestizaje*. If mixed race identity arouses pride for the Latina/o *raza* [race], why have relatively few African-Americans

celebrated the biracialism of the mulatto? Is the mulatto not a border figure and a cultural translator as much as the Mexican-American mestiza? (20). In a climate of “greater racial polarization” than its Mexican counter-part, the American mixed race figure “represents racial transgression for *both* African-American and Anglo-American identity” (emphasis added 21).

Being a threat to both African-American and Anglo-American identity discourses, the mixed race character has in scholarship fallen into abstraction. In her discussion of the character, Hazel Carby writes, “I would argue that historically the mulatto, as a narrative figure, has two primary functions: as a vehicle for an exploration of the relationship between the races, at the same time, an expression of the relationship between the races. The figure of the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device of mediation” (89). While Carby on one hand reasonably identifies the historical usage of the mixed race figure, it is perhaps a bit hazardous to assert that the figure ought to be understood in this one limited use. The slippery slope of Carby’s assertion is revealed in her comment, “In *Quicksand*, Larsen embodied the major aspects of what I have referred to as the crisis of representation of the period” (169). Here, the assertion that “the mulatto should be understood and analyzed as a narrative device,” though appropriate in other contexts, potentially removes Larsen from the very discourse of representation that Carby claims Larsen’s work to embody. As a mere “convention” and “device,” the mixed race figure loses all representational value as distinct subjectivity. In other words, following Carby’s definition, rather than be the voice of his or herself, the mixed race figure is an appropriated outlet for race grievances. Ultimately, through abstraction, mixed race subjectivity is rendered voiceless.

There is, however, a meeting point where abstraction and subjectivity meet—where the representation of mixed race identity highlights and aids in the questioning of the performativity of race. This is evident in such narratives as *Pudd'nhead Wilson*, *Malanctha*, *House behind the Cedars*, and *Walls of Jericho*. The protagonists in such texts straddle, cross, blur, and invert categories of race, thereby foregrounding questions about nature versus nurture, degrees of blackness or whiteness, and interracial and intraracial tension. In these ways, the mixed race character indeed operates as an embodiment of race relations. But, if we are alert, such representation should also urge us to consider the ways in which such abstraction does and does not represent the lived experience of individual mixed race persons. Whether as a symbol or an individual, the character has the potential to disrupt social practices and expectations. It is a given that writers, for different reasons, insert mixed race characters into narratives to play upon racial taboos and expectations, thereby creating drama and conflict. For instance, James Smethurst argues that the mixed race image was a pivotal figure for modernist problematics, making the discourse of social and sexual duality comprehensible as well as expressible.<sup>7</sup> In interracial narratives, such instability typically drives the plot until the character is sacrificed for the sake of concluding the story; while the “mulatto” lives, the center of the hegemonic race narrative cannot hold. If readers do not stop to consider the character’s actions as individual choices—and take into account the ways that rendering such choices hinders or aids mixed race representation as a distinct and viable perspective—the richness and slippage of the character is undermined. The sacrifice of the character is only tragic if we ignore the full arc of the character and the shifting environmental circumstances. In the selected texts, the choices of the character create a

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<sup>7</sup> *The African American Roots of Modernism* (2011).

parallel between geographic movement and psychosocial development, which constitutes a breaking down of assumed determinism, and renders the “sacrifice”—if there is one—an indeterminate ending rather than complete closure. The writers and texts selected for this study represent, I argue, a trend to give the mixed race figure voice.

In the binary race context of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, black and mixed race writers wanting to portray a mixed race perspective were challenged to develop poetics and devices to render the position. In the following chapters, I illustrate the ways that travel in mixed race narratives lends itself to, in addition to allegorizing that racialized experience, accessing a range of imagery and discourses pertaining to gender, class, and religion. In *Cane*, Toomer’s investigation of racial essentialism and multiracial heritage manifests itself in vacillations between geography, hybridization of genres, depictions of trains and other machinery, and a preponderance of interracial figures—all of which express his excitement for mixed race subjectivity as the model for a future America. In *Quicksand*, the feminine mixed race subjectivity that is passive and locally bound in *Cane* finds voice and action in Helga Crane. First, Larsen uses geographic locations to represent competing attitudes about black and interracial womanhood. Second, in the various social contexts, intertextual references metaphorize interracial performativity. Lastly, the sense of perpetual possibility and parallax perspective suggested in *Cane* are in *Quicksand* made more pronounced by Larsen’s explicit use repetition in the novel. In *Flight*, White demonstrates the expanded perpetual possibility and parallax that occurs when a fair-skinned woman is hounded from black society. In addition to depicting the effect of travel on his protagonist, White uses new 20<sup>th</sup> century media—a form of figuratively transporting oneself—to metaphorize mixed race identity restructuring. In this manner,

White discusses passing as a reaction to both white racism and black intraracial tension, a move that recontextualizes the mixed race experience in relation to the American ethos of self-reinvention and other forms of passing.

Although originally an abolitionist and reconstruction phenomenon, the “tragic mulatto” motif lurks in the background of many interpretations of interracial identity of the early twentieth century, even in non-pejorative readings. The tragic mulatto has become the reflex interpretation of the interracial character. In a sense, the deconstruction of the tragic mulatto stereotype has itself become a stereotype, undermining our understanding of the character and the larger issue of the polarization of race. Now a platitude, the deconstruction is an end rather than a means, resulting in a discourse that acquiesces to powerlessness and guilt. The damage of this reading is its sustaining the interpretation that the character’s very existence makes him or her complicit and deserving of alienation. The second reason for investigating the motif of rootlessness in 20<sup>th</sup> century mixed race subjectivity is to emphasize the character’s contiguity with the questions and aims of modernism. Seen this way, the traits typically associated with interracial identity, such as self-doubt and anxiety, are reframed as paralleling the psychological condition of historical modernity instead of being a marginalized and merely racialized condition. An additional benefit of this realignment is an extension of the discussion—begun in large part by Houston A. Baker, Jr., and profoundly advanced by George Hutchinson—that challenges the opposition of black artistic and white artistic achievement during the modern era.

Unlike historical and sociological studies, literary interracial studies suffers from a dearth of taxonomic and reconfiguring scholarship. Some studies that prove to be

exceptions are those by Judith Berzon, Werner Sollors, Mar Gallego, Cherene Sherrard-Johnson, and Michele Elam. In distinct ways, each of these scholars improves the field of mixed race studies. However, there are aspects of these works which the current study expands. For instance, Berzon and Sollors created important catalogs of the rendering of interracial characters, but they don't necessarily revise the interpretation of the character. Though Gallego and Sherrard-Johnson construct invigorated reinterpretations, they maintain the practice of privileging the ambiguity of "near-white" characters, thus perpetuating the greater attention that critics have bestowed upon extremely fair figures. The continuum of interracial appearance can alternatively be examined as a whole rather than a fragmentation of shades, which would help reveal a pervasive interracial America history. More than a quibble about semantics, an examination of the tragic mulatto motif also requires an engagement with social practice. If, as Toni Morrison argues, there is an "American Africanism" that stands "for the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, then it stands to reason that an *interracialism* exist that embodies "the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings" that accompany mixed race representation (Morrison 6-7).<sup>8</sup> Straddling the divide of a volatile American race discourse, interracialism has the ability to navigate and arbitrate the polarization of black and white, and challenge in unique ways the essentialist race narrative expressed in legal and social practice.

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<sup>8</sup> A distinct American interracialism is evident in the historical works of Randall Kennedy, Peggy Pasco, Mechal Sobel, James Johnston, and Joel Williamson. For instance, law professor Randall Kennedy, in *Interracial Intimacy*, has traced the legal policing of racial classification in America and the way that such an agenda overlaps with restrictive laws pertaining to gender and sexuality. Likewise, historian Peggy Pascoe traces American laws governing miscegenation and mixed race marriage, interpreting each landmark case as reflecting shifts in the racial anxiety of the contemporaneous white public; Pascoe concludes with *Loving v. Virginia* (1967) as the case with which American begins to erase its anti-miscegenation past and ongoing discomfort with interracialism.

Drawing on Park and Brown, we know that mixed race subjectivity is commonly associated with nomadism and elusive race potential. Salvaged from their analyses and various renderings of mixed race identity, notions of itinerancy and possibility can be repurposed toward a new reading.<sup>9</sup> Rather than focus on hidden blackness, i.e., near-whiteness and passing, the current reading focuses on a visible combination of blackness and whiteness; and, by emphasizing race practice as predicated on its visual nature, my reading argues for viewing mixed race characters as objects-subjects in relation to an array of contextualizing backgrounds. Put another way, mixed race characters who move to new locations will, because of the inconsistencies and regional differences in race interpretation, experience a change in how they are seen and understood, which in turn alters their decision-making and self-perception. This relationship of new location and altered perception I call racial parallax, which describes when an individual's racial appearance—although actually unchanged—appears to change because of the actual change in environment and racial gaze. Additionally, in my reading, the simultaneous and contradictory performativity imposed on mixed race identity equate to a synchrony that, in literature, allows for “a formal or textual allegory not of stasis but of perpetual possibility” (Pechey 28). Thus, the depiction of boarding a vehicle and crossing any number of socially constructed borders figuratively represents the racialized experience, whereby in this representation the states of departure, interstitial travel, and arrival correlate to blackness, an interracialism, and whiteness. The interstitial moments are a particular focus because they portray the character between the person of departure and

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<sup>9</sup> Discussing *Quicksand* as an isolated example, Jeanne Schepher offers an excellent analysis of the relationship between mixed race subjectivity and travel (“The New Negro *Flâneuse* in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*”). In my reading, itinerancy is a powerful resistant strategy for both men and women of mixed race descent.

the person of arrival. In contrast to an Aristotelean rhetoric, which holds dichotomy and persuasion as its aim, Bakhtin's possibility consists of a multiplicity of voices and listeners, with the purpose of, not persuasion, but testing the validity of the various ideas advanced by a host of voices. From this possibility, there comes a simultaneity of voice and meaning.<sup>10</sup> Although possibility is generally used to analyze narration and multiple mimetic events, it is particularly useful for interpreting the symbolism and character arc of interracial characters in early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature, for they are "read" as embodying contradictory discourses about race, miscegenation, intelligence, and sexuality. Repeatedly traversing the liminal space between racial standards of appearance and culture, mixed characters experiment, I argue, with the instability of the race concept and thereby introduce into race narratives a perpetual subject possibility.

Between 1910 and 1930, while millions of blacks would leave the South for better prospects in the North, black intellectuals were busy criss-crossing America and the Atlantic. The technology that enabled this travel influenced the life and thought of black thinkers as much as their white counterparts. Consequently, technology and travel are evident in the biographies of many Harlem Renaissance luminaries whose lives are marked by extensive mobility.<sup>11</sup> As America witnessed the enlarged role of African Americans in World War I, the migration of millions of Southern rural blacks to Northern and Southern urban centers, and the development of activist organizations such as the

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<sup>10</sup> In fact, Henry Louis Gates uses Bakhtinian voice to discuss double-consciousness in *"Race," Writing, and Difference*, and *The Signifying Monkey*.

<sup>11</sup> For example, Du Bois spent numerous years in the North and South during his early career, and made many trips to Europe and Africa as part of his Pan-African interests; Langston Hughes lived in Europe, Washington, D.C., and New York City, and traveled throughout the American Southwest, the former Soviet Union, and the Caribbean; Zora Neale Hurston lived in Florida, Maryland, New York, and New Jersey, and made several extended trips to Jamaica, Haiti, and Honduras as part of her anthropological work

NAACP and UNIA, the country experienced an evolution of black cultural pride and bicultural exchange that would set the stage for civil rights efforts for decades. Tucked into the larger issue of the increased exposure and influence of African American culture is the question of the significance of mixed race identity and its place in the changing racial discourse.<sup>12</sup> Focusing on one subset of the Harlem Renaissance intelligentsia, the dissertation analyzes the relationship of modern travel and mixed race subjectivity in literature, and addresses the question of *place* literally and categorizes the geographic movement of the character as strategic resistance to social tension surrounding race ambiguity.

The desire for a physical space supportive of or indicative of mixed race identity is evident in such works as Langston Hughes' poem, "Cross" (1926), where the speaker ponders "I wonder where I'm going to die, / being neither white nor black?" In the context of increased travel mobility, Hughes' question is both more elusive and suggestive. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the value of black cultural capital had increased dramatically, resulting in the emergence of two cultural poles—one black and one white—and these poles, I posit, exerted two fields of centripetal attraction and two fields of centrifugal repulsion. Thus, when Du Bois described the two-ness of a double-consciousness, I believe he is speaking from his racially mixed position, more than most scholars realize. Much race theory presumes one pole of influence, a hegemonic white cultural center and black perimeter. In this scenario, racially mixed characters experience

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<sup>12</sup> The Harlem Renaissance represents a dramatic ascension of African American writers and a resurgence in mixed race characters. A sampling of mixed race titles from the period include *Plum Bun* by Jessie Fauset, "Color Struck" by Zora Neale Hurston, and "Near White" by Claude McKay. There are also white authored examples, such as *Light in August* by William Faulkner and *Birthright* by T.S. Stribling. A comprehensive list of titles can be found in Werner Sollors' appendix to his *Neither White Nor Black Yet Both*.

“the pull of the white culture’s mythology [of the American dream] differently from the full-blooded black” character (Berzon 13). But, the cultural capital of the Harlem Renaissance and the black folk establishes an alternated pole that exerted not only a counter “pull” toward but a counter push away from a hegemonic black center. This duality is exemplified in Du Bois’s praise of both European classical music and Negro spirituals. For individuals of mixed race features, this cultural polarization causes a host of contradictions pertaining to appearance and action. The resulting subject vacillation is conducive to geographic and cultural meandering, which in Du Bois’s case is exemplified by his having lived in Germany and celebrating its culture, and his periods of residence in New England, the American South, and Ghana.

By focusing on travel in modern representations of mixed raced identity, one fruitful development is the need to discuss machine and media culture. As machinery is central to modern travel, it behooves us to pay attention to how travel related technology informs race and gender identity development in Harlem Renaissance texts. In *The Culture of Time and Space*, Stephen Kern gives a helpful overview of the importance of technology to subject development during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. But Kern’s analysis deals only with the effects of technology on European and Euro-American identity. Although he discusses changes in views on imperialism and class, he does very little to examine the perspective of colonized or racially oppressed peoples.<sup>13</sup> Intent on filling this void, *Here, There, and In Between* asserts that travel and technology imagery in mixed race narratives are abundant and significant, and interprets this relationship as significant

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<sup>13</sup> Few scholarly works have analyzed the representational effect of technology on black identity during this period; Joel Dinerstein’s *Swinging the Machine* is an exception.

to authorial forms for reconceptualizing mixed race subjectivity and figuratively representing a racially liminal space.

Harlem Renaissance writers in general were concerned with the question of technology and transformation, although this concern was expressed in the discourse of race authenticity, the black folk, the New Negro, or race uplift—and these discourses were set in opposition to racial assimilation, white modernism, industrialization, and cosmopolitanism.<sup>14</sup> Such framing either supported or opposed reflexive associations of black identity with primitivist notions. In this respect, African Americans were still in the shadow of assumption that they were a people not of the current time, but of a by-gone premodern era. To some extent, the centuries' old question remained for some: could—and should—the black masses adept to the pace and values of modern life? Alain Locke voiced his opinion on the matter when he described the New Negro as a “changeling” engaging in cultural “metamorphosis” (“Introduction,” *The New Negro*). Locke makes the connection between travel and black cultural progress more evident when he states that “The migrant [black] masses, shifting from countryside to city, hurdle several generations of experience at a leap, but more important, the same thing happens spiritually in the life-attitudes and self-expression of the Young Negro, in his poetry, his art, his education and his new outlook.” As for how this is represented in the literary arts, consider Toomer's treatment of race authenticity in *Cane*, a work that plays upon the train image and pivots crucially on traveling between rural and urban or field and factory spaces.

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<sup>14</sup> These discourses are wonderfully explained in the works of J. Martin Favor, W. Lawrence Hogue, Ifeoma K. Nwankwo.

In the previous pages, I have outlined the way in which travel is at the foundation of the study of mixed race identity, the misapplication of Brown's tragic mulatto label, the visual, semiotic nature of mixed race representation in literature, and the challenge for black and mixed race writers to find a poetics to counter the hegemonic binary race discourse. It is with these ideas of location, appearance, and perspective that I turn to narratives in which travel puts these very notions into question. As will be seen in the following section, the works of various travel scholars support the notion that the impact of location on identity is bilateral: location determines culture and mores, and informs the construction of identity; and, reflecting one's position and role, identity informs the interpretation of location. As Hutchinson, Gilroy, and Du Bois have asserted, African American culture is already a hybrid of African and Euro-American practices.<sup>15</sup> But, where so-called pure blacks have suffered from being erroneously categorized as African or primitive, racially mixed blacks have suffered from being viewed as better than, worse than, or the same as black despite contradictory treatment. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, much of white America perceived racial impurity as a hazardous biological and cultural contamination, which was yet another justification for racial segregation. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, white fear of contamination is complicated by a growing black ambivalence toward racial impurity because of its conflation with class difference, cultural allegiance, or racial authenticity. It is this fear and anxiety about racial impurity—not merely a psychologically internal mixed race insecurity—that exert a double set of centripetal and centrifugal forces on the interracial individual, which then in turn leads some individuals into a geocultural itinerancy.

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<sup>15</sup> See, respectively, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White*, *The Black Atlantic*, and *The Souls of Black Folk* ("Of Our Spiritual Strives").

## **Dwelling-in-Travel: Notes toward a Travel Theory for Mixed Race Studies**

In her masterpiece on mestiza identity,<sup>16</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa describes the evolution of mixed race consciousness as a *traversía*, a crossing.<sup>17</sup> This dissertation highlights this parallel of physical, cultural, and racial boundary crossing and theorizes a rereading of the interracial characters of Harlem Renaissance literature. This work interprets these characters as agents of change who use modern travel and technology to redefine the notion of race. Subsequently, the dissertation catalogues instances of train, automobile, and boat travel, and further classifies these into departure, interstitial, and arrival moments. In particular, interstitial moments, I believe, allegorize the liminal space of the interracial character. Being socially ambiguous and anonymous spaces, these moments also suspend the interracial character's normative performance of race. Through the application of perpetual possibility and parallax perspective, the selected authors can be understood as using transitional moments to redefine the turn of the century notion of race. This analysis shares with migration studies the view that travel is the expressed hope for an improved life. However, while travel analysis can be generally applied to African American Great Migration and Black Atlantic studies, travel within the interracial genre is distinguished by the different social forces at work and the different outcomes of travel for the interracial subject.

Although travel analysis has been successfully applied in the fields of postcolonialism, African diaspora studies, and feminine identity, its implications for mixed race identity remain largely overlooked. Thus, the dissertation fills this void by

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<sup>16</sup> Mestizo/a is used in Spanish speaking countries in the Americas to describe people of European and indigenous American descent.

<sup>17</sup> *Borderlands = La Frontera: The New Mestiza*.

bringing mixed race studies into relation with transnational studies, yet it adjusts both fields through the consideration of the character in transit. Taking the approach of transnational studies to recognize difference between peoples without precluding the potential of connection, my reading complicates the specific either-or race classification that plagued mixed race identity.<sup>18</sup> Although American law and popular opinion have in most instances classified mixed race as black, overwhelming evidence in literary and historical accounts document the paradoxical view that the mixed race subject is not *quite* black or should be treated as not *quite* black. This anomalous position, what I earlier termed interracialism, has been emphasized for various purposes by black, white, and interracial communities during different periods.

Recent trends in Harlem Renaissance studies have put the period in dialogue with contemporaneous cultural movements and phenomena, such as the Lost Generation, Négritude, cosmopolitanism, modernism, and nationalism. This is very much the result of developments in transnational studies and revisions of intellectual history, which acknowledge and celebrate the period as culturally collaborative and politically significant, rather than culturally exclusive and politically inept.<sup>19</sup> Such criticism perpetrates anachronistic bias and racial segregation on an intellectual plane. Intellectual segregation of this kind is responsible for excluding black contributions to modernism. Later studies, instead, laud the interracial dimension that was either omitted or condemned in prior accounts. The works of Paul Gilroy and George Hutchinson are

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<sup>18</sup> See the Clingman reference on p. 28: "a new form of negotiation in the face of this complexity: one that will recognize difference without assuming anything like hard and fast boundaries."

<sup>19</sup> Negative interpretations of the era are exemplified by Harold Cruse and Nathan Huggins. Cruse faulted the Harlem Renaissance for its dependence on white institutions (1967) and Huggins criticized black artists for allowing their work to be limited by their cultural insecurities (1971).

prime examples of the revision of interracial identity within the context of Atlantic diaspora and cultural synthesis. If Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* represents the "desire to transcend both the structures of the nation state and the constraints of ethnicity and national particularity," then the mobile mixed race figure enacts the desire to rise above the "constraints of ethnicity" that were constructed to eliminate racial ambiguity (19). On the other hand, Hutchinson confirms my interest in constructing an optimistic view of a symbiotic black-white culture; but, where he challenges the notion of the Harlem Renaissance as a political failure because of its cultural hybridity, I challenge the notion of the "mulatto" as a failed character because of its racial ambiguity and predominantly dismal story lines. Adding to the trend of reassessing notions of interraciality during the era, the current study connects the Harlem Renaissance to white modernism by excavating renderings of travel and modern technology.

Reflecting successful discussions of black-white intellectual interdependence, and deconstructions of national political insularity, *Here, There, and In Between* analyzes geographic movement as the means and expression of intercultural exchange and deconstruction of categorical race notions that limit mixed race subject representation during the Harlem Renaissance. In Atlantic and travel studies, voyaging abroad alters one's intellectual, cultural, and philosophical points of view. The change of perspective for African American travelers during the 20<sup>th</sup> century had profound effects on their sense of self, as represented in the writings of Du Bois, Langston Hughes, and Claude McKay, and later writers such as Richard Wright, James Baldwin, and Amiri Baraka. I argue that mixed race persons, especially as they are portrayed in literature, undergo a similar yet different change. For example, the protagonist of *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored*

*Man* travels between the South, New York, and Europe, and each move alters his racial status and perception of himself. As has been already stated, the effects of travel on identity are not particular to the mixed race character. However, studying the character in this way enacts “a recovery of historical complexity” and acknowledges “the intertwined discourse of race” that has been neglected in Harlem Renaissance criticism (Hutchinson 26).

As I state earlier, scholarly interest has stalled at the concept of the tragic mulatto, having ceased to push the envelope of interpreting interracialism. Scholarly interpretations largely continue to cast the figure as a victim of environment, an agenda that was important when critics were revising the “tragic” interpretation that the character was either wholly or partially responsible for his or her circumstances. But merely emphasizing the surrounding environment without acknowledging individual decision-making creates a legacy of victimhood that leads to a diffusion of and discredit to the character. My proposed remedy to this damaging practice is to apply the agency and subject building notions inherent in transnational and travel studies. In recent decades, cultural and literary scholars have proven the legitimacy of travel as both a genre and as an interpretative method. Travel as a categorization or heuristic has enriched the sub-fields of ethnic diaspora, gender, and sexuality. Likewise, the body of knowledge generated by travel and transnational studies has much to offer interracial studies. Applying the implications of black diaspora and transnational studies, this dissertation interprets travel and boundary crossing as acts that bring the ontology of mixed race identity full circle. That is, just as the subject is created by the crossing of racial and

geographic boundaries, its performance and development returns to, is sustained by, and perpetuates the crossing of physical borders.

Despite the differences in geographical and political scope, the questions and arguments of transnationalism and travel have implications for analyzing the mixed race figure in transit. If changes in technology led to changes in economic and print-media that altered individuals' transition from classic conceptions of community to national conceptions, then we can deduce that changes in travel and media technology could lead to iterations of imagined community for smaller groups and individuals.<sup>20</sup> If group membership for the mixed race subject is not guaranteed and is in doubt, then to what community do the subjects imagine themselves to belong? This questions can be answered a number of ways. Take for example James Johnson's narrator, who initially imagines his community as black but then upon passing for white creates a public persona for his immediate white community and an indirect and private imagined black community. Alternatively, Toomer's Kabnis does not attempt to pass for white, but *who* he imagines his community to be is the central question of the drama. At a critical juncture, Kabnis declares "My ancestors were Southern blue-bloods," but after another character challenges him on the implied separation of blue (meaning fair enough for blue veins to show through the skin) and black, Kabnis backtracks with "Aint much difference between blue and black." Consequently, especially if we add into our analysis the intended status significance of Kabnis' geographic distinction between Northern and Southern heritage, it is unclear who he imagines his community to be. The mutable and

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<sup>20</sup> Here, I have in mind an intranational application of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community." See also p. 28, 45, 66.

equivocal community expressed in the above examples demonstrates just how relevant place, community, and imagination are in national-local interracial subject development.

Where transnationalism explores hybrid cultural identity that is stretched by the polarization of plural global culture and singular local traditions, interracial narratives explore multiracial identity under the pressure of a polarized racial context insistent on a singular identity. Additionally, transnationalism recognizes process-development by which physical travel becomes an epistemological mode, a way of being in and seeing the world. Describing this process, Stephen Clingman writes, “there is a correlation between how the self is put together and how we navigate ourselves through space and time. It is this *how* that we can understand as a form of grammar, and movement is intrinsic to its constitution” (original emphasis 11). Additionally, Clingman’s directive for the transnational field is instructive for developing an interracial-travel correlative. He writes, “we need a new form of negotiation in the face of this complexity [the celebration and condemnation of hybrid culture]: one that will recognize difference without assuming anything like hard and fast boundaries, which will cater to the reality of differentiation without cutting off the possibility of connection” (6). Some critics may object to my comparison of transnational and interracial travel narratives, citing that racial boundaries have nothing to do with national boundaries. But, such views underappreciate not only the parallel of national identity and attitudes toward race but the extremity of cultural and regional difference within the United States; and, such views neglect the prevalence of both local and international travel in interracial narratives.<sup>21</sup> Also, despite Benedict Anderson’s claim that national identity supersedes ethnic identity and exploitation, black

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<sup>21</sup> Many notable interracial protagonists emigrate to Canada, Europe, or Africa, as seen in *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, *Of One Blood*, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*, and *Dark Princes*.

America was at the turn of the century a nation within a nation. With some adjustment, the transnational model provides a solution to the assumption of failure and self-destruction inscribed on the mixed race subject. With the transnational model, “We are in provisional, transitional space, still trying to work out its protocols. This is why these novels speak to us with a degree of urgency. If the transnational is not something they achieve, then it is something they invoke, even by way of its absence” (Clingman 26). Unlike some categorical approaches, transnational theory welcomes subject ambiguity and acts of emergence (acts without conclusive results). Such compassion and subtlety are needed in the discussion of the narratives in the current study, where protagonists strive—often with little social support—to deconstruct race and its binarity during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The argument for subject ambiguity and emergence are evident in other transnational discourses where an emphasis on movement—instead of place—alters expectations of subject authenticity, development, and expression. For example, James Clifford tells us that “travels and contacts are crucial sites for an unfinished modernity” (2).<sup>22</sup> By extension, travel constitutes “practices of crossing and interaction that troubled the localism of many common assumptions about culture” (3). As I show in the following chapters, the selected texts demonstrate the troubling of localism that interracial individuals initiate when they engage in travel—be it international, national, or local. In my interpretation, American race binarism is so pervasive and harmful that interracial characters opt to construct a “series of travel encounters” rather than acquiesce to a false or vilified stasis. In fact, “dwelling-in-travel” becomes so prevalent that “when travel [...]

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<sup>22</sup> It is assumed here that Clifford’s “unfinished modernity” consists of Western culture investigating its traditions because of societal restructuring precipitated by industrial and economic changes.

becomes a kind of norm, dwelling demands explication” (5).<sup>23</sup> Because of anxiety about colorism and miscegenation, interracial characters are continually questioned about their intentions, racial heritage, and cultural authority—the subtext being: who are your people, how do you rate yourself vis-à-vis black or white cultural capital, and which side do you claim or support? The interracial character, then, must weigh the benefits of staying stationary in the face of such interrogation, or relocate and face an unknown state of possibility.

Thus far, I have been talking in general about the disruptive effects that interracial identity and travel exert on race binarism. But such disruption is magnified for mixed race women characters, for whom travel creates a “convergence of multiple places and cultures that renegotiates the terms of black women's experience that in turn negotiates and re-negotiates their identities” (Davies 3). Because of the double oppression of race and gender, the cultural ambiguity read into the mixed female body multiplies the travel effect that “negotiates and re-negotiates their identities.” Carole Boyce Davies emphasizes this point when she suggests that “novels of ‘passing’ can be read within the context of migratory positionalities that have to do with identity and race and personal politics in conjunction with racially oppressive hegemonies” (110). Indeed, when “black women/women of color” engage in travel, it interrupts on multiple levels Eurocentric and patriarchal practices that historically have blocked women physically and psychologically (17). In reconstructing their identity through travel, women of color expand and intensify

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<sup>23</sup> In the selected texts and others, mixed race characters are regularly called upon to explain their presence in a location or their family history.

their critique of systems of domination.<sup>24</sup> *Quicksand* and *Flight* in particular demonstrate that “it is not just the physical movement, but the ways through which various subject positions are negotiated” (110). In *Cane*, several female figures suffer violence and oppressive practices because their ability to move freely between locations is limited. In these texts, there is indeed “much more mobility for Black women and in Black women’s texts than is often assumed” (110). Objectified and desired by both black and white men, yet viewed as elitist or culturally forbidden, the mobile mixed women pushing against paradigms of race and gender, and exercises a complex disruption of “unitary paradigms and dualistic thinking” (Davies 16).<sup>25</sup>

Where most transnational studies analyze cultural simultaneity or fusion that is elicited by international travel, the current study attempts to bring this approach to a more local level. Seen as experiencing the centripetal and centrifugal forces of blackness and whiteness, the racially mixed character occupies a space where the forces of these two poles meet. We can speak of these poles as cultural capitals, not just in the sense of currency but literal and conceptual locations from which culture is generated. Although in no way identical to the hegemonic force of white America, black America in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was coming into its own and exerting its own political and cultural influence. Though not covering the full breadth of geographic distance and history that transnationalism does, this study treats local travel in similar terms. Rather than track

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<sup>24</sup> Another goal for Davis is broadening black feminism beyond the privileged American construction. Although changing the conception of black femininity is not an essential issue for the current study, Davis’ challenge to the privileging of a single conception of blackness and feminism is relevant.

<sup>25</sup> Cheryl Fish, Jennifer Steadman, Sandra Gunning, and Jeanne Scheper are other scholars who provide convincing analyses of the deconstructive and reconstructive power of travel vis-à-vis black female identity. As Davies does, these scholars share with Clingman and Clifford their acknowledgement of demographic sameness in a large group while making distinctions within that same group.

“the shuttling activity through which nations have emerged under the episteme of modernity/coloniality,” this study traces the mobile mixed race identity as she or he attempts to emerge from the binarism of blackness/whiteness (Doyle 533). In transnationalism, the grand scale of Atlantic crossings prime travel scenes for dramatic “swoon” moments that dramatize the subject’s loss of self preceding the awakening of an “uprooted and yet newly racialized” self (Doyle 545). These swoon moments can be observed in the Atlantic crossings of *Quicksand* and *Flight*, but there are alternatively in these works and *Cane*, at the local level, not so much fainting spells but subtle moments of reverie in which the protagonists find themselves reawakened, uprooted, and newly racialized.

Substantiating the important symbolism of relocation within a local-national context, Farah Griffin's *Who Set You Flowin'?* creates a taxonomy of literary renderings of Great Migration travel, codifying departure from the rural South, arrival in the urban North, and reflecting on the South. This model has great applicability for mixed race narratives involving travel, but some of Griffin’s elements are more problematic. For instance, although Griffin's “strangers” and “ancestors” are useful archetypes for interpreting the African American sense of past and future during diaspora, the potential for mixed race alienation in the South and North—because of issues arising from high visibility and the contradictory forces of the aforementioned racial poles—makes these archetypes problematic heuristics for the interracial experience. Interracial ancestry has in history and literature been regarded as a point of pride, but it can also be a point of scorn in both white and black communities. For this reason, the mixed race character has a more complicated relationship to Griffin's “ancestor” figure. In fact, fairer hued blacks

are more likely to be interpreted as Griffin's "strangers" who welcome black migrants to ambiguous situations in the urban North. For example, in *Quicksand*, Audrey Denney is depicted as "poised, serene, certain, surrounded by masculine black and white," but black Harlem cringes at the interracial social practices of the fair-skinned Audrey (99). Yet, Helga Crane feels "envious admiration" for the "beautiful, calm, cool girl who had the assurance, the courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people" (62). Griffin's strangers propose to know the rules and conventions of a new environment, and they offer guidance and advice; however, according to Griffin, their advice may be malicious, benevolent, or both. Although Audrey perpetrates an interracial practice that is unpopular with some Harlem circles, her demeanor and behavior could free as well as further alienate Helga in the city.

Wanting to analyze the geographic imagery of mobile mixed race figures, my analysis is also inspired by Melvin Dixon's *Ride Out the Wilderness* (1987), which discusses the landscape imagery (wilderness, underground, mountaintop) that recurs in African American literature. For Dixon, setting and oral story are metaphorical spaces for the oppressed black psyche to restructure itself in a symbology of struggle and deliverance. For my work, motion is the metaphorical plane on which the interracial psyche is transformed. Thus, travel opens an alternate psychic space in which interracial characters conceive of a self that is better fortified against essentialism and socialized fragmentation than a psyche bound to a single location. The selected narratives demonstrate the navigation of race polarization by employing parallax perspective. Whereas parallax typically refers to the apparent change in location of a viewed object due to the actual change in location of the viewer, I use the term to identify the apparent

change of the subject that results from the actual change of the viewer. In this state, much like in Dixon's model, the subject compares past selves from past locations, and develops insights into performativity. Thus, parallax highlights the dialectical interaction of identity and travel, and creates fresh insights into cultural hypocrisies, double standards, and possibilities while the character vacillates between communities.<sup>26</sup> In my model of parallax and dialectic examination, mixed race characters select itinerant lifestyles as a means of adapting to and challenging binary race identification.

The focus of chapter 1 is Jean Toomer's *Cane* and its imagery of transportation and machinery. Conventionally, the text has been interpreted as expressing naturalist, mystical, or primitivist values. Charles Scruggs is a notable proponent of the mysticism line. Others, like Houston Baker, criticize Toomer as a primitivist. Such views neglect Toomer's fascination with modern technology, evidenced by his praise of "the machine" in his journals and letters. Although many scholars have commented on the theme of cultural synthesis, none but Mark Whalan and Paul Stasi have observed Toomer's desire to merge "the machine" and "the soil."<sup>27</sup> The synthesis of apparent opposites reflects Toomer's cultural heritage and traversing of racial boundaries. Thus, this chapter challenges the view that *Cane* celebrates the black folk and condemns black urban life. Instead, considering trains, automobiles, and other machines as tools for separating and merging disparate racial experiences, I argue that *Cane* is an artistic rendering of

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<sup>26</sup> By dialectical, I broadly mean a Hegelian dialectic that examines the development of the self (subject). However, there occasionally arises the need to employ a slightly more Marxist usage, by which I draw on the role of the history of race and gender in a particular context. Thus, the dialectical is a relationship of conflicting forces whereby such elements transform one another or possibly achieve a resolution.

<sup>27</sup> Whalan, "Jean Toomer, Technology, and Race"; Stasi, "Synchronous but More Subtle"; *Jean Toomer Reader* (16).

Toomer's coming to terms with his interracial inheritance and expresses his vision for a "New America" founded on mixed race identity.

Chapter 2 presents Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* as an example of both local and transnational interracial parallax. Depicting travel between North and South and back and forth across the Atlantic, *Quicksand* offers an explicit demonstration of parallax whereby moving between black and white communities shows the high visibility of the mixed race subject and its effect on subject perception. When the protagonist Helga Crane moves from one location to another, the public gaze of the new location—be it black or white—assigns her visibility a new value and character. The apparent change in her as an object is produced by an actual change in observer and observer position. Consequently, parallax enables Larsen's exploration of mixed race self-perception and her dialectic deconstruction of race and gender as they relate to the ideology that each location symbolizes. For instances, in each place, Helga's visibility and belonging are manifested in changes in her clothing, which resist or conform to her mutable, signified status. In the course of the novel, Helga changes her social and geographic backgrounds as easily as she changes her wardrobe, and Larsen builds a social critique from the accumulated parallactic incidents. In "Race Prejudice and the Negro Artist," James W. Johnson observed that "A number of approaches to the heart of the race problem have been tried: religious, educational, political, industrial, ethical, economical, sociological." Johnson believed that, while the older methods had had some success addressing the "race problem," the intellectual and artistic methods of the New Negro were an improvement on prior efforts. Using the comparative effect of parallax, to reveal ideological

differences, Larsen uncovers the limitation and hypocrisy of each ideological approach outlined by Johnson, ultimately showing that each fails the black and mixed race woman.

Chapter 3 focuses on Walter F. White and his second novel, *Flight*. Although he is best known for his civil rights activism and long-time NAACP leadership, White produced several novels. The first, *Fire in the Flint*, was moderately successful, but the second, *Flight*, was commercially disappointing and has been mostly forgotten. As there is scant scholarship on the latter, chapter 3 contextualizes *Flight* in relation to White's other creative works and autobiographical sources. With the intent of recuperating the novel from obscurity, the chapter argues for the merits of the book as a complex narrativization of the relationship between mixed race subjectivity, travel, media, and whiteness. The chapter builds on the parallax perspective established in chapter 2 to demonstrate how travel determines interracial subjectivity when acceptance in black society is withheld. In *Flight*, after leaving a relatively race neutral neighborhood in New Orleans, the protagonist Mimi Daquin experiences a series of racial awakenings. Moving to several American cities, Mimi encounters a race riot, black bourgeois materialism and puritanism, poverty, and ethnic passing within whiteness. As Larsen does, Walter White depicts travel as a means for challenging race and gender oppression, but, unlike in Helga Crane's case, motherhood limits neither Mimi's travel prospects nor her process of perpetual possibility.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century literature, the mixed race figure either represents the dangers of racial contamination or epitomizes—by proximity to whiteness—the humanist potential of African America. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, remaining an imposing symbol of boundary-crossing and cultural confluence, the figure is adopted by black writers to raise

race solidarity by criticizing the act of passing for white. However, there is another representational strategy available. Some writers embraced the contradictions and ambiguities of modernity, as well as its transportation and technology, as part of their exploration of mixed race subjectivity. In doing so, these writers render a character who, in literally traversing geographic boundaries predicated on race, transcends binary race ideology. These figures, then, not only challenge turn of the century race ideology but reveal the nature of American interracialism and disavowal of its interracial history. Focusing on Jean Toomer, Nella Larsen, and Walter White, I assert that the appreciation of their work is enriched by an analysis of the use of movement to depict mixed race subjectivity. The characters in these works engage in geographic movement as a resistance strategy to essentialist devices within and without literature. This interpretation—suitable to near-white and legibly mixed race character—has wide application for the field of mixed race literary studies. Rather than concentrate on failure or victimization, my reading concentrates on mobility as a gesture of exploration, emergence, and potential.

## CHAPTER 1

### **“BLUE-SHEEN GODS” AND “BLUE BLOODS”: THE EFFECTS OF MODERN TRAVEL ON MIXED RACE IDENTITY IN JEAN TOOMER’S *CANE***

Most scholars view the poem, “Song of the Son,” as the epitome of the theme and purpose of *Cane*. In the poem, the speaker is a prodigal “son” who returns to the South to laud and eulogize his black heritage “just before an epoch’s sun decline.” (14). The imagery of “land and soil” and the tone of a “plaintive soul” are habitually interpreted as representative of Toomer’s work. By contrast, readers see the urban depictions in the second section as embodying the alienation and cultural death of the “‘pseudo-urbanized’ Negro” (Pfeiffer 38). But, critics typically ignore the degree to which mechanical transportation affected the conception and creation of the book. Also, they have oversimplified the book’s images of industrialization and urbanity, particularly in the second section. The opposition of black folk culture and white industrial culture embodies what some believe to be an unresolved cultural conflict in Toomer’s psyche. Although *Cane* is generally considered a book that depicts the black experience at the turn of the century, it is my contention that it actually depicts a distinctly mixed race point of view.

The question of Toomer’s acknowledgement of his black heritage has been a point of contention among scholars and critics throughout his career and persisting into his legacy. For instance, in the introduction to the latest Norton critical edition of *Cane* (2011), Rudolph Byrd asserts that “Toomer was right to declare that he was of mixed ancestry, and that the opposition between ‘white’ and ‘black’ was too simplistic. But he

was wrong to say that he had never lived as a Negro” (*Chronicle*). The phrase that Byrd disputes demonstrates perhaps the semantic battle that Toomer waged. Byrd supports his own position by citing Toomer’s explanation for refusing inclusion in the 1934 anthology, *The Negro*. Toomer states, “though I am interested in and deeply value the Negro, I am not a Negro” (ibid.). Byrd also dug up a comment Toomer made to *The Baltimore Afro-American*, in which Toomer claims, “I would not consider it libelous for anyone to refer to me as a colored man, but I have not lived as one.” There is enough evidence of Toomer’s attitude toward rigid and essentialist conceptions of race to suggest that he is in these statements maintaining the deconstructive stance that he fostered in his early 20s. It is well known that, in 1922, when the editors of *The Liberator*, Max Eastman and Claude McKay, requested biographical information to accompany several of his submitted writings, Toomer wrote in return, “my position in America has been a curious one. I have lived equally amid the two race groups. Now white, now colored. From my own point of view I am naturally and inevitably an American. I have strived for a spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling” (*Cane* ix). Also, it should be pointed out that Toomer was in 1934 still studying with George Gurdjieff, a spiritual leader who placed great importance on redefining terms and categories that limit individual potential. The difference between Toomer’s statements and Byrd’s criticism is that, if being “Negro” consists of expressing a set number of normative traits and behaviors, then Toomer believed he was not “Negro,” and definitely not only Negro. Byrd, then, is perpetrating the kind of binary race thinking against which Toomer fought. When Byrd concludes that Toomer “was a Negro who decided to pass for white,” his conclusion is made possible by assuming that the denial of exclusive black identity is

equivalent to claiming exclusive white ancestry (*Chronicle*).

In claiming to live “equally amid the two race groups” and develop a “spiritual fusion analogous to the fact of racial intermingling,” Toomer describes the vision by which he directed his life and fashioned his art. He did not, and probably could not in most instances, live in a black community and a white community simultaneous. Alternating between locations, Toomer lived sometimes among blacks and then among whites. Toomer’s itinerancy is well documented in key biographical studies, but few comment on it as an expression of his radical race theory<sup>28</sup>. By the time Toomer published *Cane*, he had lived in Washington, D.C., New Rochelle, N.Y., the Midwest, New England, and Spartanburg, Georgia (Jones). The subtext of Toomer’s quotes above indicate his acceptance of geographic mobility as a method of creating a liminal space within the context of race dichotomy, enabling a fusion that is sincere to the diversity of his racial heritage—a fusion that the majority of blacks and whites rejected or resented either because of a normative sense of essentialism or because of the perceived contamination or elitism associated with light-skin societies. Byrd’s research into census and draft records, among other public documents, shows that Toomer moved many times during his life and chose when and how he discussed his racial heritage. Consequently, it stands to reason that Toomer’s travel history influences his rendering of travel in his creative work. Just as travel directly altered the course of his life, it distinctly marks the creation and structure of *Cane*.

It is at this point that I turn to travel and travel machinery as the means and metaphor for Toomer’s complex conception of his racial position. By changing context

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<sup>28</sup> Some pertinent biographies include: *The Lives of Jean Toomer: A Hunger for Wholeness, Invisible Darkness, To Make a New Race*, “Taking Myself in Hand.”

and social milieu, Toomer explored the mutability of racial performativity and exercised control over others' ability to gaze at and construct his objectivity. This relationship, I believe, is rendered in most of his work. Additionally, evidence of Toomer's relationship to travel and machinery can be found in his letters and journals. As Mark Whalan and Paul Stasi have noted,<sup>29</sup> these writings document his artistic vision of symbolically merging "the machine" and "the soil" (*Reader* 16). As inspired as Toomer was to reconnect with his southern black heritage, he was aware that the rural black folk was neither an ideological nor physical space he could stay. In a 1922 letter to Waldo Frank, Toomer writes, "Dont [sic] let us fool ourselves, brother: the Negro of folk-song has all but passed away" (151). In the same letter, Toomer observes that "the supreme fact of mechanical civilization is that you become part of it, or get sloughed off (under)." It would be easy to stop here and presume that Toomer saw "mechanical civilization" only as a threat, but Toomer goes on to complicate his position:

The aesthetic of the machine, the artistic acceptance of what is undeniably dominant in our age, the artist creatively adopting himself to angular, to dynamic, to mass forms...these things have life and vitality and vision in them. (*Reader* 17)

Although Toomer's "machine" symbol is not totally beneficent or perfect, it also bestows "life and vitality and vision." The machine may grind one in its gears and it may lack a "spirit," but, in Toomer's pragmatic and dialectic thinking, these shortcomings were balanced by its progressive and stimulating attributes. Stating "I think my own contribution will curiously blend the rhythm of peasantry [sic] with the rhythm of machines," Toomer shows yet again his ability to synthesize seeming opposites for the purpose of creating an aesthetic that faithfully portrays a liminal experience.

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<sup>29</sup> See Whalan, "Jean Toomer, Technology, and Race"; Stasi, "Synchronous but More Subtle."

Scholars have considered the modernism of *Cane* in respect to its form, but little has been done to improve our understanding of its modern content and imagery. In the first section, machinery appears in the form of the factory, train, and automobile. In “Karintha,” “Carma,” “Georgia Dusk,” “Fern,” and in “Blood-Burning Moon,” the saw mill is a major backdrop that influences the plot and tone. The automobile plays a pivotal role in “Esther” and “Blood-Burning Moon,” and it makes appearances in the second section, in “Seventh Street,” “Avey,” “Box Seat,” and “Bona and Paul” (these titles also feature a steamboat, fire-truck, subway, and elevated train). Electricity and electric light play a cameo in “Theater,” “Box Seat,” “Storm Ending,” and “Her Lips Are Copper Wire,” and “Bona and Paul.” “Kabnis” is curiously devoid of modern technology except the insignificant mentioning of “an occasional Ford” passing the house where Kabnis stays after being evicted from the school cabin (*Cane* 88). However, this absence is to the point: the town is caught in the black-white binary and is utterly blighted. Though a complicated symbol, the machine connotes social change. For instance, in “Esther,” Barlo returns to town in a large automobile. The play of electric light and shadow support the theme of artificial surfaces and performance in “Theater” and “Box Seat.” In the second section, cars, boats, trolleys, trains, and electricity are otherworldly objects that physically, spiritually, and intellectually transport characters. Enabling actual, symbolic, or psychological travel, the machine image is crucial to the construction of *Cane*.

The essentialist categorization that has excluded black culture from white modernism is also the cause for the oversight of travel and machine imagery Toomer’s work. Not just a white practice, some black intellectuals from the Harlem Renaissance and Black Arts Movement maintained an essentializing separation of black and white

movements. Thankfully, recent scholarship has exposed the false separation of movements. For instance, George Hutchinson confirms that resistance to non-essentialist race theory was so widespread that Toomer's complex ideas about race “remained virtually invisible to critics for over half a century” (“Motion”). When dealing with *Cane* and its author, readers always run the risk of oversimplifying the nuances of Toomer's themes and symbolism. Categorizing Toomer as merely primitivist or modernist elides the complex layers of ideology to be found in his work.

Some recent scholarship has begun a recovery of Toomer's machine culture interests and begun reconstructing a portrait that represents the fuller breadth of his ideology. Paul Stasi sees *Cane* not as aestheticizing the black rural past but as the artist's recuperation of it. But, even as Stasi acknowledges a balance of modern and premodern in Toomer's work, Stasi perpetuates the image of Toomer as a primitivist when he asserts, “it is precisely here in this framing of the speaker's primitivism that we can find the intersection between the volume's modernist form and its interest in racial politics” (147). Although seeming to bridge modernist and racial elements, the previous assessment limits Toomer's modernist accomplishment to the form of the book and posits the racial interest in the content. Similarly, Mark Whalan states that, as part of their modernist agenda, “Toomer and Anderson were also both interested in racial discourses such as eugenics, primitivism, and the 'vogue of the Negro,’” and that their response to the tumult of the times “relied upon imagined and romanticized pasts” (Manhood 3, 2). Whalan achieves a better rendering of Toomer's balance of ideological oppositions (oppositional paradigms we should acknowledge as dangerous—e.g., modern and premodern, historical and ahistorical, civilized and uncivilized—because of the presumption of superiority and

inferiority inherent in such oppositions, and their easy appropriation for stereotype and oppression), but Whalan maintains romanticizing the past as the core of Toomer's thinking. Having no illusions about returning to the folk, Toomer looked forward to a bright future consisting a new America celebrating multiracial identity and enabled by spiritual and technological advancements.

By crediting *Cane* as a text predicated as much on a variety of modernist ideologies as it is on folk values, I not only strive, as Paul Stasi as Mark Whalan do, to correct this oversimplification, but—diverging from Stasi and Whalan who hold Toomer as a spokes-person for black Harlem and black identity in general—I identify modern machinery and technology as emblems, vehicles if you will, of Toomer's use of travel to address the problems imposed on mixed race identity. Although Toomer wrote *Cane* as a swansong to black folk culture, it is evident from its motifs and imagery that the book is also a manual for using travel, technology, and imagination to resolve dilemmas of racial identity. If *Cane* announces “an epoch’s sun decline,” it also heralds a poetics that distinguishes the mixed race experience within the larger Great Migration context (14). Where on one hand travel leads to better material opportunity, on the other it specifically enables identity construction. The interpretation of transportation also informs the diverse humanist and multicultural experiences that Toomer sought. Scholars Roger Casey and Cynthia Dettelbach have described the car as a distinctly American symbol of wealth, self-reliance, and ingenuity. For a multiracial person like Toomer, the symbolism of the car and train inspires cultural exploration and an altered, if not entirely new, identity and social network. These prospects enhance our comprehension of the creation and reading of Toomer's work. The particularly American symbolism of the automobile and

transportation dove-tails interestingly with Toomer's heralding of a nation based on racial mixture.

At the same time that Toomer was deconstructing race, he was theorizing the “New American,” a nation-based identity that presumed racial and cultural intermixture, thus rendering preoccupations with racial and cultural essentialism and exclusivity pointless. Refocusing the debate of identity from race to nation, Toomer enters into a practice of imagined community. Although Benedict Anderson claims that national identity is based on “deep, horizontal comradeship” regardless of “actual inequality and exploitation,” the resistance that Toomer faced in claiming national identity over race shows a lack of “comradeship” in a nation that prides itself on democracy and social justice. Toomer’s having to demand that he be seen as American shows the insincerity and verticality of American “comradeship” in respect to the history and practice of race. But Toomer’s appeal for Americanness, demonstrates his perpetration of an imagined community, where “in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson 49). Attempting to capitalize on the “profound emotional legitimacy” of “nation-ness,” Toomer attempts to merge nationalism and race in a new way. Recognizing the evidence of American racial-cultural mixture and rejecting the specious claims of purity, Toomer calls for a nationalism that simultaneously draws on the legitimizing effect of nation-ness and eliminates the relevance of race. In doing so, Toomer invents a new imagined community, one based on multi-racial, multi-cultural heritage. While combining imagined community with travel identity might seem to create a turbulent identity, I hypothesize that Toomer’s narrators experience a “perpetual possibility,” where they, in absence of an actual “New America,” inhabit a continual state of progressive becoming

and transformation. Mixed race “perpetual possibility” can be rendered in several ways: episodes of bending (but not necessarily crossing) the color line in an ambassadorial or reconnaissance capacity; traveling in which racial performativity is suspended or adjusted; or creating new identities and social connections based on the vagaries of race. To varying degrees, “Becky,” “Bona and Paul,” and *Kabnis* are examples of these forms. However, perpetual possibility also applies to the narratorial slippage that occurs from section to section and from story to story. The similarity and difference of the male speaker in “Fern” and Louis in *Kabnis* is a case in point, as we will see.

It is my belief that Toomer's interracial identity has been undervalued as the source and focus of *Cane*, and this oversight neglects the struggle over racial appearance and culture that prepared him to perform a comparative investigation of the Southern black folk. First, Toomer's formative years demonstrate his repeated crossings of the class and color lines. Hand in hand with this boundary crossing, Toomer acquired an extensive travel experience that was aided by the technology and vehicles of modernity. Second, consider that 8 of the 13 major pieces in *Cane* pivot upon the matter of interracial desire or mixed race appearance. Lastly, for the most part, the narrator of these works is a fair-skinned black man. Regarding the form and content of the book, Toomer used his insider-outside status to gain access to the material and aesthetics of the Lost Generation, the Harlem Renaissance, and the Southern black folk, not to mention his later involvement with the Gurdjieff spiritual society. Reflecting a travel and technology enabled unlimited potential, *Cane* embodies Toomer's exploration of race as a concept and is embedded with symbols of Toomer's New America.

Though a creative work, *Cane* traces Toomer's actual movement between folk and

cosmopolitan, between black and white cultures, and the ways that Toomer's multicultural background complicates his participation in black society. In *Cane*, even in a seemingly all-black cultural context, blackness and whiteness and the relationship between the two continue to have consequences. Kwame Appiah describes these consequences when he writes

“Race” disables us because it proposes as a basis for common action the illusion that black (and white and yellow) people are fundamentally allied by nature and, thus, without effort; it leaves us unprepared, therefore, to handle the “intra-racial” conflicts that arise from the very different situations of black (and white and yellow) people in different parts of the economy and of the world. (176)

Faced with artificial and treacherous boundaries, Toomer embraced the transgressive and unstable nature of the mixed race type, and he investigated the notion of race by entering into a state of social and geographic mobility. Examining perpetual possibility, point of view, and transportation imagery, I show that the dominant narratological perspective of *Cane* is dependent on an interracial perspective and the insights made possible by modern transportation. Readers, as Toomer did, must allow their experience to be in flux the same way that viewers of a cubist painting must. Ultimately, Toomer's travel experience enabled him to dissolve common literary and social categories. In shifting between Georgia, D.C., and Chicago, *Cane* renders both a seeking for black authentication and a suspension of it. As travelers and visitors, Toomer's narrators and protagonists gain access to northern and southern black societies (and white societies in the case of “Bona and Paul”), but either reject membership or are rejected. Using an analysis of imagined community and interior monologue, Toomer resists the restrictions placed on interracial status by employing transportation to move figuratively and literally in and out of a range of racialized contexts.

While critics generally see Toomer as a voyeur, my reading presents him as consciously using technology to modulate between dichotomous extremes, especially between modernism and primitivism. For Toomer, the future is a progressive product of the present and past, and thus, the concept of race itself is advancing dialectically. Where most critics try to place Toomer within one category of a binary, I read Toomer and subsequently *Cane* as vacillating or *traveling* between traditions and categories. And where some critics view Toomer as ambivalent about his racial heritage, I see him as committed to his radical notion of race. Just as Toomer swung between racial categories in order to undermine those categories, *Cane* is informed by this will and philosophy. It is a mirror of his use of actual mobility to dissolve abstract categories.

### **Section I: “The Machine,” Mixed Race Issues, and the Rural South**

Set in a rural town of Georgia, Section I appears to romanticize images of agriculture and black folk ways. However, here, one finds touches of modernity that consistently affect the plot development, narration, and subtext in ways that suggest the potential of regeneration rather than the destruction that many readers presume. For instance, even though “Karintha” does not explicitly feature mixed identity (being described as the “color of dusk,” Karintha's racial appearance is possibly dark or light), it does feature travel and machinery. In the story, young men desiring to improve their prospects for courting the beautiful Karintha “run stills to make her money,” “go to the big cities and [work] on the [rail] road,” and “go away to college” (*Cane* 4). The significance of making moonshine will be discussed later in detail, but suffice it to say now that it is an act that involves crossing physical, social, and racial boundaries.

Although their attempts to gain her favor move them away from Karnitha, the young men's means of courting illustrates the prevalence of modern travel in Toomer's conception of race and masculinity in the South. This context in turn surrounds his conception of interracial identity in the South.

In the first section alone, five of the six stories involve interracial identity: "Becky," "Carma," "Fern," "Esther," "Blood-Burning Moon." Becky is a white woman who bears two mixed sons. Carma has a "yellow flower face" and is "as strong as a man" (12, 13). The mysterious Fern is a "cream-colored solitary girl" of African and Jewish descent. Esther, who "looks like a little white child," struggles with repressed desire (22). In "Blood-Burning Moon," Louisa, described as the color of leaves in fall (30), is courted by Bob Stone, who is white. The predilection for interracial characters and relationships in the first section establishes early the importance of the interracial perspective for Toomer and the text.

While discussing any of the five stories mentioned would reveal an interesting examination of Toomer's use of machines and travel to treat issues of interracial identity, two stories are particularly useful: "Becky" and "Fern." In "Becky," machines and travel isolate as well as liberate individuals involved in race mixing. Threatened by Becky and the miscegenation she represents, the town exiles her to "the narrow strip of land between the railroad and the road" (7). The town's disapproval of Becky is clear. In the opinion of its white citizens, she is a "common, God-forsaken, insane white shameless wench." To its black citizens, she is a "Catholic poor-white crazy woman." The town as a whole shuns Becky as a veritable untouchable; however, blacks and whites separately and covertly help shelter and provide for her. "Becky" illustrates a theme of social

ambivalence toward mixed identity that is present in other interracial narratives, such as *Quicksand*, *Chinaberry Tree*, and *The Walls of Jericho*. Also, isolation brought on by social views about mixed identity is a recurrent theme in *Cane* and in Toomer's life before and after the critical success of the book.

Though Becky is a white woman, she is central to the interracial identity analysis of the story. Because she publicly acknowledges her half-black children, the town in essence revokes her white status and banishes her to a liminal space symbolic of the in-between condition of biracial status. The possibility of living within the black community is out of the question because the race narrative of the day did not permit a white woman to live across the color line. Hence, without recourse to white or black society, Becky is abandoned to a no-man's land situated in a symbolic terrain sequestered between two man-made barriers. The fact that these barriers are modes of transportation, a railroad and a traditional road, further speaks to the ambivalence the town has toward her. Becky lives on an "eye-shaped piece of sandy ground. Ground islandized between the road and railroad track." Although the town has been put her out of sight, she remains under surveillance, as the descriptive "eye-shaped" implies.

Becky's banishment to "islandized" ground parallels the interracial situation in another way. When she is relegated to a place between the road and railroad track, it is as though the town reassigns her racial status to "mulatto." She is made to feel on the fringe of both black and white society, in the same way that many interracial persons were made to feel during the era. By being on the fringe, she is closer to modes of travel and the potential of renewal that they promise. Both the bipartisan social pressure asserted against mixed identity and the mixed race reliance on travel are played out in the

depiction of Becky's two half-black sons. As children, they grow up isolated in a one-room cabin on the outskirts of town, in neither a white nor a black community. As they grew, they became “sullen and cunning” and “drifted around from job to job” (8). The last sighting of the boys is very telling: “They answered black and white folks by shooting up two men and leaving town. 'Godam the white folks; godam the niggers,' they shouted as they left town” (8). Throughout the boys’ lives, the two sides of town exert a dual pressure on the sons until they explode in physical violence and flee. While an escape on the train would have been more consistent with an embrace of modern transportation, their exit nevertheless supports the pattern of mixed characters using travel to answer the combination of black and white social pressure.

By relegating Becky to a “sandy island,” the town expresses its attitude toward interracialness. Black males being accused of accosting white women is a common narrative in turn of the century white townships. In this case, Toomer decentralizes the significance of the identity of the “damn buck nigger” by not revealing it. Judging by her silence and her actions, Becky consents to the town's judgment of her. From labels like “insane” and “shameless,” we can deduce that the town feels that Becky should rationally or morally know not to associate sexually with a black man. The town's rejection of miscegenation falls on Becky but its judgment is qualified by her whiteness. Rather than murder her, the town exiles her. By exiling her, the town assigns her the interregnum space given interracial persons. Yet, the guilt of the town regarding its treatment of her is shown in blacks and whites anonymously assisting her with labor and goods. Some critics view this guilt as resulting from the town's conflict about her whiteness. While I see this as true, I also believe that the town is incapable of having a mature, public conversation

about interracial desire and love because of the narrow lexicon of racial segregation. That is, the racial discourse has a public narrative for a white man and white woman, and a tacit narrative for a white man and a black woman. But, it has none for a white woman and a black man where the love is publicly expressed by a white woman, the symbolic pinnacle of white virtue and purity; this is beyond the vocabulary and understanding of the town. Finding such an act inexplicable, both white and black members conclude by questioning her sanity. In contrast to “Blood Burning Moon,” where a white young man courts a black woman for sex but not marriage, Becky makes her interracial liaison public by refusing to abort or abandon her children.

Modern transportation makes several appearances in “Becky.” Situated near the tracks, “trains passing shook the ground” on a regular basis. Toomer makes even greater homage to the train when he describes Becky's piece of land as “pushed up where a blue-shen God with listless eyes could look at it” (7). Toomer's locomotive is a powerful, old Testament God that could equally grant death and salvation. In Becky's case, the blue-shen God did not save her but caused her cabin to collapse: “the ground trembled as a ghost train rumbled by” (8). For Becky's sons, at first the train and the road pen them in; but, these barriers also symbolize a principle of travel that they exploit by story's end.

Although the train image also appears prominently in “Fern,” very little commentary has been written about it. In fact, critical scholarship has not been kind to the story in general. As William Boelhower observed in 2001, the story “has almost always been neglected even by Toomer's best critics” (199). And, when “Fern” does get attention, it receives a few summary sentences or is interpreted as showing the narrator's inability to connect with, appreciate, or understand black femininity. Boelhower and

Maria Stein find great meaning in “Fern” and regard it as more than a minor story in *Cane*. In a 1970 article, Stein analyzes eye imagery in the story as expressive of Toomer's participant-recorder status and expressive of his union with Fern. This observation of Stein's assists my reading of “Fern” in several ways. Firstly, she states that “The so-called mystic-Toomer and the so-called realist-Toomer meet here” (64). Although her remark perpetuates the primitivist label commonly applied to Toomer, it also identifies a pragmatism grounded in the modern present. In my reading, the modern present is in large part founded in the effects of modern technology. Secondly, Stein says of Toomer and his work, “like an asymptote in mathematics, always, he is *approaching*.... Exquisite art, always *becoming*, often becomes reconciliation of polar opposites” [sic] (64). Stein's comment echoes my argument that perpetual possibility is a feature of interracial identity within and without literature. Lastly, Stein addresses the relationship between Fern and the narrator: “They are akin; they briefly stop each other because they are akin; in her eyes he recognizes consciousness of the beauty and anguish of knowledge of absolute isolation and therefore absolute wholeness” (64). Stein points to the similarity between Fern and the narrator, and his identification with her. What Fern feels, so does the narrator, which is paradoxically “absolute isolation” and “absolute wholeness.” It is this equation that endows him with the desire to liberate her, because what he imagines for her he imagines for himself.

As Stein does, Boelhower emphasizes the imagery of Fern's eyes. For Boelhower, Toomer's narrator is not physically interested in Fern but spiritually. In this case, "it becomes evident that for the narrator, Fern's eyes are a conduit to other levels of reality, and the oft-used verb 'to flow' signals the act of transport he is concerned with" (199). As

with Stein, Boelhower perceives in the story a spiritual union between Fern and the narrator which leads, by way of “transport,” to an alternative reality. In a word, Stein and Boelhower look to eye imagery as the source of imagined union and transportation in “Fern.” The themes of union, alternate reality, and transport that Stein and Boelhower raise are relevant to the work’s enactment of imagined community, but Fern’s eyes are only the outward depiction of her imagining herself elsewhere or part of something larger than herself. Because the act of imagining is internal, we only observe her blank, outward stare. In addition to her gender and hometown, another distinction from the narrator is the access to actual travel. By the story’s conclusion, she remains on the steps of her house while the narrator continues his journey of self-development by leaving town on a train.

Thus, although my primary concern is Toomer’s rendering of the relationship between travel and mulatto identity, this emphasis does not overlook Toomer’s problematic position on masculinity and sexual relations. As in other stories in *Cane*, the narrator here expresses a contradictory “double will to empower and overpower the women of the title” (Doyle 97). But as much as the narrator colludes with his proposed male audience, he (consciously, I believe) implicates himself in the acquisitive male gaze in order to expose his complicity and myopia. Fern is a mystery, but so is the narrator. What does he do to frighten Fern? Why does he not recall what he did? Did he do anything at all to incite her violent reaction? Ultimately, the narrator’s rendering demonstrates men’s, including his own, superficial and ineffectual reading of Fern. Remaining in the travel context, what the narrator offers is “talk” of “new horizons,” but this would fail to liberate Fern because assisting her in traveling to a new town or city would only worsen her oppressed and objectified condition (18). Traveling, for Fern,

would result in her being an outright “prostitute” or “concubine.” This, it would seem, is what happens to Avey. Similarly, the danger that travel presents to black women is seen in both *Quicksand* and *Flight*, where, alone and in unfamiliar surrounds, Helga Crane and Mimi Daquin are read as viable targets for propositions for paid or bartered sex.

However, Fern’s gaze suggests that she on some level would like to leave the town:

“Like as not they’d [Fern’s eyes] settle on some vague spot above the horizon, though hardly a trace of wistfulness would come to them. If it were dusk, then they’d wait for the search-light of the evening train which you could see miles up the track before it flared across the Dixie Pike, close to her home” (17).

As with her past lovers, Fern is present in body, but her mind is elsewhere, focused on the horizon or the train that connects the town the outside world. Fern’s provisional presence is also represented in her habitual posture. Daily she stands on her stoop leaning against a post but never rests her head. Instead, she suspends it above a jutting nail. Fern’s reason for not resting metaphorizes her status in town, and it is this mysterious restiveness that sets her apart, making a different kind of object of desire than Karintha. It is clear that Karintha is an accepted member of town, for she was a child there and “married many times” as an adult (4). By contrast, Fern’s childhood goes undescribed and, when she reached adulthood, “a few men took her” without marriage (16). These clues, along with her “aquiline, Semitic” nose, express Fern’s outsidership. Like the narrator, Fern is mulatto, but instead of making use of physical travel to moderate her liminal social position, she engages in psychological detachment as a form travel. Thus, in addition to commenting on the futility and superficiality of the male approach to heterosexual relations, Toomer self-consciously describes the social conditions that limit women’s ability to use travel to address subjectivity in the manner that his narrator does. However,

Toomer captures yet another gender distinction in regard to travel. With fewer options, women in his work (if Fern is seen as representative) make greater use of imagination to address their fears, desires, and questions about racial identity.

## **Section II: Mixed Race Themes Transformed by Speed and Light in the Urban**

### **North**

The stories and sketches of section II are set in Washington, D.C., and Chicago, and this section is rife with street and machine imagery. Generally speaking, in Toomer scholarship, the North symbolizes African American alienation from its folk roots. However, the northern urban centers contain a dense abundance of vibrant life illuminated, transported, and augmented by streets, automobiles, trains, and other modern machinery. Notwithstanding that technology represents the demise of an uprooted black culture, such imagery also expresses an exhilaration and empowerment that expands the potential of blacks in general and interracial characters in particular.

A number of the poems, sketches, and stories in this section grant an interpretation of technology or travel as tropes that demonstrate the persistent interracial point of view and perpetual possibility. Although “Seventh Street” does not involve an interracial character, its tone and imagery describes the blurring of boundaries and culture. Similarly, “Rhobert” does not explicitly feature a mixed character, but the sense of burden and isolation, captured in the bizarre image of a house on a black man's head “like a monstrous diving helmet,” parallels the absurd position of the interracial character caught between worlds (42). In “Avey,” a light-skinned male narrator pursues a woman (who may be dark or light), and his journey takes him from Washington to Colonial

Beach, Virginia (about 60 miles south of D.C.), Harper's Ferry, West Virginia (about 60 miles north-west of D.C.), Wisconsin, and New York City. Touching on the notion of an imagined community of interracial acceptance, "Theater" uses an enclosed space and artificial light to relate the aborted romance of two mixed race characters, John and Dorris, because they each presume the other to be "dictie." In "Box Seat," mixed race Dan fruitlessly pursues Muriel while surrounded by the effects of electric light and machines, and while struggling with individuation and the values of urban black society. The final and crowning piece of the second section, "Bona and Paul" recounts a romantic liaison between the interracial Paul and the white Bona. Set in Chicago, the story employs an elevated train as a point of imaginative departure, and it uses the artificial light of a club to create the illusion of racelessness.

Each of the pieces of the second section deal compellingly with the nexus of mixed race perspective, machines, and travel. "Theater" and "Bona and Paul" most prominently display such features. However before going on to analyze these two short-stories in-depth, I would like to briefly discuss another piece to emphasize the extent to which travel, imagined community, and race permeates even works that do not seem at first to fit my established model. "Seventh Street" is a rarely discussed work that deserves more attention. Farah Griffin is one of the few to unfurl the delicate nuances of the sketch. She observes, "The imagery is distinctly urban: Fast money, hustlers, and transportation technology contrast with the sunsets, swan songs, and beautiful, sensual women of the Southern section. The sounds are literally the sounds of cars and streetcars" (65). Where Griffin asserts the personification of money in "Seventh Street," I perceive in such imagery the representation of volatility and dissolving boundaries.

Griffin accurately identifies the verbs of the poem as words of sex and reproduction: “breathing,” “thrusting,” “split,” “shred,” “pouring,” “flowing.” Taking the implication further, she writes, “Washington is a white woman, a stale and stagnant being entered forcefully by the black male migrant blood.” For me, however, this language does not convey violence but more accurately the legacy of Toomer's interracial heritage and the development of his own personal identity.

In its tone and theme, the piece depicts a context of flux and integration that is informed by Toomer's experience. The refrain at the start of “Seventh Street” initiates an overall impression of increased speed of life and blurring of boundaries in a turn of the century urban setting:

Money burns the pocket, pocket hurts,  
Bootleggers in silken shirts,  
Ballooned, zooming Cadillacs,  
Whizzing, whizzing down the street-car tracks.

Resembling a jazz-scat, Toomer's free association in these few short lines emphasizes objects of material affluence, and captures the despair and thrill of the period. Equally present in the quote is the notion of travel. First, bootlegging required several exchanges to conduct the illegal alcohol from distillery to distributor to retailer, that is, from an area remote or across state or national lines to an establishment of consumption. Second, the Cadillac embodies power, speed, and liberty. Finally, the car overlaps with the tracks of an electric street-car, the former mass-produced since 1902 and the latter available in American cities since the 1890s.

As the sketch continues, it persists in demonstrating the influence of interracial identity upon Toomer's perception of his surroundings. For instance, the street is a “bastard of Prohibition and the War” and as a “wedge of nigger life” injecting “black

reddish blood into the white and white washed wood of Washington” (*Cane* 41). The theme of bastardy appears consistently in interracial literature, where a parent (usually male) rejects his or her biracial child. The orphan theme is equally common, where the child is untimely separated from one or more parents. Both the bastard and orphan themes run throughout interracial literature of the antebellum, reconstruction, and turn of the century periods. For instance, Langston Hughes highlights parental rejection in “Mulatto,” and James W. Johnson deals with parental separation in *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man*.

Furthering the boundary blurring effect of Prohibition, “Seventh Street” deals in metaphors of miscegenation. A definite allusion to miscegenation is visible in Toomer's description, “wedge of nigger life [...] thrusting unconscious rhythms, black reddish blood into the white and whitewashed wood of Washington” (41). Seventh Street is a “wedge of nigger life” reminiscent of Becky's “island.” Black Washington's wedge is isolated and surrounded by a mass of white culture. Simultaneously, though appearing “soft-skinned” and sickly, there is an undeniable strength in the wedge's ability to cut through the material of the white city. The above phrase anticipates Ralph Ellison's metaphor of “optic white” in *Invisible Man*, where the main character is responsible for adding the correct amount of black paint into white at a factory. Like Ellison's metaphor, Toomer's suggests cultural exchange and a literal infusion of black DNA. For Toomer, Washington is a city of indelibly mixed racial identity, or, to use Werner Sollors's title, neither white nor black yet both. Contrary to views of the middle section of *Cane* as illustrating black cultural alienation and demise, “Seven Street” celebrates black genetics and culture to regenerate the “stale soggy wood of [white] Washington.”

Though little discussed, especially in regard to mixed identity, “Seventh Street” paints a dizzying picture of changing modern life spurred by Prohibition and World War I. Awash with “distinctly urban” imagery and words connotative of interracial “sex and reproduction,” the piece arrives just short of a direct proclamation for interracial oneness. And, in a section—not to mention the book as a whole—where black culture is supposed to be declining, “Seventh Street” proclaims the regeneration of black and white America by way of a cultural and genetic merger, the epitome of Toomer’s New America.

“Theater” touches directly on mixed race appearance but expresses less optimism is “Seventh Street.” Compared to other stories in *Cane* pertaining to romantic relationships, “Theater” is striking because it revolves around two light skin black characters. The story depicts them and their anxiety about one another, revealed by the interior monologues that comprise the narrative. Intra-racial anxiety over shades of skin color is a theme of Harlem Renaissance literature that can be seen in Hurston’s “Color Struck,” Thurman’s *The Blacker the Berry*, and Schuyler’s *Black No More*. Such anxiety normally occurs between lighter and darker characters. Here, John and Dorris are similarly fair. However, the stereotype of the “dictie,” which is a conceited black person (usually “mulatto”) is so prevalent that it warps John and Dorris’ perception of one another even though they are both light.

“Theater” uses interior space and interior monologue to artfully render internalized racism. This approach is appropriate to the story’s theme of intra-racial tension and the imagined self and community of the interracial character. Set in the Howard Theater of a black neighborhood in Washington, the narrative centers on John, brother of the theater manager and casting agent, and Dorris, a dancer trying for a chorus

girl spot. Both are light-skinned. John is not directly described as interracial, but multiple clues point in this direction. First, despite the evidence of an objective narrator, much of the action is described from John's point of view. Second, John is introduced as having light from a window on his face: "one half his face is orange in it. On half his face is in shadow" (52). The description of the color of his face as orange suggests that he is fair. Third, one of the chorus girls tells Dorris that John is "Th manager's brother. Dictie. Nothin doin, hon" (53). Although "dictie" is not a term exclusively for light-skinned blacks, the expression is predominantly applied to them. Lastly, when Dorris is trying to talk herself out of wanting John's attention, she proposes in a phrenological sense that "his lips are too skinny" for John to express love sufficiently. Such a description would seem to indicate that his facial features are at least partly European, rather than entirely African. These four clues strongly suggest John's mixed racial heritage. In contrast, Dorris's racial composition is obvious in the description, "bushy, black hair bobbing about her lemon-colored face" (53).

The issues of superficial impressions, internalization of a stereotype, emotional misgivings, and misreadings of character are paralleled by the interior space consisting of artificial light of the setting. John announces the significance of skin hue and illusion when he first assesses the entrance of the dancers trying out for chorus girls. In this first instance of interior monologue, he thinks, "Soon the audience will paint your dusk faces white, and call you beautiful" (52-3). The editor's footnote informs the reader that directors of the era gave preference to light-skinned performers, or that white audiences unconsciously lightened the skin of the dancers in order to be more comfortable considering them beautiful. The foot note establishes the importance of skin hue to the

psychological atmosphere of the text. As the text goes on to demonstrate, psychological tension about personality—as presumed by skin color—is what creates the tension, climax, and conclusion of the plot; for, where a white audience “paints” the dancers' faces white in order to perceive them as merely beautiful, a black audience sees the dancers' light skin as beautiful and “dictie.” For instance, upon first seeing Dorris, John thinks, “Stage-door johnny; chorus-girl. No, that would be all right. Dictie, educated, stuck-up; show-girl. Yep. Her suspicion would be stronger than her passion. It wouldnt work [sic]. Keep her loveliness. Let her go” (53). As a first impression of Dorris, John's reaction attests to the strength of the stereotype as it is applied to light-skin people.

Although Dorris does not initially label John as dictie, she eventually succumbs to the influence of the stereotype. Her curiosity about John leads her to making inquiries about him; she is told that he is “th manager's brother. Dictie. Nothin doin, hon” (53). Dorris wrestles with the advice by asking herself, “Nothin doin? How come? Aint I as good as him? Couldnt I have got an education if I'd wanted one? Dont I know respectable folks, lots of em, in Philadelphia and New York and Chicago? Aint I had men as good as him? Better. Doctors an lawyers. Whats a manager's brother, anyhow?” (53-4). Dorris accepts without question that John is classist, because the stereotype informs her perception. She then attempts to neutralize his dictie status by cataloging her social achievements in black middle-class circles of Norther cities. However, because this list of rhetorical questions is directed at herself, she is actually trying to legitimize herself to herself.

In his turn, John is torn between his perceptions of class, love, and carnal desire. In one extended internal monologue, he teeters in rumination while watching Dorris

dance:

—and then you shimmy. I'll bet she can. Some good cabaret, with rooms upstairs. And what in hell do you think you'd get from it? You're going wrong. Here's right: get her to herself—(Christ, but how she'd bore you after the first five minutes)—not if you get her right she wouldn't. Touch her, I mean. To herself—in some room perhaps. Some cheap, dingy bedroom. Hell no. Can't be done. But the point is, brother John, it can be done. Get her to herself somewhere, anywhere. Go down in yourself—and she'd be calling you all sorts of asses while you were in the process of going down. Hold em, bud. Can't be done. Let her go. (Dance and I'll love you!) And keep her loveliness. (54)

As in “Fern” and “Avey,” “Theater” touches on ambivalent desire. John is in crisis about what he wants from Dorris and about what he believes she wants from him. The monologue begins with a desirous image, Dorris's shimming, and the image of shaky undulation establishes the unsure attitude of the rest of the monologue. John would seem to desire getting Dorris alone in an upstairs room of a cabaret, for presumably lecherous purposes. But, then he asks himself, “and what in hell do you think you'd get from it?”, and criticizes, “You're going wrong.” By thinking “going wrong,” he rejects dealing with Dorris so caddishly as a mistake for his intended goal of seducing her. Additionally, the conflict indicates an underlying and sincere emotional investment that is expressed later.

The complexity and combativeness of John's interior speech takes on the impression of a two-person dialogue or dialectic. At first, the argument appears to be over whether he can take advantage of Dorris in the squalor of a cheap cabaret room. He seems to doubt whether she would give herself easily to his desires, the question being whether she thinks herself respectable or not. Her respectability is at question when John debates whether it is worth it to pursue her at all, asking, “what in hell do you think you'd get from it?” and conjecturing, “she'd bore you after the first five minutes” (54). But then several turns take place, which shift the meaning of this interior debate. The merely

opportunistic voice is altered by the doubt and repulsion, so that getting Dorris alone and touching her could have figurative importance rather than the literal act of touch. It is possible, supported by the emotional turn at the end of the monologue, that John actually desires not only a physical love but a romantic one. In the final line of the monologue, while John is trying to convince himself to “let her go,” he interjects “Dance and I’ll love you!” In addition to an obvious physical reading, John’s reverie at the end of the story solidifies him as emotionally in love with Dorris (55). In his final daydream, she is “Glorious Dorris” and his respect for her is shown in his thought of his melancholy as “too deep for sweet untruth.” Her questionable social status from the first reverie is not mentioned, and he cannot pronounce any of the untruths suggested in his earlier, dialectic interior-speech. Instead, John and Dorris share a platonic moment in a rented room where he reads from his manuscript while she performs its dance scene.

John’s internal debate preceding the romantic scene demonstrates the internalized color-class tension that confronted the interracial character of early 20<sup>th</sup> century literature. John’s crisis arises from being swayed by the very same assumptions of the stereotype that are applied to him. Subsequently, he assumes the worst of the situation even as he entertains reveries an alternative reality. Rather than see Dorris as someone similar to himself, he subscribes to the presumption a dictie mulatto and fears rejection. Simultaneously, he fails to come to terms with his physical desires and class needs. Meanwhile, Dorris’s speech and admitted lack of education compels her to justify her equality to herself. Making a point to secure his attention, Dorris dances with abandon and with periodic, inviting glances in John’s direction. While her “eyes burn across the space of seats to him,” she enters into an internal, dialectic monologue of her own:

I bet he can love. Hell, he cant love. He's too skinny. His lips are too skinny. He wouldn't love me anyway, only for that. But I'd get a pair of silk stockings out of it. Red silk. I got purple. Cut it, kid. You cant win him to respect you that way. He wouldnt anyway. Maybe he would. Maybe he'd love. I've heard em say that men who look like him (what does he look like?) will marry if they love. O will you love me? And give me kids,and a home, and everything? (I'd like to make your nest, and honest, hon, I wouldn't run out on you.) You will if I make you. Just watch me. (55)

Dorris's dialectic alternates between fear of rejection and fear of John's inability to love, or fear of John's exploiting her sexually. Yet, she expresses an exploitative impulse of her own when she states her desire for material gain represented by the “red silk;” she then supplants her material impulse with a resolve to gain John's respect. Dorris continues to question his ability to love but a fragment of optimism or competitiveness compels her to make John notice her. She resolves, “you will [love me] if I make you. Just watch me” (55).

John and Dorris have internalized the stereotype of the dictie mixed race subject to the extent that they misread each other's intentions and behaviors. By all indications, they are probably a good match for each other. The climax comes as Dorris dances with such style, grace, and abandon that she arrests the attention of everyone at the rehearsal:

Odd ends of stage-men emerge from the wings, and stare and clap. A crap game in the alley suddenly ends. Black faces crowd the rear stage doors. The girls, catching joy from Dorris, whip up within the footlights' glow. They forget set steps; they find their own. The director forgets to bawl them out. Dorris dances. (54)

Her dance also enraptures John, and he falls into a reverie of romance. In his dream, John rendezvouses with her at a stage door:

Dorris knows that he is coming. Just at the right moment she steps from the door, as if there were no door. Her face is tinted like the autumn alley. Of old flowers, or of a southern canefield, her perfume. 'Glorious Dorris.' So his eyes speak. And their sadness is too deep for sweet untruth. She

barely touches his arm. They glide off with footfalls softened on the leaves, the old leaves powdered by a million satin slippers.

Later, in the same reverie, they are alone in a room:

“John reaches for a manuscript of his and reads. Dorris, who has no eyes, has eyes to understand him. He comes to a dancing scene. The scene is Dorris. She dances. Dorris dances. Glorious Dorris. Dorris whirls, whirls, dances ...”

In the dream, John takes Dorris to a room, but it is not the “cheap, dingy bedroom” of his dialectic monologue. Having decide to “touch her” emotionally rather than physically, John makes a decision that the narrators of “Fern” and “Avey” want to make but fail. The repetition of Dorris's name also makes this reverie a chant that glorifies “Glorious Dorris.” Unfortunately, just as John imagines their life together, Dorris finishes her dance, created for him, and sees “his whole face is in shadow.” Worse still, “she finds [his face] a dead thing in the shadow which is his dream” (56). His blank outer expression obscured by shadow belies his beguiled and rapt state, and the effect crushes Dorris's openness to him. Sadly, both John and Dorris anticipate the worst from each other because of the dictie stereotype. Further, each character's interiority interferes with his or her ability to engage the other. John, by far, is more conflicted about his wants and desires than Dorris is. Although Dorris manages to make an exterior show of her attraction to John, she does so indirectly—leaving room for misunderstanding—and her interiority is mired in her class insecurity.

In “Theater,” we see that the stereotype of the dictie light-skin person dominates the popular image to such a high degree that it creates tension and anxiety even among mixed race persons. Anderson's imagined community should have played a part in resolving the class conflict of “Theater.” Instead, both John's and Dorris' imagined

communities were devoid of an unstereotyped mixed race identity. Even with her travel experience, Dorris lacked the confidence to stand against the doubt of her peers and the doubt of her own making. In the theater setting, the anonymity of the urban space is enacted in the remove between performer and audience. For instance, at various points John's face is obscured by the darkness that shrouds him. Conversely, Dorris and the other dancers are altered by a flood of artificial light. In essence, travel and imagination are not flawless remedies to the plights of interracial identity.

“Bona and Paul” provides different implication of travel and technology as they relate to interracial issues. The theme of longing for companionship appears repeatedly in Section II, such as in “Avey,” “Box Seat,” and “Harvest Song.” The romantic curiosity in “Theater” is in effect in “Bona and Paul,” but instead of leading to unspoken desire and misunderstanding between two mixed race characters, it leads to verbalized desire and perceived possibility between a mixed man and a white woman. As one of the longer, more conventionally narrated stories, “Bona and Paul” has received much scholarly attention. But where many commentators see impotence, internalized racism, and self-hatred, I see Toomer using the hued lighting of a night club to suspend the stark constraints of an anxious American race narrative. Subsequently, the ambiguous conclusion does not necessarily cancel the potential of the vision revealed to Paul and the reader.

Scholars have read “Bona and Paul” as a case of tragically intellectualized romance and racial self-consciousness. Kerman and Eldridge, for instance, interpret the story as an autobiographical piece about Toomer's self-consciousness and racial guilt. Robert Bone argues that the “philosophical bent” of Paul's “whiteness” ends the

relationship prematurely. Mark Whalan cites the pieces as an expression of Toomer's gravitation to McFadden physical culture, which emphasized body development rather than social status ("Taking Myself"). Charles Scruggs explains the story as an "awakening" to Toomer's "vision of wholeness in the Gardens," but "it is a fusion whose nature, like that of dusk, is only temporary" (279-80). Such readings interpret Paul as failing to consummate his desire or an ability to overcome his socio-racial anxieties. As Scruggs points out, Paul does in fact overcome societal restrictions, so there is no lack of ability. It is the maintenance of his transcendent constructions that falls short. As for the consummation of his desire, the ambiguity of the conclusion leaves room for doubt whether arguing for or against it. Truly, Paul's physical union with Bona does not occur in the text, but there is still the possibility of it beyond the text. Bona is a classmate at his college, so he will certainly see her again in drill or basketball practice. Who is to say that Paul doesn't use his superior athleticism to chase her down immediately. If we are to look at the story as autobiographical as Kerman and Eldridge suggest, we should remember that Toomer was a successful wooer of women. Though we cannot wholly equate the author to Paul, enough biographical equivalences exist that we can embrace the possibility of Paul being emotionally and intellectually capable of eventually seducing Bona.

Travel, technology, and imagination weave with interracial perspective at several junctures in the story. The first is Paul's reverie at the double window of his apartment, creating a split, bi-racial vision, sparked by the shadows of passing elevated trains:

Bona is one window. One window, Paul.  
Hurling Loop-jammed L trains throw them in swift shadow.  
Paul goes to his. Gray slanting roofs of houses are tinted lavender in the setting sun. Paul follows the sun, over the stock-yards where a fresh stench

is just arising, across wheat lands that are still waving above their stubble, into the sun. Paul follows the sun to a pine-matted hillock in Georgia. He sees the slanting roofs of gray unpainted cabins tinted lavender. A Negress chants a lullaby beneath the mate-eyes of a southern planter. Her breasts are ample for the suckling of a song. She weans it, and sends it, curiously weaving, among lush melodies of cane and corn. Paul follows the sun into himself in Chicago. (73)

In the above quote, the reader follows Paul's inner eye as it makes a series of choices about perception and point of view, the first being whether to go to his window or Bona's. From there, Paul's imagination transports him to a plantation in Georgia. The reader sees through Paul's mixed race as well as his mixed cultural schema, that is, the melding of opposites. In the passage, transportation leads to imagination; the shadow of the train induces a sense of movement, which transports Paul to a southern scene. Consistent with Paul's biographical and cultural background, the plantation scene is imagined as an interracial one, but the gender roles are reversed from the one in which Paul is engaged in his present. Whereas Bona is a white woman with "mate-eyes" for the darker Paul, the reverie features a white man ogling a black woman; in the southern scene, we must assume the "planter" to be white because his racial status is presumed by omission, whereas the racial status of the woman is included in her title, "negress." In the above scene, the stimulus of modern transportation triggers an imagined change in setting, which then prompts an altered replication of an interracial scene. The excerpt illustrates the circular construction of interracialness in *Cane*, where interracialness is the original impulse, but the impulse then transcends by way of travel and imagination, to arrive at—or try to arrive at—a new destination where a repositioning of the interracial dilemma can be proposed.

Paul's walk to the Crimson Gardens is also marked by technology and

transportation imagery that spur his imagination and turn his inner eye toward the South.

The narrator describes the environment of his walk:

The Boulevard is sleek in asphalt, and, with arc-lights and limousines, aglow. Dry leaves scamper behind the whirl of cars. The scent of exploded gasoline that mingles with them is faintly sweet. Mellow stone mansions overshadow clapboard homes which now resemble Negro shanties in some southern alley. (75-6)

Once again, Toomer portrays a fascination with technology and transportation. The vocabulary of his vision, as in the L train scene, enables his characters to be transported emotionally and psychologically rather than physically. In the above passage, urban surfaces, light, and cars are conducive to movement. Toomer's use of machine imagery is mixed with those of nature. Note the image of leaves coupled with cars. Also, the smell of gasoline is combined with the impression of leaves as well. In each case, machinery juxtaposes artifice and nature, and the excitement of the juxtaposition of potential lovers. Similarly, machinery suggests the potential of travel, which juxtaposes north and south as a metonymy of the juxtaposition of black and white.

Visibility—appearance, watching, and being watched, between men and women, and between black and white—is a central motif. As he gets ready for his date with Bona, Paul considers his roommate's grooming habits and entertains the superficiality, and perhaps the irony, of a white person altering his or her color. The roommate, Art, powders his skin, making a “pale purple facsimile of a red-blooded Norwegian” (75). The matter of the superficial appearance of skin is no small matter for Paul, for rumors about his racial heritage already abound at the college because of his unique hue. Also, the effect of artificial light and its altering the shade of skin-color is an observation that returns in the later scene at the Crimson Gardens night club. There, patrons at the club whisper to each

other about his ethnicity when Paul and his party enter: “What is he, a Spaniard, an Indian, an Italian, a Mexican, a Hindu, or a Japanese?” (76).

Under the catalytic pressure of the curious crowd, Paul experiences an epiphany.

He concludes that

he was apart from the people around him. Apart from the pain which they had unconsciously caused. Suddenly he knew that people saw, no attractiveness in his dark skin, but difference. Their stares, giving him to himself, filled something long empty within him, and were like green blades sprouting in his consciousness. (77)

Rather than cause despair, Paul's separateness functions like that of the reaper in “Harvest Song” (which appears immediately before “Bona and Paul”), in which the speaker of the poem announces, “My pain is sweet. Sweeter than the oats or wheat or corn. It will bring me knowledge of my hunger.” The reaper realizes that his waiting has inured him to loneliness, so much so that solitude develops a flavor and sustenance that rivals oat, wheat, and corn. Whether by pride or habit, his “labor” has been so enduring that it has taken on a life and momentum of its own. Similarly, in the Crimson Garden club, Paul realizes a sensation of separateness and feels something of a fulfillment.

Thus, Paul's separateness empowers and invigorates him. Faced with the crowd's stares, he embraces his othered ambiguousness. By contrasting himself to the crowd in dialectic fashion, he finds his identity. And the idea of difference blooms “like green blades sprouting in his consciousness.” Paul's metaphor of self-realization is a Whitmanesque exaltation that proclaims that “the smallest sprout shows there is no death” (Section 6, *Leaves of Grass*). Essentially, Paul's metaphor is one of regeneration where “all goes onward and outward.” For Paul, the “green blades” of difference representing his many isolated deaths lead to rebirth under the stares of the patrons. This

allusion to regeneration and the union of Whitmanesque multitudes returns in the closing moment when Paul conveys to the doorman a utopic vision of a world of limitless love and harmonious fusion of men and women of all races. At the club, something dies in Paul, but phoenix-like something is also born.

In addition to making Paul's acceptance of separateness possible, the Crimson Gardens scene creates an illusion—and thus an imagined possibility—of racelessness. The club setting features a playfulness of artificial light and superficial surfaces. Where his self-awareness comes by being objectified, his position as viewer allows him to see the notion of race altered by the artificial light of the club: “White lights, or as now, the pink lights of the Crimson Gardens gave a glow and immediacy to white faces” (77). Paul almost doesn't recognize his companions in the light. He ponders, “Art and Bona and Helen? He'd [venture a] look. They were wonderfully flushed and beautiful. Not for himself; because they were.” What goes unstated in this scenario is that if he barely recognizes his friends in club lights, and if his friends are now flushed red instead of pale white or purple as Art was described earlier, then it stands to reason that Paul has undergone some fantastic change of color as well. Such an alteration probably revises the reader's interpretation of two earlier impressions. The first is the attention that Paul received when he entered the club. Under the strange lights, it is now possible that the crowd stared not out of racist maliciousness but out of genuine curiosity to comprehend his new hue, which may have been unlike most of the patrons. The second impression is Paul's excitement in the club. Considering the fantastic lighting, it is now possible to see a realistic rendering of a red utopia absent of black and white opposition; in Paul's imagined Crimson Gardens, the crowd is comprised of a range of crimson. In the illusion

of a crimson Eden, Paul is so overtaken with optimism and excitement that he starts with amazement and almost turns over the table.

Toomer's use of interior monologue in "Bona and Paul" suggests more than the free-indirect discourse that Megan Abbott asserts as pervading the narration of *Cane*. In "Bona and Paul," the interior mode often relates a character's self-talk while he or she dialectically struggles with the implications of race constructs. The significance of this mode contrast with the first section of *Cane*, which uses traditional conventions to distinguish dialogue from narration. For instance, "Blood-Burning Moon" employs free-indirect discourse predominantly to relay the son of the white plantation owner ruminating on race, beauty, and entitlement. But, in the second section, Toomer begins using the colon of dramatic dialogue to indicate interior monologue. In "Bona and Paul," all of the major characters, regardless of color, receive a monologue exhibited by the dramatic colon. This distinction is the beginning point of a technique that reaches its apex in the hybrid prose-play of the third section ("Kabnis"), where the colon alternates between indicating interior monologue and exterior dialogue. The second section marks an expanding experimentation of genre and typography.

Although Paul experiences several epiphanies about himself and vision of the future by story's end, the narrative concludes ambiguously. His first achievement is confirming the attraction between him and Bona. On the dance floor, after a contentious start, "passionate blood leaps back into their eyes. They are a dizzy blood clot on a gyrating floor. They know that the pink-faced people have no part in what they feel" (79). The narrator, distinct from Paul, makes it clear that both Bona and Paul express, acknowledge, and reciprocate passion for one another. However, the final scene of the

story creates doubt about the outcome of their emotional journey. After proselytizing the doorman about the singular and elevated beauty of the anticipated communion between Bona and Paul, Paul returns to the sidewalk but does not find her there. As with the other works of *Cane*, an ambiguous ending signifies neither a positive nor negative closure, leaving room for perpetual possibility.

In the course of the story, the reader has been repeatedly exposed to situations of repetition, regeneration, and possibility. First, there is the long list of Paul's potential racial identities. Second, the night club creates further possibility for Paul in regard to racelessness and sexual desire for Bona. Lastly, the ambiguous conclusion leaves open the possibility of Paul's union with Bona. Simply not being where he last saw her does not mean she has disappeared irrevocably or irreconcilably. More importantly, in the transaction of the evening, Paul experiences a revelation about himself that fosters a hopeful vision of the future, perhaps the purposefully blended race of his New America.

### **Section III: The Scapegoating of a Prodigal Son**

Section III consists of a narrative-drama hybrid, “Kabnis,” that takes the reader back to the setting of rural Georgia. The hybrid form of the play parallels the theme of mixed race identity and explores conventions of representing speech, thought, and narration. Unlike most of *Cane*, the environment of “Kabnis” is almost devoid of the effects of modern technology, which is why it is a world of chthonic imagery and stagnancy. The play illustrates the decline of southern black culture where there is no vision for the future. Furthermore, the play depicts the consequences of Toomer's ideal American—a mixed race individual capable of galvanizing a diverse population—when

said character despairs rather than blooms within the potential of his duality. Instead, the anti-hero Kabnis allows himself to be mired where he is not fully accepted or accepting, and is unable to comprehend his role as synthesizer of opposites. As in “Theater,” the motif of imagination and the issue of social class are in affect here. In “Kabnis,” the ability to hold opposites or move away from the town dictates one's ability to manage the crisis of modernity and racial identity. Specifically, Kabnis is afflicted by an inability to resolve the tensions of his various heritages, resulting in a fall in social class and geographic immobility.

Starting at the sound of a chicken or a rock through a glass window, Kabnis is as anxious about being in the black South. Most critics rightly discuss Kabnis's ambivalence toward his black southern roots. For example, Kerman and Eldrige see Toomer “react[ing] to the South as he did to his southern roots, with ambivalence that could be expressed but not resolved, as he speaks through the persona of Kabnis” (82). Kabnis is not only compared with Toomer, but he is contrasted with other characters, such as Lewis or Father John. By such contrasts, Kabnis' ambivalence can be interpreted as internalized racism, racial self-hatred, or intra-racial classism. Take for instance, Robert Bone's description of Kabnis as a “spiritual coward,” who is “consumed with self-hatred and cut off from any organic connection with the past” (87). Yet, another strain of criticism revolves around Kabnis' ability or lack thereof to create a language that expresses his position truly or resolves his indecision. Mary Battenfeld argues that Kabnis' inability to express his deeper thoughts and feelings represents the failure of the ethos of the Harlem Renaissance to use language to bring about social change. Each of these interpretations take for granted that the other characters come across less conflicted and less self-

loathing. For instance, Bone contrasts Kabnis and Lewis, concluding that Lewis is a “Christ figure” (87). However, at the end of the fifth section, Lewis is so reviled by the debauchery of Halsey's party that he runs into the night on the eve of his departure from the town. No character of “Kabnis” escapes unscathed from the oppressive surrounds of the town. The viability of black life in the town is moribund, and Toomer portrays the different means by which each character deals with the inevitability of the situation.

Escape by travel is one way that characters, if they so choose, could deal with the suffocating decay of the town. Notions of travel and mixed race identity are embodied in several characters. Lewis is light-skin and visiting from the North. He is a race activist whose questions stir up the anxiety of the black population of Sempter, Georgia. As a result, a rock with a threatening note attached is thrown through a window to intimate him into leaving. Most everyone respects Lewis for his intelligence, conscientiousness, and manliness despite the agitation he causes. In his way, the light skinned Halsey is also known for being smart and masculine. He was born in Sempter and later traveled to Atlanta to attend college. Finding the educational system demeaning and restrictive, he returned to the town and has remained ever since. Lewis and Halsey offer the reader two perspectives on the town: one from a Northerner temporarily in town; and one from a long-time resident. Each separately rises to the challenge then falters under the stagnation of the town. Lewis arrives and shakes up the status quo with his questions but abandons the town when confronted with its moral squalor. As a visitor, he has the luxury of escape. Halsey by contrast is a stalwart social pillar of the community, as shown by his taking in Kabnis and giving him employment when he is dismissed from teaching at the school. However, Halsey has a dark side that is revealed in his late night sprees of alcohol

and carousing with loose women. The town seems to exert a pressure on its inhabitants, especially those with interracial backgrounds, that is inexorable except by escape. Lewis' flight should not make him a Christ figure as Bone states, but merely a survivor. Coming from the North and being educated, Kabnis should also be able to flee, but Kabnis gets mired in his own riddle of classism, self-doubt, and romantic imagination. Bernard Bell sees Kabnis as never making good on his great ambition to ascertain the beauty and pain of black folk, but only remaining a "promise" of his potential (258). If Kabnis is not totally successful in Bell's assessment, which I think Kabnis does do, he at least comes closer than Lewis, for Lewis does lower himself to the working-class level of those around him nor does he suffer for his insights of beauty the way Kabnis does. This achievement should make Kabnis somewhat heroic even as he is obviously pathetic.

Another tactic for dealing with the stifling depression of the town is imagination, but just as travel is no guarantee of hero status, imagination does not come without its pitfalls. In the first section of the play, Kabnis says to himself: "Ralph Kabnis is a dream" and "If I could feel that I came to the South to face it. If I, the dream (not what is weak and afraid in me) could become the face of the South. How my lips would sing for it, my songs being the lips of its soul" (83-4). In the passage, Kabnis expresses an ontological awareness of himself as partly if not wholly imagined by himself, like the man in Zhuangzi's "The Butterfly Dream" who questions whether he is a man dreaming he is a butterfly or a butterfly dreaming he is a man. Kabnis' revelation marks his awareness of contrasting inner and outer self, and his desire for resolution. That is, he expresses the important role that imagination plays in his mission to develop himself.

The problem with imagination is that it can create foes and obstacles where there

are none. Kabnis' fear of racial violence is partially to blame for this. After the above passage, Kabnis imagines himself in a cell of the town's court house where "white minds, with indolent assumption, juggle justice and a nigger" (85-86). The prospect of violence awakens his loneliness and imagining of the distances he has traveled. In free-indirect discourse, Toomer writes:

"Somewhere, far off in the straight line of his sight, is Augusta. Christ, how cut off from everything he is. And hours, hours north, why not say a lifetime north? Washington sleeps. Its still, peaceful streets, how desirable they are. Its people whom he had always half-way despised. New York? Impossible. It was a fiction. He dreamed it. An impotent nostalgia grips him" (86).

Kabnis weighs his situation in Sempter against the northern cities he has inhabited. In Sempter, he lives in fear and isolation, but, if we think to the male characters of the second section, the North holds capitalist anxieties and superficial distractions. Kabnis' resignation to "impotent nostalgia" is beguiling seeing as he can return North whenever he chooses. The violence that he imagines awaiting him doesn't make him leave Sempter. Instead, "he forces himself to narrow to a cabin silhouetted on a knoll about a mile away. Peace. Negroes within it are content." Kabnis uses his imagination to calm himself by projecting himself into a nearby black home, where its inhabitants "farm," "sing," "love," and "sleep" peacefully. This use of imagination to vacillate between the South and North of his mind, in dialectic fashion, simultaneously uproots and stabilizes Kabnis. This pattern of contrasting an imagined North and imagined South is repeated in several other portions of the play. The dialectic is possible because Kabnis is from the North but is in the South, so every mention of the North is by recollection and nostalgia (which is ironic considering that many critics assert that it is nostalgia which brings Kabnis South). In contrast, Kabnis has very little direct knowledge of the South, yet there he is; so,

everything he knows about the South is assembled from second hand accounts. The plane of imagination on which Kabnis straddles, an unfamiliar immediate reality and a distant known reality, influences his perception of himself and those around him throughout the play.

Several of Kabnis's relationships are affected by the difference between the self he remembers of the North and the self he wishes to be in the South. In the first section, Kabnis thinks, "The body of the world is bull-necked. A dream is a soft face that fits uncertainly upon it... God, if I could develop that in words. Give what I know a bull-neck and a heaving body, all would go well with me, wouldnt it, sweet heart?" (83). From this statement, it is clear that Kabnis has come South to get in touch with folk heritage and to put his feelings into words. He has several opportunities to confront the self to which he aspires and draw inspiration from black folk culture. One instance of inspired insight occurs when he first meets Lewis. When Lewis is introduced to Kabnis

His eyes turn to Kabnis. In the instant of their shifting, a vision of the life they are to meet. Kabnis, a promise of a soil-soaked beauty; uprooted, thinning out. Suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him. Arm's length removed from him whose will to help... There is a swift intuitive interchange of consciousness. Kabnis has a sudden need to rush into the arms of this man. His eyes call, "Brother." (98)

Lewis sees in Kabnis the "promise of a soil-soaked beauty" but that promise goes unfulfilled because it is "suspended a few feet above the soil whose touch would resurrect him." Nonetheless, both men identify with the other through "a swift intuitive interchange" that unites them, on some level, as "brothers." This moment is one where Kabnis' imagined community could find fruition, but the potential unity is stalled by Kabnis' cynicism. Instead of literally or figurative embracing Lewis, "a cynical twist-about within him mocks his impulse and strengthens him to repulse Lewis. His lips curl

cruelly. His eyes laugh. They are glittering needles, stitching.” If we read *Cane* as a cycle, each piece informed by the previous piece, the source of Kabnis' reaction is clear. His abrupt turn is fueled by a pride in loneliness and individualism that can be found in other stories and poems in *Cane*, such as “Esther,” “Box Seat,” and “Harvest Song.” These works would also suggest, however, that Kabnis' pride is born of rejection, disappointment, and embarrassment. Take for example, the speaker's words in “Harvest Song,” who says, “I fear to call. What should they hear me, and offer me their grain, oats, or wheat, or corn? I have been in the fields all day. I fear I could not taste it” (71). Disappointment and embarrassment are also readily observable in “Box Seat” and “Bona and Paul.” It is clear that Kabnis wants very badly to trust and believe in Lewis, but his experience has taught him to mistrust. As in “Harvest Song,” imagination has sustained him for so long that he falters in the face of the reality of companionship. For Kabnis, imagination was once a useful coping mechanism, but it hurts him in this situation; instead, imagination strengthens his misanthropy.

If Kabnis could embrace Lewis, he might find that he could heal himself of his anxieties. Lewis seems to hold dichotomies where Kabnis cannot. When Lewis catches Kabnis making a distinction between blue-blood and black ancestry, Lewis proclaims, “Cant hold them, can you? Master; slave. Soil; and the overarching heavens. Dusk; dawn. They fight and bastardize you” (108-9). Unlike Kabnis, Lewis has successfully drawn on his interracial identity and travel experience to build an ideology of synchronicity which fosters faith in himself. That is, his sense of connection derives from a faith in belonging to the community he now imagines.

The insularity and poverty of the town make thriving there nearly impossible. In

assessing the play in terms of imagination, technology, and travel, we can come to several poignant conclusions. First, imagination can either limit or liberate the characters of *Cane*. It is safe to say that Lewis, not being from the South, is probably as much drawn there by his imaginings of the region as Kabnis. Halsey has the opportunity to leave the town but could not “see” himself elsewhere. He says of his northern teachers, “I couldn’t stand their ways.” But, as the trade of wagon repair becomes antiquated, he struggles to find work. In this way, the lack of technology in the town limits everyone within it. As easy as it may be to categorize Lewis as a hero or messiah, as many scholars have, he is not without his weakness. Unable to fit in and unable to change the ways of the town, Lewis runs away as he “leaps up the stairs. Plunges through the work-shop and out into the night” (112). What saves Lewis from Kabnis’ fate is a mental feat that resolves racial oppositions. Kabnis is one character among a cast of failures and cowards. As such, singling him out is merely scapegoating.

For some critics, *Cane* is a “celebration of the ‘primitive’ over ‘civilization’” or a critique of “‘the machine’ [that] emasculated black men” (Summers 216). But, these views neglect the rejuvenation, excitement, and potential that Toomer saw in “the machine.” For him, technical innovations of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century promised great social changes, some negative and some positive. In addition to igniting his imagination, machine culture of the period enabled his crossing of geographic boundaries, which then further fueled his crossing of aesthetic and generic boundaries. In this way, *Cane* is an expression of Toomer’s fledgling imagined community, for embedded in the book are the seeds of his belief that the boundaries of race ideology could be transcended and his vision of evolutionary progress could be realized. Although Toomer was celebrated by his

contemporaries as a great Harlem Renaissance writer, some scholars would prefer to limit him to formal innovation. By analyzing his confidence in mixed race identity and the positive impact of modern technology on that identity, we can begin to comprehend the full breadth of his poetics and the depth of his faith in a truly integrated world.

## CHAPTER 2

### **“HER CONSCIOUSNESS EXPANDS A TINY NOTCH”: INTERSTITIAL SPACE, VISIBILITY, AND PARALLAX PERSPECTIVE IN NELLA LARSEN’S *QUICKSAND***

Where Toomer’s treatment of mulatto appearance alternated between light-skin and direct interracial heritage, Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* lands us squarely in the realm of the biracial mulatta. As we saw in *Cane*, gender and mixed racial heritage unfold together under pressures and opportunities to travel. Because of the serial nature of *Quicksand*, the novel is an ideal example of the function of parallax moments generated from the dialectical interaction of identity and travel, which renders perspectives on hypocrisy and double standards as visible to interracial persons as they travel between communities. Once again, I define parallax as the change of self perception (subject) that, resulting from a change of location, is brought on by a new set of observers and observer responses. In this state, the self is able to contrast past selves and past locations, and build dialectical insights into performativity. What I intend by dialectic is something of mix of a Hegelian and a Marxist meaning whereby the examination of the self in relation to an other is as important as the contrasting of social phenomena. Here, the dialectical is a relationship of conflicting forces whereby such elements transform one another or create the potential of achieving resolution. The notion of potential is vital to analyzing *Quicksand* because it is a novel that flirts with “perpetual possibility,” having as it does an “unfinalizable hero[ine],” and “the power of hypothesizing an end to the story is in no one subject’s hands” (Pechey 28).

Change of perspective and transformation is central Larsen's depiction of Helga Crane's conscious engagement with being unfinalized and juxtaposition of her past(s) and present. In particular, Larsen brings our attention to the ways that the parallax moments experienced by interracial characters present sharp challenges to four early 20<sup>th</sup> century teloi circulating in the black community: industrial uplift; bourgeois uplift; expatriation; religious stoicism. Additionally, Larsen shows how these characters' travels and ways of being provoke moments of moral panic, for themselves and others. Larsen does so by engaging each of these ideologies in each of the main locales Helga travels through. Also, Larsen inserts interstitial travel moments, narrative spaces between origin and destination, and it is in these moments that we see Helga's reflectiveness in play, or in other words parallax perspective. With race and gender being primary themes of the novel, Larsen's unique treatment of overlapping concerns would have been severely hampered were it not for her transportation of the protagonist to a series of locations. In *Quicksand*, these concerns converge and diverge in multiple locales and cultures that renegotiate the terms of the interracial feminine experience. More importantly, Larsen's use of travel creates a relational critique of the roots of restrictive categories of race, gender, and class.

Although past scholarship has strictly interpreted Larsen's work in regard to the Harlem Renaissance, tragic mulatto, or melodramatic traditions, her depiction of mobility, transatlantic travel, and expatriation—elements generally associated with white modernity—expanded her cultural relevance. For instance, her work can be seen as dialoguing with that of Gertrude Stein and Djuna Barnes, who employed departure, expatriation, and return as strategies for confronting crises of modernity and paradigms

of male dominance. This rethinking of the classification shows the breadth of her work and supports my assertion that fragmentation and alienation should be understood as dialectic progression in the novel. Thus, Helga's moments of travel, rather than reactions to fear and whimsy, demonstrates her conscious construction of a feminine identity developed in the process of motion. Travel in *Quicksand* functions as the visible representation of grappling with the modern condition —the period's break with the present, its anxiety about the past, and its concern for the future—symbolized in the motion and racial ambiguity of Helga. We can look at Helga's attempts at travel not as failure or concession but as acts of challenging, drawing attention to, and revising the identity, social position, and narrative prescribed to interracial femininity.

Rather than see modern interracial literature as preoccupied with the past, we can view it as looking toward and striving for the future, and thus putting Larsen's race sensibility in dialogue with Toomer's. Furthermore, when seen this way, the genre represents not a running away from race, but a running to a new conception of racial identity. In *Helga*, we see a parallel development of transnational *and* transracial identity, not to mention transclass. With the use of travel, Helga maintains a connection to her interracial childhood and international heritage. Although some scholarship has touched on the function of travel in *Quicksand* in regard to feminist resistance (as Jeanne Schepers notably has), I assert here that the representation of travel in the novel does this and more. Achieving a dual goal, travel creates a space to revise black and interracial narratives, and critique black political agendas against racism.

A dynamic text of this sort has result in a range of scholarship investigating sexuality, maternity, race, capitalism, and modernity. The genius of *Quicksand* is that the

novel clearly illustrates all of these concerns. Although much past scholarship places the work in the tragic mulatto tradition, early reception hardly uses language that would categorize it as such. Instead, early reviews praised the novel for its depth of characterization, narrative complexity, and fresh depictions of black bourgeois society, black femininity, and black sexuality (see comments by Walter White, Carl Van Vechtan, and Du Bois). It would be later critics, like Jay Saunders Redding and Hugh Gloster (1945 and 1948), who endorse a tragic mulatto reading, a gesture that simplifies the multiple concerns at stake for Larsen; such critics would also use the category to account for what they view as an inexplicable conclusion.

Since the 1980s, scholars have better understood the layering of Larsen's work; however, these scholars still practice the tendency of either incidentally reinstating the tragic mulatto category, or flattening Larsen's work by restricting it to one agenda. In the introduction to the 1986 edition, Deborah McDowell both sustained the novel's classification in the tragic tradition and advanced a richer understanding of its feminist concern. Of its classification, McDowell writes, "The argument that Helga's is a story of the 'tragic mulatto' is clearly supported by the novel's epigraph from Langston Hughes' poem 'Cross'" (xvii). Yet, McDowell also perceives in the epigraph a subtle directive to investigate the gender-roles suggested by the poem (i.e., the white-male plantation owner and black-female servant), and warns against "focusing on the problems of the 'tragic mulatto'" because "readers [will] miss the more urgent problem of female sexual identity" (ibid.). However, George Hutchinson cautions that "emphasis on the feminist concerns of the text has so far worked to repress the distinctive racial perspective of the novel, at best assimilating Helga Crane to models of black female sexuality and

psychology” (*Disappearance* 178). Rather, Hutchinson recategorizes *Quicksand* as a naturalist text that illustrates the fatalistic nature of race in American.

As McDowell does, Cheryl Wall interprets *Quicksand* as a dramatization of black women choosing sexual repression rather than the eroticism of primitivism or the child-rearing role of racial uplift. The emphasis on repressed desire that McDowell initiated lends itself to the development of later Freudian analyses, which deals with desire, childhood trauma, and interiority (see Badia Ahad, Barbara Johnson, and Claudia Tate). These studies point to the importance of cognitive interiority, imagination, and the interlocking nature of identity. With the grounds for interiority established, scholarship moved to the interpretations of the self in space. For instance, Anna Brickhouse attempts in her essay to “track Larsen’s geographical exploration of narrative, aesthetic, and ideological limitations” (536). Also, Karen Chandler explains that “melodrama’s discontinuity is manifested through the protagonist’s anxious movement from one location to another. In each place, she demonstrates her personal strengths by confronting those who would oppress her” (27). Hutchinson, following Larsen’s allusion to the isle of Naxos, investigates the symbolism of Ariadne and constructs a reading based on a racial labyrinth and racial fate. These interpretations make it clear that travel should consider an essential part of any reading of *Quicksand*.

Because of the emergence of Black Diaspora and transnational studies, the significance of travel in the novel has begun to be more directly addressed. In 1994, Jeffrey Gray observed, “it is these two conditions—of travel and the mulatto heroine—which establish *Quicksand* as a novel *sui generis* about the African-American’s construction and self-construction as art object abroad” (258). Laura Doyle, comparing

Virginia Woolf's *The Voyage Out* and *Quicksand*, argues that the two writers "collapse the novel's freedom trajectory exactly by putting pressure on the racial and sexual matrix of modernity/coloniality" (545). According to Doyle, the authors explore transnational mobility and hybridity as means to resist narratives of freedom determined by race and gender. In a collaborative essay, Arne Lunde and Anna Westerstahl Stenport investigate the racial and colonial implications of Helga Crane's contact with the Scandinavian Modernist Breakthrough Movement. Although Laura Tanner's cultural geography is not strictly transnational, her reading of Helga as a discursive body moving through or across politicized space and boundaries—more of a performative approach—intersects with the transnational line. Jeanne Scheper provides a profound reading by revising the androcentric concept of *flaneur*, and creating a "flaneuse" identity that exercises wandering as an act of feminist assertion against patriarchal and capitalist modernity. As the work of these scholars attests, the narrative traversal of multiple geographies parallels the traversal of constructed landscapes of race, gender, and class.

In this chapter, I first present examples of liminal space in *Quicksand*, and then I perform symbolic interpretations of the locations in the novel. My reading extends from the work of Hutchinson and Scheper, who respectively argue for the importance of distinguishing the interracial experience in the novel, and argue for wandering as an effective feminist act. In this reading, there are two steps to interpreting the importance of travel. In the first, I analyze several depictions of travel (i.e. passages in which Helga is in some form of transportation), and discuss the meditative and psychological effect of travel, which is an individual form of parallax. In the second, I analyze the telos practiced in each location in the novel—a more socially relevant form of parallax—and I discuss

the impact of those ideologies on the protagonist's development. As a consequence to this social reading, I elaborate on Helga's extreme visibility, stemming from racially ambiguous appearance, and the ways she and others attempt to manipulate it through fashion. Ultimately, this reading shows Helga building a non-binary possibility, in respect to race and gender, where various parts of American society exert either-or positionality.

### **Interstitial Place as Liminal Space**

In *Quicksand*, travel is a means to self-discovery and a metaphor of interracial identity. By moving between origin and destination, Helga creates a liminal space that replicates her racial and cultural "betweenness." And, by making a series of voyages, she repeats and extends this liminality, and in doing so, she creates "the fecund cave of her imagination where she is cradled in the arms of *Coatlicue*" (Anzaldua 46) That is, in a world that refuses her home, she finds respite and shelter in a psychological state that melds "birth and death," and is "the incarnation of the cosmic process" (ibid.). Although scholars have given attention to particular locations to which Helga travels, no in-depth analysis has been made of Larsen's depictions of travel, that is, of Helga in transit. There are three such episodes: the train to Chicago (22-6); the train to New York (37-40); and the ocean-liner to Denmark (63-5). Consistently, these interstitial moments suspend the drive of the plot and 'pause' Helga's reflexive response to place, allowing her to assess her remembered past. In addition to initiating an analysis of the nexus of race and gender, travel is a crucial component of Helga's interracial subjectivity. Gloria Anzaldua confirms this in her description of the mixed heritage subjectivity:

Every increment of consciousness, every step forward is a *travesía*, a crossing. I am again an alien in new territory. And again, and again. But if I escape conscious awareness, escape “knowing,” I won’t be moving. (48)

Anzaldúa’s description explains Helga Crane’s impulse to move. Just as the person of mixed heritage is born of boundary crossing, their development of consciousness and knowledge requires future crossings of boundaries. The attempt to remain still results in restricting one’s awareness, because remaining still means ignoring some aspect of the self that has ontological roots in a social space beyond one’s immediate location.

Interpreted this way, Anzaldúa’s description supports a reading of travel as an essential narrative device that enables Larsen’s building Helga’s consciousness and confronting of multiple social forces, rather than, as Jeffery Gray and others suggest, avoiding awareness and choice.

The achievement of Larsen’s challenge to gender- and race-based expectation is measured in Anzaldúa’s answer to the question, “Why does [the mestiza] have to and try to make ‘sense’ of it all?” (49):

It is only when she is on the other side and the shell cracks open and the lid from her eyes lifts that she sees things in a different perspective. It is only then that she makes the connections, formulates the insights. It is only then that her consciousness expands a tiny notch (ibid.).

It is this “tiny notch” of expanded consciousness that justifies Helga’s journey and should, in my opinion, mitigate claims of Helga’s failure. Readers who expect Helga to experience a grand epiphany expect too much of her, given the daunting restrictions of her social context. Yet, because Helga desires to “make ‘sense’ of it all” and to incorporate the full diversity of her mixed heritage, Helga must go to Naxos as much as she must go to her Uncle’s house in Chicago, and she must go to Harlem as much as she must go to Denmark. Although Anzaldúa’s focus is the Mexican mestiza (the female

descendent of Spanish Europeans and Indigenous Americans), her analysis substantiates the crucial relationship of travel to mixed race identity.

The first example of interstitial space occurs after Naxos, where the plot is interrupted by over four pages (the entirety of chapter 4) of text narrating the train ride north to Chicago. This episode of transportation disrupts Helga's Naxos-based identity, and opens a reflective space for unraveling her personal history and the events at the school. First, Helga reflects on her exchange with Anderson, questioning, "just what had happened to her there in that cool dim room under the quizzical gaze of those piercing gray eyes?" (22). She also acknowledges that "She had outraged her own pride, and she had terribly wronged her mother by her insidious implication" (23). Here, Helga's reflections introduce the reader to the real and full picture of her mother, instead of the red-herring pitched to Anderson. More accurately, her mother was "A fair Scandinavian girl in love with life, with love, with passion, with dreaming, and risking all in one blind surrender," and who, after being left by Helga's father, married "as a grievous necessity" a second time "a man of her own race, but not of her own kind" (ibid.). Helga's thoughts then transition to her memories of childhood among her white step-family, years of "self-effacement" and "savage unkindness." We also learn that, after the death of her mother, Helga is "rescue[d] by Uncle Peter, who had sent her to school, a school for Negroes." Helga makes two important discoveries at the school: first, "because one was dark, one was not necessarily loathsome;" second, relocation can result in personal growth. Thus, this interstitial train scene reveals the formative moments of Helga's being, and all of these moments are directly and indirectly related to travel. Via her parents' interracial

union, her schooling in Chicago, Nashville, and Atlanta, and her trips to Denmark as a young girl, Helga's identity is rooted in geographic and social boundary crossing.

In addition to conveying her formative years, this interlude of travel fills out the backstory of Helga's relationship to James Vayle—and thus, sexuality—and illustrates the privilege of light skin and class dynamics in a Jim Crow context. Given Helga's understanding of her mother's misfortunes resulting from love and sexuality—love overriding practical values, and sexual desire leading to the responsibility of a child—it should be no surprise that she is practically superstitious about the “ancient appeal” (8) between a heterosexual man and woman. Despite the Jim Crow laws that denied blacks access to a sleeping berth, Helga negotiates one from the conductor. Returning to the topic of Anderson, she ponders, “Why hadn't she grasped his meaning? Why, if she said so much, hadn't she said more about herself and her mother? He would, she was sure, have understood, even sympathized” (26). In this reflection, Helga sees Anderson as someone with a similar family, class, or racial background. This moment demonstrates Helga's position as a gaze possessor, and not merely object. Also, such a sympathetic interpretation of Anderson initiates Helga's slow steps toward the realization of her attraction to him. This relatively short chapter reveals a great deal about Helga and the context of Jim Crow, class difference, and mixed raced opportunity.

Another interstitial episode takes place on pages 37-40 (most of chapter 7), documenting Helga's train ride from Chicago to New York. Hired to edit the speeches of the race lecturer Mrs. Hayes-Rore, Helga accompanies her on a tour. In addition to critiquing the derivative and trite nature of bourgeois uplift discourse, Larsen in this episode also comments on black anxiety about interracial, which repeats the pattern of

Helga's reflecting about family while in transit. When Mrs. Hayes-Rore interrogate Helga about her "people," Helga tries to deflect the question, but Mrs. Hayes-Rore persists, "You wouldn't like to tell me about it, would you? It seems to bother you. And I'm interested in girls" (38-9). It is possible that Mrs. Hayes-Rore's wording and persistence introduces a homosocial or queer subtext, but what is unmistakable is her disapproval of Helga's personal history, "dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery" (39). As in the first train episode, Helga recalls and relives her formative years: "she began mockingly to relate her story" and "again the torment which she had gone through loomed before her as something brutal and undeserved" (39). Although the train ride with Mrs. Hayes-Rore creates emotional stress for Helga, it also creates several material solutions for her employment, housing, and social needs in New York.

This scene makes prominent use of a window metaphor that laces the book (for instance, the window scene where Helga looks down on the Naxos students in lined formation). As Helga becomes emotional in recounting her past, "The other woman still looked out of the window, apparently interested in the outer aspects of the drab sections of the Jersey manufacturing city" (39). As with the other window moments of the novel, the act creates a distancing between subject and object. In this case, "During the little pause that followed Helga's recital, the faces of the two women, which had been bare, seemed to harden. It was almost as if they had slipped on masks" (ibid.). Helga affects a 'mask' of disinterest while Hayes-Rore affects one of pious recalcitrance that hides her disapproval of miscegenation. The quiet standoff dramatizes the social reticence, among blacks and whites alike, of even discussing miscegenation. Despite Hayes-Rore's

nurturing inquiry, her reaction confirms for Helga that her initial decision to hide her heritage was the correct one. This message of denial is repeated a few pages later when she meets Anne Grey for the first time. In the taxi to Anne's apartment, Mrs. Hayes-Rore advises Helga to hide her interracial heritage from Anne (41). In a lengthy sentence using suspended syntax, Larsen describes Helga's first reaction to Anne:

In after years Helga Crane had only to close her eyes to see herself standing apprehensively in the small cream-colored hall, the floor of which was covered with deep silver-hued carpet; to see Mrs. Hayes-Rore pecking the cheek of the tall slim creature beautifully dressed in a cool green tailored frock; to hear herself being introduced to "my niece, Mrs. Grey" and "Miss Crane, a little friend of mine whose mother's died, and I think perhaps a while in New York will be good for her"; to feel her hand grasped in quick sympathy, and to hear Anne Grey's pleasant voice, with its faint note of wistfulness, saying: "I'm so sorry, and I'm glad Aunt Jeanette brought you here. Did you have a good trip? I'm sure you must be worn out. I'll have Lillie take you right up." And to feel like a criminal. (41-2)

The lovely and charming extended syntax of Helga's impression in first meeting Anne is turned in the final phrase to shame and guilt. The hovering syntax and its final reversal parallels the suspended psychological state of Helga, creating an atmosphere akin to espionage because of her forced silence about her heritage, and the respective pressure from both white and black society. Also, the suspended meaning of the sentence mirrors Helga's travel identity. Just as Helga is drawn toward movement—halting and starting along the way—in order to create meaning and identity, so too must the reader move from the starting point to the end of the sentence in order to construct the entirety of the sentence's meaning. Unfortunately, as exemplified by the attitudes of her Uncle Peter and Mrs. Hayes-Rore, both white and black America respectively work to shame her and keep her heritage a secret.

The third interstitial episode occurs on pages 63-5 (half of chapter 12), where Helga is aboard an ocean-liner to Denmark. Larsen describes her as “glad to be at last alone, free of that great superfluity of human beings, yellow, brown, and black, which, as the torrid summer burnt to a close, had so oppressed her” (63). The description captures Helga’s anxiety around crowds and her attention to the multitude of shades of black skin, two themes that receive specific attention in several places in the novel. In addition to the creating an echo to the larger history of the Middle Passage, the liner voyage creates a parallax specific to Helga. First, there is the trip she made to Denmark in her youth. Remarkably, the ship’s purser is a man who worked on the ship on which Helga traveled as a child. He recalls her “as the little dark girl who had crossed with her mother years ago” (63). In turn, the voyage of her youth mirrors her mother’s solo crossing, which is the impetus of the international and interracial relationship from which Helga sprang. Conversely, the current voyage contrasts with Helga’s experience with the conductor in the Jim Crow car of the train traveling north from Naxos. Each parallax moment, one nestled alongside the other, informs its neighbor and accumulatively demonstrates the transformative power of travel for a woman in Helga’s position. Each echo between moments instructs Helga and the reader in interpreting the shift of meaning of demographic categories according to location. The parallax perspective reinforces Helga’s inclination to resolve public and private issues by way of travel, a strategy acquired in childhood. In effect, Helga’s mother indoctrinated her, during formative years, into a travel and transnational based identity.

The ocean liner episode uncovers several other details of Helga’s way of being and moving in the world. Upon seeing her, the ship’s purser invites Helga to dine at the

privileged position of his table. If readers doubt her transnational identity, it is this scene that should convince them, with its revelation that Helga can speak Danish and that she had lived as a child in Denmark for several years (64). The relationship with the purser confirms that traveling can create social entrées that substitute for family name recognition. A similar entrée was conducted by Mrs. Hayes-Rore. Additionally, while in transit, Helga finds “happiness and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (64). The individualism expressed in the previous quote recalls Helga’s admiration for Audrey Denney, for Helga aspires to the “courage, so placidly to ignore racial barriers and give her attention to people” as Audrey does (62). Helga and Audrey, each in her own way, negotiate “the complex relationship between individual and racial identity” particular to interracialness (Carby 163). This scene is significant, too, for demonstrating Helga’s initial realization, more fully than in prior interstitial scenes, of her attraction to Dr. Anderson. Regard how her series of repeatedly interrupted denials diminish the confidence of the denial: “With the recollection of that previous flight and subsequent half-questioning a dim disturbing notion came to her. She wasn’t, she couldn’t be, in love with the man. It was a thought too humiliating, and so quickly dismissed. Nonsense! Sheer nonsense! (64). By a variety of rhetorical approaches, Helga attempts to deny her attraction to Anderson. Considering that we are witnessing an interior monologue and there is no one but herself to convince, her debate suggests that she is aware, on some level, of her desire.

Also, the ocean-liner episode demonstrates the power and fear associated with travel. When Helga nears the shore of Denmark, “the welcoming crowd on the wharf stood under the shadow of the great sea-monster” (65). By describing the ship this way,

Larsen conjures notions of the Leviathan or Kraken. Classic battles—of Jason, of Odysseus, of Theseus—between men and unworldly beasts come to mind. As the footnote for Naxos suggests, Larsen (whether consciously or not) is drawing from Greek mythology and connecting the narrative to the symbolism of the labyrinth and Minotaur. The significance of the labyrinth is compelling since it parallels the ensnarement signified by the title of the novel. And more provocatively, the allusion to the Minotaur makes a symbolic association between mixed race identity and the mixed species of the mythical beast.<sup>30</sup>

### **Situating Early 20<sup>th</sup> Century Black Teloi**

The genius of *Quicksand* is its episodic nature, which, by changing its surrounding cast and location, achieves a parallax perspective that enables a number of comments about the persons and places involved. On one hand, it dramatizes the transnational, black, interracial, and transclass experience that Larsen knew intimately. On the other, it gazes back at the dominant forms of resistance of her day, those being industrial uplift, bourgeois uplift, expatriation, and religious stoicism. In addition to reflecting the fragmentation and changing values of modernity, Larsen's episodic approach is conducive to switching social and ideological scope, which then enables a dramatization of subject development and multidirectional critique. Confronting the bind of black female sexuality, Larsen creative a parallax perspective that dramatizes the changing image of Helga that results from the changed vantage point of her viewer. Helga accumulates the impressions of observers, and thus Larsen builds a dialectic

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<sup>30</sup> See Hutchinson's "*Quicksand* and the Racial Labyrinth" for a full analysis of Larsen's references to classic Greek mythology.

critique of the racial political climate; in essence, Larsen provides a prognosis for each form of resistance as it relates to women of color.

The novel tells the story of Helga Crane, the daughter of a Danish mother and a black father of unknown Caribbean origin. When we are first introduced to her, she is twenty-three years old and teaching at a black, southern boarding school, but she soon departs for Chicago. In all, the novel traverses 9 distinct geographically determined episodes:

Naxos, Georgia: 1-21  
Train to Chicago: 22-6  
Chicago: 27-36  
Train to NY: 37-40  
Harlem: 40-62  
Ocean Liner: 63-65  
Denmark: 65-93  
Return to Harlem: 94-117  
Alabama: 118-135

Helga travels to a series of locations across America and the Atlantic to find a community that will accept her and which she can accept in clear conscience. Both at the national and local level, the question of Helga's imagined community is not without complexity. At the national level, her American status is complicated by the years spent in Denmark during her childhood. Further complicating her status, culturally and racially speaking, is her void of actual community. Because Helga's membership to community is constantly questioned and challenged, she relies on imagined potential and imagined communities beyond her immediate place. For instance, she expresses the feeling at Naxos, "I don't seem to fit here" (19), and she comprehends that "the people don't like me" (20). Thus, for Helga, she stresses for herself a world of potential beyond Naxos, which is demonstrated in her rejection of the school, saying "*They* can't stop me. Trains leave here

for civilization every day” (14). It is the pull of her imagined “civilization” that gives Helga hope and drives her forward. Helga’s will for community is further exhibited when she arrives in New York, and “Any shreds of self-consciousness or apprehension which at first she may have felt vanished quickly, escaped in the keenness of her joy at seeming at last to belong somewhere” (44). Helga’s sense of community is reinforced when she describes her arrival in Harlem: “In the actuality of the pleasant present and the delightful vision of an agreeable future she was contented, and happy” (46). In this description, Helga’s parallax perspective and imagined community meet, for her seeming to “belong” in the “pleasant present” exemplifies her comparison of past and present communities. Yet, the imagined aspect of her community is also in effect as projects a “delightful vision of an agreeable future.” Community for Helga is complicated by the semiotics of race and her staunch moral standards. Depending on who is gazing at her, Helga is variably progressive, conservative, apolitical, race conscious, practical, impractical, reserved, or sensual. Although many critics attempt to account for Helga’s rejection of the various communities in the story, few examine the ideological hypocrisy of those communities, and few analyze the ways in which those communities reject Helga. Although some scholars have judged Helga as tragically indecisive, my reading interprets each of her relocations as an attempt to actualize an imagined community that accepts her full range of potential. Helga is too intelligent and versatile to allow herself to be truncated by a stereotype or double standard, so she boldly takes to the possibilities of travel rather than concede to insincerity.

### **Naxos: Southern Industrial Up-lift**

In the Naxos episode, the structure and values of the school resemble those of Booker T. Washington's Tuskegee Institute; thus, Helga's critical view of Naxos allegorizes Larsen's critique of the industrial up-lift telos, which promoted agrarian education over liberal education, advocated minimal political activity, and compromised to white supremacist discourse. In the opening scene, Helga has retired to her room, seeking "forgetfulness, complete mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind" (2). This is because "the day had been more than usually crowded with distasteful encounters and stupid perversities." In fact, Helga is physically repulsed by "the statements made by the holy white man of God." The renowned preacher had complimented the staff and students of Naxos for the "good sense" that "They knew enough to stay in their places" (3). For Helga, this backhanded compliment is a literal and figurative injunction not only to remain socially restricted within a limited range of political and economic activity, but to remain geographically immobile within White authorized areas of living. The preacher simultaneously endorses and restricts growth, saying, "no other race in so short a time had made so much progress, but he had urgently besought them to know when and where to stop" (ibid). Helga feels "anger" and "resentment" not only toward the preacher but toward the audience that responded with "considerable applause." The preacher masks his material aims by cloaking them in words and ideas of religion: "He hoped, he sincerely hoped, that they wouldn't become avaricious and grasping, thinking only of adding to their earthly goods, for that would be a sin in the sight of Almighty God" (ibid). Helga wonders at the Naxos audience's inability to see the thinly veiled, insulting interdiction. That Naxos would claim to advocate for black pride and progress while

acquiescing to the blatant stunting of economic and political advancement is a hypocrisy that Helga cannot condone in any shape or form. She rejects the situation so vehemently that she commits to leaving before she has figured out a means for departure.

By disseminating an ideology that de-individuates its students and limits their educational and political prospects, Naxos is a model system of the white preacher's injunction. Here, Larsen uses industrial terms to express Helga's disapproval of the school's repression of black culture and individuality. For Helga, the school "had grown into a machine" that was "with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern" (*Quicksand* 4). The school "tolerated no innovations, no individualisms" so to garner favor from white financial support and to counter the stereotype of "the black man's inefficiency" (ibid). The day Helga decides to leave, she watches the students lining up for breakfast. Via free-indirect discourse, she describes them as marching in a "goosestep" fashion, and calls them "automatons" (12). Larsen also has Helga describing the school a "cruel educational machine" (17). In addition to commenting on black anxiety of image and conformity to white political agendas, such industrial language also puts Larsen in dialogue with other modernist contemporaries, who worried about the dehumanizing effects of industry and urbanization.

If Larsen's figurative descriptions of Naxos express a certain disdain for mechanization, such language belies the empowerment Helga achieves through the machinery of travel. When she decides to leave and her sole female confidant, Margaret Creighton, warns that the school will not allow her to leave in the middle of the term, Helga replies, "*They can't stop me. Trains leave here for civilization every day*" (original italics 14). Helga's choice of words is striking because it unifies travel, liberty,

modernity, and civilization. Although the matter of money for the ticket is still uncertain, she gathers inspiration from the possibility that transportation and civilization promise. As we see later, the act of travelling holds at least as much significance as arrival does, and this change of emphasis justifies a positivist reading of the novel and its conclusion. In juxtaposing nature and civilization, the episode seems to be following the primitivist opposition of black and white characteristics, but we can interpret this dynamic as the paradox of the modernist struggle with tradition. Superimposed on the modern dilemma is Helga's crisis of family connections. Helga equates the rural with fixedness, and the urban with possibility. Rather than resurrect a past period or tradition, as some moderns had, she strives for an identity that is defined by movement and relationships forged while in transit.

### **Harlem: Northern Bourgeois Up-lift**

In the Harlem episode, Larsen establishes the parallax perspective that builds Helga's world view. Staying with Anne Grey and moving within Mrs. Grey's circle, Helga acquires a unique insight into the Harlem bourgeoisie. After several years in New York, "she had had that strange transforming experience, this time not so fleeting, that magic sense of having come home. Harlem, teeming black Harlem, had welcomed her and lulled her into something that was, she was certain, peace and contentment" (43). Helga's experience with "fleeting" impressions refers us back to her past arrivals at "home." Before Naxos, there was a boarding school after her mother's death, "where for the first time she could breathe freely, where she discovered that because one was dark, one was not necessarily loathsome" (23). Of course, at Naxos, "she had ardently desired

to share in, to be a part of this monument to one man's genius and vision" (3). But, in a short amount of time, she had become disillusioned with both schools. Because of her wide ranging intellectual, Harlem seemed to hold more promise. In Anne's circle, Helga was introduced to "people with tastes and ideas similar to her own. Their sophisticated cynical talk, their elaborate parties, the unobtrusive correctness of their clothes and homes, all appeared to her craving for smartness, for enjoyment" (43). Infused with the talk, ideas, and fashion, "she was able to reflect with a flicker of amusement on the constant feeling of humiliation and inferiority which had encompassed her in Naxos" (43). Her act of reflection—seeing herself in a different context and through the eyes of a different population—composes the parallax moment. Another example of a parallax moment is when Helga compares herself in Harlem to herself in the Chicago of her youth: "she knew [her happiness in Harlem] sprang from a sense of freedom, a release from the feeling of smallness which had hedged her in, first during her sorry, unchildlike childhood among hostile white folk in Chicago, and later during her uncomfortable sojourn among snobbish folk in Naxos" (46). Contrasted with past locations, her time in Harlem demonstrates that a community of race pride and beauty, without the tether of family connections, is possible.

However, her happiness in Harlem begins to wilt in the second year. She begins to long for "something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to" (47). Although it may be tempting to attribute Helga's disillusionment to a weakness in writing or to "mulatto" indecision, I find that Helga's anxiety here has everything to do with overcrowding, geographic confinement, and antagonism toward interracial heritage. When Helga becomes more restless and seeks "something vaguely familiar," she starts

making “lonely excursions to places outside Harlem” (ibid.). The presence of crowds is repeatedly remarked upon in the episode. One prominent example is when Larsen writes, “She recoiled in aversion from the sight of the grinning faces and from the sound of the easy laughter of all these people who strolled, aimlessly now, it seemed, up and down the avenues” (48). It seems plausible that the “something vaguely familiar” is a combination of solitude, freedom to roam, and intercultural exchange.

Irritated by the small geography of Harlem, Helga begins to view the arbitrary and restrictive nature of assembling persons by race who are demographically diverse in all other aspects. For instance, at a party, the hostess Mrs. Tavenor “invited representatives of several opposing Harlem political and social factions, including the West Indian, and abandoned them helplessly to each other” (99). Also, before Helga goes to Denmark, she perceives Anne Grey as a propagator of intraracial classism, black self-loathing, and segregation. In this way, Anne is a symbol of black bourgeois uplift hypocrisy reminiscent of Du Bois’s Talented Tenth. Anne preaches against “Social Inequality” and advocates for “Equal opportunity for all,” but “she considered it an affront to the race [...] for any Negro to receive on terms of equality any white person” (48). Anne’s biased notion of equality is a one-way arrangement. Also, her promotion of race pride is not without classist hypocrisy, for “While proclaiming loudly the undiluted good of all things Negro, she yet disliked the songs, the dances, and the softly blurred speech of the race” (ibid). Although verbally rejecting white society, “she aped their clothes, their manners, and their gracious ways of living.” Combined with the illusion of freedom in Harlem being shattered by the press of its crowds, Anne’s race hypocrisy makes Harlem intolerable for Helga. She now “wanted to be free of this constant prattling of the

incongruities, the injustices, the stupidities, the viciousness of white people” (49). As in Naxos, Helga balks at institutional hypocrisy—here, at the hands of bourgeois Harlem—forcing her toward action.

While there are other factors to Helga’s departure, like encountering Robert Anderson and Audrey Denney, Helga’s unease and thoughts of departure begin long before. For Helga, Anne’s rhetoric “stirred memories, probed hidden wounds, whose poignant ache bred in her surprising oppression and corroded the fabric of her quietism” (ibid.). These words and thoughts, combined with Helga’s sense of a looming and encroaching oppressive feeling precipitated by the imagery of Harlem crowds, strings her discomfort back to past traumas and geographic restriction. On the personal level, Anne’s words stir Helga’s memories of her “unchildlike childhood.” On the ideological level, Harlem, even though it opposes the philosophy of places like Naxos, offers limited political freedom and less spatial freedom. Rather than ignore race activism and strife as Naxos does, Harlem promotes race activism and black bourgeois values. This exclusive emphasis, Helga discovers, performs a type of restriction and oppression that is on par with the restrictions of the South. Exclusive emphases on racial identity and bourgeois values construct a mental confinement no better than the restricted politicization and inferior social status of blacks in the South. Such racial performativity is a prison where the inmates resent and reject large parts of the inmate community yet aspire to the culture of the keepers.

As we learned in the conclusion of the Naxos episode, Helga loathes untruths and double standards. Before she leaves the school, she explains to Dr. Anderson the cause for her departure, saying, “the people here don’t like me. They don’t think I’m in the

spirit of the work. And I'm not, not if it means suppression of individuality and beauty" (20). Anderson responds, "Some day you'll learn that lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community. Most people achieve a sort of protective immunity, a kind of callousness, toward them." Whether unwilling or unable, Helga does not develop such immunity, so the first Harlem episode closes when she receives a letter from her uncle, containing money and a suggestion to visit her aunt in Denmark.

### **Denmark: Black Expatriatism**

By the time the story reaches the Denmark episode, the accumulated insights made possible by parallax perspective begin to build critical momentum. By now, we come to expect Helga's initial flush in a new environment, as well as eventual disillusionment. However, the insights of social critique also grow in force. In the Denmark chapters, Larsen critiques the black expatriates who extolled the graces of Europe and the Europeans who expressed an interest in celebrating the entertainment and exotic aspects of black culture. Soon after Helga's arrival, Larsen begins unraveling the idealistic benevolence of the European acceptance of blackness. Within the first week of her arrival, Helga opines that she "felt like nothing so much as some new and strange species of pet dog being proudly exhibited" (70). Meeting Helga for the first time, the artist Herr Axel Olsen itemizes and appraises her physical features. To him, she is a compartmentalized assortment of "Superb eyes ... color ... neck column ... yellow ... hair ... alive ... wonderful ..." (71). To be fair, the fragmentation of his description is aided by Helga's rudimentary Danish; but frankly, the point is moot because even if she were fluent, "His speech was for Fru Dahl." Indeed, without consulting Helga, Fru Dahl

arranges for Herr Olsen to paint a portrait of Helga, and later arranges for suitors, including Olsen, to court to Helga. Viewed, itemized, and not addressed, Helga has entered into the atmosphere of an auction block.

By way of Fru Dahl's primitivist expectations, Helga's features and adornments become, more than in any other episode, her voice as she is otherwise all but silenced. During the first full day in Denmark, Fru Dahl begins her make-over of Helga. When Helga casts a mute but questioning glance at Fru Dahl's clothing suggestion, Fru Dahl explains, "I'm an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you're young. And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things" (68). Helga is Danish enough to be accepted into civil and mixed company, but she is too black not to be "different," "striking," and "exotic."

Considering the deep implications of fashion and appearance, Fru Dahl's make-over of Helga enacts a violent regression of black representation and history. In order to ensure that Helga makes an impression at the party, Fru Dahl has the dress "cut down" until it is "practically nothing but a skirt. [Helga] was thankful for the barbaric bracelets, for the dangling ear-rings, for the beads about her neck" (70). This portrait justifies those scholars (see Debra Silverman, Delfalco, Francis) who compare Helga's time in Denmark to the expatriate experience of Josephine Baker. Unlike Baker and her vocal presence in entertainment and international politics, Helga is reduced to near silence in Denmark (although, it could be argued that Baker's voice was overwhelmed by the objectification of her body). At the soiree, because of the aunt's fashioning her into a "veritable savage," Helga experiences an ironic objectification where the white men silently compliment her

with their gazes and the women freely verbally compliment her beauty (69). The women party-goers perceive Helga as so entirely alien that she presents no threat to their relationships with the men there, even though she represents hypersexuality. Instead, she is a “mysterious niece of the Dahls” and “was not to be reckoned seriously, in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count” (70). In the context of Western European polarization of race, the beauty of a woman of color is rarely acknowledged in public and in mixed company. In this scene, although she is aesthetically appreciated, she is denied equal participatory status. When Fru Dahl cuts down Helga’s dress and bedecks her with beads, Fru Dahl effectively cuts out Helga’s tongue and lobotomizes her in the view of the Danish public. Her objectification and figurative dismemberment becomes complete with the physical itemization by Herr Olsen: “Superb eyes ... color ... neck column ... yellow ... hair ... alive ... wonderful ...”

Via the objectification of Helga in Denmark, Larsen highlights the quandary of the African American expatriate. What is the value of appreciation if one is not fully acknowledged as a member of his or her new society; and, similarly, what is the value of freedom if it does not contribute to improving the conditions of one’s community in a home country? Sojourning abroad, expatriates of color run the risk of opening themselves up to being celebrated for otherness, which in this case equates to ostentatious display. Being a woman complicates this situation further. Whereas men of color are usually objectified for purposes of labor, women of color are, in addition to labor, objectified for purposes of visual and sexual pleasure.

### **Alabama: Folk Religious Stoicism**

Helga's move to Alabama results directly from her religious conversion in Harlem, which, with its overtones of sex and sexual release, plays an fitting segue between Helga's attempted affair with Anderson and her procreative marriage to Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green. Her relocation to Alabama marks a change in spirituality, sexuality, and class, involving a major transformation from cosmopolitan, financially independent, single woman to dependent, pious housewife and mother. Her life in Alabama is paradoxically one of empiricism—unending tasks, pregnancy, and birth—and spiritual transcendentalism. By taking Helga into a black rural community, Larsen contrasts Alabama with the prior locations of the novel, and portrays a southern black folk that is subject to colorism and apathy.

Though not blatant, colorism affects Helga's life in Alabama. Mr. Pleasant Green's leader status appears to be supplement by his "yellow" complexion and that of Helga. Additionally, her color and "slight" and "delicate" build are used by the town to interpret Helga. For instance, she is frequently contrasted with the disgruntled competitor for the reverend's affection, Clementine Richards, who is distinctly "black" and of "Amazon proportions" (119). In addition to her middle-class tastes, Helga's color marks her as a target for accusations of being "dictie," which denotes haughty but connotes having light skin or acting white; this usage is seen in *Cane* and *Flight*. To the women of the town, she is an "uppity, meddlin' No'the'nah." In their view, the "pore Reve'end,' [...] 'would 'a done bettah to a ma'ied Clementine Richards'" (119). The dialect and content of the previous quote contrast black rural speech with the speech of every other location of the novel. Even at Naxos, ostensibly set in Georgia, Larsen does not render in

speech regional or class differences. The use of “uppity,” because of its association with dicite, puts the comment in the tradition of equating light skin with classism. Lastly, the content of the quote sustains the opposition of dark and light skin. Both Clementine Richardson and Sary Jones (“little bronze figure” who is “trusting,” “certain,” and “toiled everyday of her life” (125)), models of black feminine working-class strength, are described as visibly darker than Helga and less delicate. Larsen, perhaps unconsciously, has created a pattern of associating dark skin with a certain working-class traits. This pattern can be viewed in Toomer’s *Cane* as well, namely “Esther” and “Fern,” in which fairer black women, and occasionally fairer men, exhibit an emotional austerity that alienates them from a genial black community. Like Mimi Daquin of Walter F. White’s *Flight*, Helga achieves communal support only after the town is satisfied by her strife and humiliation.

Perhaps the most pointed statement that Larsen makes in the Alabama section is her indictment of working class black society’s relationship to religion. Although Helga has experienced disappointment in other locations, the disillusionment she experiences in the final section results in unprecedented vitriol from the protagonist. She rails, “What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe” (130). After the prolonged discomfort and pain of her fourth pregnancy erodes the last of her patience and etiquette, she quietly unleashes “angry bitterness and an enormous disgust” upon the town (130). Although she is angry with herself as well, she is most upset about the role that religion has played in her condition: “With the obscuring curtain of religion rent, she was able to look about her and see with shocked eyes this thing that she had done to herself” (ibid.). In this epiphanic moment, we find the source of the novel’s title: “At first she had felt

only an astonished anger at the *quagmire* in which she had engulfed herself. She had ruined her life” (emphasis added 133). Larsen’s synonymous association is repeated a page later in Helga’s declaration that “in some way she was determined to get herself out of this *bog* into which she had strayed” (emphasis added 134). In the accumulation of synonyms for quicksand appearing in the final section, we come to see that Helga’s trap is a matrix of religion, maternity, and poverty. As we saw when James Vayle’s proposed to Helga in the second Harlem section, appropriation of the female body for child-bearing is a practice shared by both the economic and political up lift camps. Acquisition and monetization of the female body is also a theme in the Denmark section. Maternity in the poor, rural society differs in its degree of oppressiveness because of the constancy of pregnancy and manual labor. The burden of the feminine position in Alabama is compounded further by that society’s teloi of physical sacrifice premised on heavenly reward in an after-life. As a result, the measure of a woman’s womanhood is based on her not only her ability but her willingness to suffer in silence. This effect, in retrospect, cast an eerie shadow on the cast of silent women of *Cane*, the narrator of which appears to be at least somewhat aware.

Although Larsen’s attitude toward religion is shared by some of her contemporaries, most only appeared concerned with the incapacitating effects of religion on men. James W. Johnson wrote, “A large group of younger men, college men, authors, doctors, intellectuals, denounce the church as a foe to racial progress [...] They say, these younger men, that the energy, time and money which Negroes spend in their churches should be devoted to a constructive effort to meet the problems of this world” (Smith, in Spencer 455). In similar terms, Larsen condemns the Reverend Mr. Pleasant Green’s

congregation for its conscious surrender to its suppressive circumstances. In her embarrassment and frustration back in Harlem, Helga made a decision, not realizing that there was a deeper despair in which to fall. Despite her other disappointments, she had always possessed a sense of choice, independence, and mobility. Here, Helga realizes the mind can ensnare itself in a cognitive quicksand that incapacitates a person's consciousness of being abused and disables the mind's ability to conceive of resistance.

The trap of religion, as experienced by Helga and depicted by Larsen, has ensnared rural and poor black America, which is by far the majority of the race at the turn of the century. Helga criticizes the black folk for believing in "The white man's God. And his great love for all people regardless of race!" She laments, "How could she, how could anyone, have been so deluded? How could ten million black folk credit [white Christianity] when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction?" (130). As in the other locations, Helga deplores hypocrisy. But, she sees this instance of contradiction as more destructive than the others because of the "childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'kingdom come.'" (133). That is, she sees this instance of contradiction as more destructive than the others because this form of trust, as Larsen renders it, strips the practitioners of all sense of self-worth and ability to resist oppression. Helga's criticism in the final pages brings the novel full circle to the opening chapters where she contemplated the insult and injustice of the white preacher visiting Naxos.

In the first chapter, we are told that "Helga shuddered a little as she recalled some of the statements made by that holy white man of God to the black folk sitting so respectfully before him" (2). While some readers see Helga's turn to religion in the final

chapters as a hypocritical or unsatisfying turn, it can be seen in another way. It can be seen as a representation of the danger that Helga had been avoiding throughout the novel, but to which she succumbs in a moment of weakness. Being distracted during the major disappointment and humiliation of Dr. Anderson's refusal, Helga lets her guard down and she allows herself to subscribe to a belief system that she had previously judged as culturally self-loathing. The important point here is that it takes Helga's journey to New York and Denmark and other places to appreciate the full picture of Helga's frustrations, which reflect those of the black/interracial woman.

Because the Alabama scene would seem to promise an escape from repressed sexuality, materialism, and political agendas of the prior sections, Alabama would seem a perfect antidote to her various frustrations. Coming at the end of her travels, Alabama in parallax would seem a panacea to her previous frustrations. Entering into a sexual relationship at any point in her travels would have drastically altered the narrative, effectively stopping the narrative at that location. The climax of the novel, the kiss with Anderson, is sexual, but the consequences are racial and gendered. In using travel analysis, we can see that each location emphasizes a different component of the black female bind.

The various parallax moments of the Alabama section continue to influence our understanding of Helga, her development, and the forces against which she operates. Upon her first arrival in Alabama, Helga reflects on "her supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known" (114). In the Naxos, Harlem, and Denmark sections, Helga comments extensively on the complexity of the material surroundings of each location. In much of

the book, Larsen is almost obsessive in her attention to objects of privilege. The first chapter opens, “Only a single reading lamp, dimmed by a great black and red shade, made a pool of light on the blue Chinese carpet, on shelves, on the white pages of the opened one selected, on the shining brass bowl crowded with many-colored nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet” (1). In addition to embodying bourgeois and cosmopolitan values, and some would say material capitalism, the obsessive descriptions imply a harried attention to tabulating the objects of one’s surroundings. Repeated in other sections, this hyper-materialism is an extension of the novel’s comment about America’s cataloging of class, politics, race, and gender. Helga retreats from such materialism in the final section, but her respite is not successful. Just as she rejects America’s obsession with race only to encounter a subtler exoticism in Europe, Helga now rejects bourgeois materialism but finds an altered emphasis on physicality. In Alabama, like the women around her, she becomes “unceasingly concerned with the actual business of life, its rounds of births and christenings, or loves and marriages, of deaths and funerals” (121). Poverty, it seems, has its own kind of materialism.

Helga takes on a relationship to her body that differs from her body image in the other locations. During her transition to rural life, she discovers that “she, who had never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics, had now constantly to think of it” (123). Indeed, much of her life has pivoted around the clothes she has worn. It was a point of issue in Naxos, in Harlem, and in Denmark. Although her life until this point has been one of relative privilege, she paradoxically must now pay more attention to her body, for, in the demanding physicality of Alabama, “It had

persistently to be pampered to secure from it even a little service” (123). If parallax is the perceived change in an object resulting from the actual positional change of the viewer, then parallax reveals that the perception of her body has changed from trophy and clothes consumer to laborer and child bearer. However, not all of what is revealed in parallax is detrimental or constricting.

During her time in Alabama, Helga comes to a new position of understanding herself. In the opening chapter, in reaction to her disgust about the white preacher’s speech, she goes to her room seeking “forgetfulness, complete, mental relaxation, rest from thought of any kind” (2). Helga’s tendency to dissociate appears again when, after her fourth, difficult delivery, she “had gone down into that appalling blackness of pain” and “hovered for a long time somewhere in that delightful borderland on the edge of unconsciousness, an enchanted and blissful place where peace and incredible quiet encompassed her” (128). Although something of an escapist response, the unconsciousness she seeks results in epiphanies about herself. In her “serene haven,” she sifts through her past: “There was her mother, whom she had loved from a distance and finally so scornfully blamed, who appeared as she had always remembered her, unbelievably beautiful, young, and remote. Robert Anderson, questioning, purposefully detached, affecting, as she realized now, her life in a remarkably cruel degree; for at last she understood clearly how deeply, how passionately, she must have loved him” (128). Through the parallax of the past, Helga comes to understand herself. She realizes the complexity of her emotions toward her mother (“whom she had loved from a distance”) and Robert Anderson (“at last she understood clearly how deeply, how passionately, she must have loved him”). The list of participants in the imagined parade of her past include

people from across the spectrums of places and scenes of her life, and they—the expressions of her imagined community—each in their own way inform a fundamental change in Helga’s perception of them and herself.

While early reviews of *Quicksand* praise the novel for its depth of characterization, narrative complexity, and fresh depictions of black bourgeois society, black femininity, and black sexuality,<sup>31</sup> later criticism investigated the impact of primitivism and the puritanical reflex of black uplift on the black female subject. Larsen illustrates the tension of being caught between the racialized myth of hypersexuality and the racial uplift directive to create a counter image of pious social values. However, Larsen’s concern is not merely a black feminist one. As has been seen, Helga’s mixed race status has as much to do with the direction of the novel as her gender. The “mulatta” image was the quintessential symbol of the New Negro woman,<sup>32</sup> and the intelligentsia in Naxos and Harlem vied for control of that image. In addition to controlling the black feminine image, uplift agendas sought to control black women’s bodies as the means for swelling its middle-class ranks. Similarly, the interracial image is at the heart of the color-class tension of the Alabama episode.

With the device of travel, Larsen illustrates the overlap and conflict between race, gender, and class.<sup>33</sup> In this way, Larsen contributes to the body of work that links relocation to the mixed race experience. Also, because itinerancy is not bound to any one location or scope, it allows for an allegorical tour through both race and gender

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<sup>31</sup> Positive contemporary reviews of *Quicksand* include those by Walter White, Carl Van Vechtan, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

<sup>32</sup> See Sherrard-Johnson.

<sup>33</sup> Schepe, Gray, Esteve, Doyle, and others argue for the merits of travel as a powerful interpretive tool for enriching our appreciation of the novel.

performativity and entails a critique of several black resistance ideologies. Helga's journey is a lesson in the ways of the world regarding race, family, education, and capitalism. In each location, she learns something about each of these aspects of society. With a parallax perspective, Larsen uncovers the hypocrisies of 20<sup>th</sup> century black resistance ideology and white assimilation politics. Asked to be a sex object or prude, Helga chose a third way; she chose travel as a means of exploring femininity and racial identity. Sadly, Helga's journey reveals that biology, when yoked by social practice, can be unforgiving. It only takes a momentary lapse of resolve to confine one to years of hardship. Though many readers see the conclusion as fatal, I maintain the view that the open-ended conclusion functions as a form of perpetual possibility. Ending ambiguously with a gesture toward a fifth pregnancy, Helga Crane, like Nella Larsen, may disappear, but that does not mean she has ceased living.

## CHAPTER 3

### “MIRACULOUS TRANSFORMATION”: REINVENTION BY TRAVEL AND MASS MEDIA IN WALTER WHITE’S *FLIGHT*

In the annals of African American accomplishment, Walter White is most celebrated for his role as executive secretary of the NAACP. Some scholars and historians describe him as an unofficial literary agent for many notable Harlem Renaissance writers, such as Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, and Langston Hughes. As a writer, White is remembered for his nonfiction work, *Rope and Faggot*, which presents statistical and first-hand accounts that disprove the long-standing belief that lynching punished black men for sexual crimes against white women. The book also made groundbreaking additions to the analysis of the cultural and economic foundations of lynch violence. In addition to his activism, journalism, and assistance getting black writers published, White wrote two novels and an unfinished manuscript. Despite an uneven reception by his contemporaries and a dearth of interest by later critics, White’s fiction deserves critical attention because of its unique examination of class, color, and religious discrimination in the black community as well as white. As in the previous chapters, the concern of the current chapter is the function of parallax perspective and its effects on interracial identity. However, in *Flight*, White makes a construction of parallax that involves figurative as well as literal transportation. That is, in addition to using travel to create new selves or encounter new interpretations of self, his protagonist attains alternate perspectives and interstitial spaces in print, cinema, and music. *Moved* by these modern

media beyond her immediate point of view, the protagonist uses them as an extension of the geographic shuttling that is at the heart of her dialectic process.

If asked who are the most influential figures of the Harlem Renaissance, many scholars would list a host of names and never propose Walter F. White. Yet, White was an important activist, political leader, liaison for the black arts, and, as I will present here, significant fiction writer. Though White's influence on publishing rivaling that of Alain Locke is well document in letters, White continues to be seen as a minor figure. There is relatively little interest in White and his work, and the few scholars who have deigned to make comment (e.g., Cooney, Hart, Scruggs, Waldron) discuss his correspondences and either dismiss his fiction as insignificant or ignoring it entirely. Library of Congress manuscript librarian Charles Cooney made several archival forays in the early 1970s into the letters and correspondences of White, drawing several conclusions about White's significance. In one article, Cooney sees White's position as Assistant Secretary of the NAACP, originally a white-founded organization, as positioning him as the perfect liaison between white intellectual interests and the blossoming coterie of black writers. For Cooney, White's contribution as literary agent outweighs his efforts as a fiction writer because of "the aesthetic limitations of Walter White's two novels" (*Harlem Renaissance* 231). Cooney's interest in White's correspondence with white intellectuals is carried over into Cooney's other articles. In one, he focuses on the letters between White and Sinclair Lewis, and argues that White assisted in the writing of *Kingsblood Royal*. In another article, Cooney chronicles the correspondence between essayist H.L. Mencken and White. As in the Lewis article, Cooney uses epistolary evident to sketch a

reciprocal relationship between the two men, Mencken advising White on the writing of *Fire in the Flint*, and White assisting Mencken's research on the black experience.

Also curious about black and white collaboration, Robert C. Hart in a 1972 article investigates the nature of relationships between black writers and white writers of the 1920s. In addition to discussing the literary relationships of the likes of Van Vechten and James Johnson, Hart describes H.L. Mencken's role in advancing White's creative career. After White criticized T.S. Stribling's *Birthright* in a review, Mencken urged White to write a novel that renders more authentically the educated black professional. The resulting novel was *Fire in the Flint*, White's first published creative work. Although he acknowledges the importance of White to the social fabric of the era, Hart states that White's "talents did not lie primarily in fiction" (616). In a 1973 article, Edward Waldron sought to recover White as a publicist, believing that White's legacy as an NAACP investigator obscured his importance to literary Harlem. In looking at White's endeavors as artist, critic, representative, activist, and journalist, two points about White's beliefs become clear. First, White "devoted almost as much of his energy to freeing the Black man in the arts as he did to freeing him from the fear and tyranny of the lynch-mob violence racking the country in the turbulent twenties" (457). Second, White was convinced of "the good that excellent art from the Black community could do, not only for the Black man, but for the whole country" (442). These beliefs explain why White worked tirelessly to get black writers published, and they suggest that White would not lightly turn his intellect toward a creative project.

Thanks to the efforts of a few scholars, White's legacy is more secure, but his creative legacy is still very much in jeopardy of being dismissed or forgotten. The

tendency in scholarship to overlook White's creative work is evident in Charles Scruggs's assessment of White's importance to the Harlem Renaissance. In refuting the view that black intellectuals and artists were passive receptors of white motives and ideas during the era, Scruggs discusses White and Alain Locke working separately to direct black artistic contributions into American culture. Scruggs rightly argues that "the patronage system and publishing situation were far more complicated than we have previously imagined" (91). As with most of the existing scholarship on White, Scruggs' article extrapolates from letters between the two men and others. Because White and Locke both believed in the importance of the black literary arts to black social and political achievement, they sometimes competed against each other for career opportunities and had disputes over intellectual property. One important difference between the two men was their opinion of the literary liaison. Locke attempted to shape the writers and their works, but White, seeing himself as a facilitator, declined to alter the person, content, or style. As a consequence, Locke wielded a great deal of intellectual influence yet garnered fewer relationships between writers and publishers, whereas White had no reputation as an aesthete but built more successful relationships. If we accept Scruggs's assertion that White's influence rivaled, and even surpassed in some instances, the widely acknowledged importance of Locke, we are still left with the impression that White's fiction does not merit attention.

Indeed, White's letters and journals read like a who's who of the Harlem Renaissance. He played a crucial role in the publishing efforts of Countee Cullen, Rudolph Fisher, Nella Larsen, Claude McKay, and Dorothy West. As has been already mentioned, he fostered successful working relationships with influential white

intellectuals, such as Mencken, Sinclair Lewis, and Horace Liveright. As profound as his contribution is as a literary agent, this skill should not loom so large that it erases his artist contributions. Only a small number of scholars have granted his novels in-depth attention (Brooks, Suggs, and Wall), and the diversity and richness of topics in these analyses suggest that greater scholarly consideration is warranted. In fact, these critical works support my belief that White's novels deserved to be mentioned in the same breath as the works of a Jessie Fauset, Wallace Thurman, and many others dramatizing the interplay of class, gender, and race.

One critic who has championed the untapped potential of White's fiction is Jon-Cristian Suggs. Searching the Shomburg Center archives in 1995, Suggs discovered an unpublished and unfinished manuscript by White. White's role as an "artistic arbitrageur" was profoundly "formative and crucial" to the Harlem Renaissance, but the manuscript, Suggs explains, is evidence that White's reputation as a poor fiction writer should be reexamined. Relevant to the goals of the current chapter, Suggs analyzes the ways in which the development of the protagonist of the manuscript is affected by moments of free geographical movement, machine imagery, and identity reinvention. Cheryl Wall and Neil Brooks also make a substantial contribution in validating White as a fiction writer. Although Wall sees White's work as suffering from seeking a "single verifiable truth," she connects his activism and creative work, making one an extension of the other. But if White's creative legacy, Wall seems to say, is not as established as his contemporary Jessie Redmon Fauset, it is because his audience was averse to the topics of interracial sexual violence, black middle-class superciliousness, and pro-union rhetoric in his first novel. Of the existing scholars, Brooks gives perhaps the richest reading,

observing that the novel “illuminates the impossibility of mapping the American racial or cultural landscape in anything but the most provisional manner” (372). Indeed, *Flight* brings several thematic additions to the rendering of black identity, those being: the correlation of race, gender, and economy; the color, class, and religious fragmentation of the black community; the contrasting of mechanical and organic imagery; the relationship of print media and lynching.

### **Transported by Machines and Media**

Although Brooks, Wall, and Suggs make strides in the appreciation of White as a fiction writer, the poetics of his work have not been sufficiently addressed. The view that his work is mere melodrama mistakenly undervalues the artistry and intelligence of his rendering of America. For instance, White’s novels are a unique blend of the working-class imagery (reminiscent of the work of Claude McKay and Langston Hughes) and middle-class imagery (Rudolph Fischer or Jessie Fauset). Also, White’s depiction of race anticipates the union and socialist themes of 1930s and 40s American literature. White’s fiction also expresses his observations of what today we would consider globalism and neocolonialism. The novel *Flight* in particular presents innovations on the discourse of race, media, and passing. Although I agree with Brooks’s assessment of White’s renderings of female subordination, capitalism, interracial identity, and industrial America, I diverge from his conclusion that the protagonist of the novel “avoids confronting that which is unpleasant by taking ‘flight’ from the vital and taking the position of observer of her own unfolding drama” (380). Indeed, there are moments when the protagonist takes the position of observer, but I disagree with the subtext of

powerlessness in Brooks's interpretation. In my view, the act of "flight" is one of autonomy and control, and the "position of observer" is an act of objective, pragmatic decision making. Ultimately, the protagonist is not running from the "vital" but pursuing the course of greatest vitality.

*Flight* is, broadly speaking, a novel about prejudice, and, while the general focus of prejudice is typical of African American literature, the novel distinguishes itself by portraying a series of overlapping cultural bigotries. *Flight* should be included in the select group of African American literature that dramatizes the correlations and divergences between race and gender. For instance, racism—vis-à-vis motherhood, female sexuality, and patriarchal chauvinism—are subjects of works by writers like Pauline Hopkins, Angelina Grimké, Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. *Flight* also targets the prejudice of colorism, classism, and materialism within black society. Because the novel tries to operate on these separate levels, travel and change of setting are ideal devices for moving between the distinct categories of prejudice. In addition to seeing travel as a plot device, we should also see travel as utile to depicting the shifting social condition of the interracial woman. Travel is ultimately the device by which the protagonist of *Flight* develops the parallax perspective necessary to make choices about her place in society in regard to racial identity, gender performance, and class distinctions.

*Flight* shares with the other texts of this dissertation a compelling rendering of the interplay of travel, modern technology, and interracial identity. However, *Flight* introduces several features to the discussion. As in the other texts, this chapter is concerned with the ways that the actual change in location result in an apparent change in

its protagonist, specifically the ways that different populations in different locations react to and interpret the protagonist's fair-skinned. As is typical of parallax perspective, the apparent change in White's protagonist, Mimi Daquin, is due to the actual change in location and viewers involved. As with Helga Crane, the difference in race discourse and politics of each location alter the way each set of viewers interpret her appearance, thus leading to different assessments of her and different degrees of acceptance and rejection. This is not to say that Mimi does not develop psychologically during her travels, for her story is, I would argue, a bildungsroman of acquired skills, discoveries, and maturation. In fact, her development is enhanced by the apparent difference that is parallax because the contrast of locations reveals the constructedness of local values. Mimi's acquired parallax perspective deconstructs the presumptions, oversights, and contradictions of each locale. The actual change in location and viewer creates an apparently different object and sign "Mimi," which Mimi deciphers. Over the course of the novel, Mimi deciphers several "Mimis" and thus accumulates a comprehension of the political agendas competing to possess, control, or reject her, in regard to gender, race, and class. Paradoxically, in deciphering the apparently different "Mimis," Mimi achieves an actual intellectual and emotional growth.

Mimi Daquin's arc of development is similar to Helga Crane's, but with several fundamental differences. Like Helga, Mimi's family heritage is founded in international and interracial biological and cultural exchange, as evidenced in Jean's oral history of the family (38-9). Although Mimi is not directly interracial, her heritage and physical appearance render her racially ambiguous. She may not have had much choice in moving from New Orleans to Atlanta, but her subsequent relocations to Philadelphia and New

York are autonomous choices. Each location presents Mimi with a separate set of challenges regarding race, religion, class, and gender. When Mimi chooses to take “flight” in response to crisis, she replicates her ambiguous racial position by entering into a dialogue with both black diasporic travel and Western-styled modernism. Additionally, because traveling creates an interstitial space between two points, it is an apt metaphorical manifestation of her ambiguity. In engaging the two traditions and using each as a foil to the other, Mimi uncovers the blind-spots and prejudices of both: the self-inflicted disunity of black society; the equally self-inflicted moral corruption of white society. While black society allows itself to fracture politically at intersections of class, darkness of skin, and religion, white’s society tacitly accepts deceit, oppression, and greed as means towards material security.

The pattern of relocation is established early in the novel when the Daquin family leaves New Orleans because of economic and social reasons. Mimi demonstrates an awareness that “taking ‘flight’” is itself “unpleasant;” however, under circumstances that would restrict her thoughts and actions, “taking ‘flight’” gives her the best chance of being sincere to her independent nature. Brooks’s view that Mimi merely “tak[es] the position of observer of her own unfolding drama” seems to miss the importance of “the position of observer” in the protagonist’s objectivism, cogitation, and problem-solving. It is in moments of daydreaming and meditating that she discovers truths for herself or makes a decision. Rather than interpret this move as passive, as Brooks does, I see it as a process of autonomy and pragmatism.

In *Flight*, race is one of many demographic categories used to create social hierarchy; however, race is also one of several categories that a subordinate person can

manipulate in order to “pass” as a dominant person. The novel conveys the impression that America is fetishistic about physical appearance and ethnic heritage even as it promotes an ethos of classlessness and self-reinvention. As will be discussed, travel in the novel makes the relative dominance of culture, race, and gender apparent. Furthermore, it should become clear that *Flight* is a work that expands our conceptions of the American traditions of modernism, self-reinvention, and travel.

### **Summary of *Flight***

*Flight* is the coming-of-age story of Mimi Daquin, daughter of Jean Daquin and step-daughter of Mary (Richardson) Daquin. Mimi and Jean are of blue-blood (light-skinned black) New Orleans stock stretching back to 1728 (38), but Mary is dark-skinned and comes from Chicago. Middle-class, fair in appearance, and raised in New Orleans, Mimi lives in the Creole section of the city and is unaware of the privilege her skins affords her. Mary wants Jean to move to Atlanta for business opportunities, but Jean resists because of his attachment to the relaxed and genteel culture of New Orleans. He concedes however when Creole families with long histories in the area begin to die off or move away, resulting in the selling and demolishing of classic homes, and the building of cramped, industrial apartments.

In Atlanta, Mimi and Jean experience on multiple fronts alienation from the black community. Mimi is struck by the competitiveness, jealousies, and slights within the black community. Because Jean remains true to his Catholic roots, black Atlanta, being Baptist, is openly uncomfortable around him. Jean also finds it hard to subscribe to the community’s materialistic work ethic. Still coming to terms with the cultural difference

of their new city, Mimi has a racial awakening when she and Jean are caught up in the historical Atlanta race riot of 1906. Mimi has already experienced a racial revelation in her new exposure to black folk songs, but almost becoming a victim of the riot cements her sympathy and allegiance to the African America experience. The riot scene also represents Mimi's first experience passing as white, although she does not consciously do so. The white assailant at first accosts her but stops when at a closer distance he believes her and her father to be white.

Mimi's time in Atlanta is also marked by a brief love affair with Carl Hunter, the son of a prominent, light-skinned family. When she becomes pregnant with his child, Carl demands that she have an abortion. Defying him, his parents, and her mother, she decides to leave Atlanta to raise the baby on her own. She moves to Philadelphia, where she lives until the child, *Petit Jean*, is born. After *Petit Jean* suffers an almost fatal illness, Mimi realizes that she cannot adequately support herself and her son on the irregular income of a seamstress. Fearful of the neglectful and underfunded black orphanages, Mimi leaves *Petit Jean* at a white, Catholic orphanage.

Wanting anonymity and a good chance at employment, Mimi moves to New York, where she finds both. However, the petty maliciousness that she sought to leave in Atlanta shows itself in Harlem when her family's former housekeeper recognizes her at a dance club. Until that moment, Mimi had enjoyed the comradeship and acceptance of Harlem's black middle-class. After, gossip about Mimi's pregnancy and suppositions about her loose morals quickly circulate her social stratum, and she is ostracized by all but the aunt with whom she lives. Lonely and distraught, Mimi feels compelled to move to a white neighborhood south of Harlem and pass for white.

As a white seamstress, Mimi's financial independence and social mobility take a decidedly positive turn. Her job pays well enough to support her and *Petit Jean's* boarding and education. One of her coworkers, Sylvia Smith, befriends her, and her employer, Madame Francine, increases Mimi's pay and position. Both Smith and Madame Francine have changed their names to suit their situation, being respectively Jewish and Irish. Working at Madame Francine's, Mimi learns of the financial doings of white middle- and upper-class New York. She sees the way gender differences are played out in financial terms and the degree to which deceit is practice in that struggle. Through long hours and attention to detail, Mimi becomes Madame Francine's executive assistant and goes as her proxy to Paris fashion shows. There, she meets Jimmie Forrester, a white American she later marries.

Back in New York City and married, Mimi discovers that Jimmie is incorrigibly racist and materialistic. She has two experiences that influence her decision to leave the marriage. In the first, she meets a Chinese official, and in the second, she watches a musical performance that weaves the instruments of Western classical music with the melodies and lyrics of Negro spirituals. The anti-imperial message of the Chinese official confirms for her the moral bankruptcy of white America, and the beauty of the musical performance reaffirms her faith in the spirituality, humor, and grace of black culture. Where the banquet sparked her rational rejection of her situation, the music worked as an emotional catalyst to action. Inspired in both mind and body, Mimi decides to leave her marriage, retrieve *Petit Jean*, and "return" to her "own people" (300). The novel concludes with Mimi walking an avenue, basking in a dawn sun, and anticipating the change she is about to make.

As with the texts of previous chapters, *Flight* can be divided into sections delineated by geographic location. These sections consist of Atlanta (42-154), Philadelphia (155-183), and New York (185-300), a flashback sequence of New Orleans (19-41), and finally several short stints in Baltimore, New Jersey, and Paris. Consistent with the other works, *Flight* also contains interstitial moments of travel as well as a significant treatment of machine imagery. And, finally, the interracial position of the protagonist provides a distinct vantage point—than an “purely” white or black point of view—of the race discourse in America, and this vantage point is made all the more distinct by change in location that create a parallax effect, the apparent changes in character resulting from actual changes in context. For Mimi, trains, cars, and ocean-liners are sites for engaging, constructing, and transcending notions of race.

Before treating the different sections, it is worth discussing the extent of Mimi’s interracial and transnational heritage. In the flash-back sequence in the Atlanta section, Mimi’s father, Jean, tries to prepare her for leaving the cultural context of New Orleans by reaffirming the fullness of her racial lineage:

Neither Margot [his first wife] nor I have ever consciously sought to keep from you the fact that the Negro blood in you set you aside, here in America, as one apart, though we have tried to shield you as much as we could from the embarrassments that blood can bring you [...] You can afford to laugh here in Creole New Orleans [...] But away from here it’s a different matter” (37-8).

Jean’s pride in their black and insurrectionist heritage is evident in his regaling his second wife with stories about his great-grandfather, a black Dominican refugee who came to

New Orleans “from the Insurrection of 1791 in San Domingo” and built a sugar refinery (30). Jean is equally proud of his white and mixed ancestry as well. During his walk with Mimi through one of the city’s old cemeteries, he gives another rendering of her intellectual, spiritual, and racial heritage:

“We Daquins trace our history a long ways back—back to the early days of the convent Louis XV founded here in 1727—the Ursalines—to teach the Negro and Indian girls [...] Soon after Madeline Hachard—who called herself ‘Hachard de St. Stanislas’ after she took the veil—and the others opened the doors of their convent, there was need of wives for the young men of character and means. Girls of good family were sent to the colony—*les filles a la cassette* they were called. From these matings sprang many of the great families of Louisiana—and to one of them you and I owe our being. From her who nearly two hundred years ago took the long and perilous voyage there comes down to us a path—at times clear and distinct—at times faded and shadowy [...] We of the so-called coloured branch—many of our ancestry of the proud *gens de couleur libre*—we too have had a large share in making Louisiana what it is today” (38-9).

It is clear from the tone and content of the monologue that Jean is preparing Mimi for the upheaval of leaving New Orleans and that he means for her to draw on their family history. He says, “I’m telling you, for when you run up against hard situations later on in life—and we all do—the knowledge of what’s back of you will give you strength and courage” (38). Jean’s account establishes the family’s intricate racial composition, trans-

Atlantic origins, Catholic roots (a detail relevant to the Atlanta section), examples of independent women, and examples of maverick and revolutionary personalities. Even the religious order is relevant to Mimi's future choices, as "the Ursalines," now called the Company of St. Ursula or the Angelines, is an order of consecrated women dedicated to the education of women and who support themselves through secular careers. The theme of feminine independence is unmistakable in Mimi's later choices to reject marriage and accept single motherhood, seek a liberal arts and trade education, and achieve an executive position at a high-end fashion house.

Additionally, Jean's history anticipates the anti-capitalist theme of the novel. Of his Creole ancestry, he says,

most Creoles are a little bit of everything and from that very mixture comes the delightful colourfulness which is their greatest charm. To them the cardinal sin is avarice or stinginess. Dalliance at love—too great devotion to the cup—poverty—all these are minor faults to be forgiven and forgotten. We are not a nation of shopkeepers, thank God, even though you and I, Mimi, are about to desert to the enemy camp. (40)

Jean's last sentence expresses his reservation about leaving New Orleans for Atlanta, for he associates the latter city with the materialism of his second wife's family. Jean views Mary's father, Mr. Robertson, as obsessed with "Money—money—money—how much is it worth?—how much can I make out of it?—these were the first, last and intermediate stages of Mr. Robertson's every thought, every statement, every action" (11). Thus, in addition to affirming her mixed-race ancestry and nonconformist family history, Jean's monologue is an appeal to Mimi to avoid the "avarice" of the world beyond New Orleans. Later, the theme of greed is revisited in the juxtaposition of machine and organic imagery to render the tension between white capitalist culture and black folk culture.

### Material Communities and the Transcendent Self

Although not identical, the locations and their relative politics in *Cane* and *Quicksand* are recognizable in *Flight*, a fact that shows that the authors share an interest in how location informs the construction of racial identity and class signification of color complexion in the black community. Although White's depictions of New Orleans and Philadelphia are particular to his work, his rendering of Atlanta resembles Toomer's Washington and Larsen's Naxos. And while White's Harlem approximates Larsen's, his Paris is less exoticizing than Larsen's Denmark due to Mimi's passing for white while there. What is recognizable about Mimi's European excursion is the black expatriate impulse, seen in *Quicksand*, to choose the passive racial discourse of Europe over the more violent and overt racism of America.

As with my discussion of *Cane* and *Quicksand*, travel functions almost synonymously with machinery because of how the two phenomena intersect in the representation of modernity. Or, as Robert Park states in "Human Migration and the Marginal Man," "the vast expansion of Europe during the last four hundred years" had "brought about everywhere an interpenetration of peoples and a fusion of cultures," producing "a personality type which if not wholly new is at any rate peculiarly characteristic of the modern world" (Park, in Stonequist [1937] 1965: xiv–xv, xviii). Indeed, travel symbolizes an increased pace of life and its fragmentation, and machinery symbolizes alienation from organic or traditional forms and institutions. In *Flight*, machine imagery is particularly visible as the symbol of the dehumanizing effects of capitalism and the contrast of white culture and black. For instance, during Mimi's observation of a black chain gang in Atlanta, "She marveled at their toughness of fibre

which seemed to be a racial characteristic, which made them able to live in the midst of a highly mechanized civilization, enjoy its undoubted advantages, and yet keep free that individual and racial distinctiveness” (94). Similarly, while living in a white neighborhood, Mimi comments on industrial capitalism when she posits that white society “had created a machine of which they are intensely proud and of which they think they are the masters. Instead, ironically enough, the machine has mastered them” (268). Although this organic-machine opposition runs the risk of essentializing culture, Mimi’s use of machine travel and new media complicates the facile polarization. To an even greater extent than the chain gang members (who are incarcerated in a post-slavery system of free labor), she is able to enjoy modernity’s “undoubted advantages” and “keep free” her individual distinctiveness. Both of the preceding examples make clear several aspects of, what I see as, the interracial-machine-travel matrix. The machine culture that would seem at first to endanger the protagonist’s individual and racial distinctness actually aids her actuation of them. That is, in traveling across geographic and social borders, Mimi negotiates the parallax effect in order to consider an array of sociopolitical ideologies, construct individual insights about racial-cultural distinctiveness, and enable pragmatic decision making.

### **Atlanta: Religious Prejudice and Colorism**

From the outset, Mimi’s racial appearance, signified by her red hair and fair-skinned, is a central component of how she is depicted and how she is viewed. Early in the novel, Jean’s description of his sleeping daughter emphasizes her hair:

In the shadow it had seemed brown. Before Jean’s eyes it underwent a miraculous transformation as the tiny rays of light picked out the coppery

brilliance that here was auburn, and there shaded off into a deeper reddish colour. It was like spun gold dipped in flaming cochineal. The curls in tangled disarray framed the oval, cream-coloured face. (21)

In addition to contributing to the theme of Mimi's various forms of "miraculous transformation," the passage practically fetishizes her hair. Jean is proud of his daughter's beauty, yet, "He had been too much of life to be unaware of what his child's delicate and fragile beauty might bring her" (21). The events of the novel substantiate his anxiety about "the glances Mimi [...] drew instinctively from the men, young and old." Jean's concern resembles the worldly thoughts of the narrator of *Cane*, who in "Karintha" comments on the risk to feminine beauty," saying "this interest of the male, who wishes to ripen a growing thing too soon, could mean no good to her" (3); and then, who in "Fern" confides "Could men in Washington, Chicago, or New York, more than the men of Georgia, bring her something left vacant by the bestowal of their bodies? You and I who know men in these cities will have to say, they could not" (18). In *Flight*, middle-class black society attempts to remedy such risks to femininity by restricting the movement of its young women and controlling the type of interactions they have with men. Despite these austere measures, middle-class black society nonetheless maintains both a fascination with and apathy for fair-skinned features.

In Atlanta, Mimi is marked as different because of her appearance, New Orleans heritage, and Catholicism. These planes of otherness draw admiration and contention from the black community:

Her reddish hair in the sunlight was a magnet that caught and held the eye, the mind meanwhile feasting on its brilliant decorativeness.

And in combination with these reminders of tropic warmth and colour was Mimi's air, piquant, vaguely mysterious and seductive. Not that she was aware of all this, nor did she do other than laugh when Hilda compared her to some other girl, always to the disparagement of the other

one. There were pretty ones—several of them, in fact, more beautiful than Mimi. Yet, none of them possessed the combination which was hers and, not having lived in Atlanta all her life and thus newer to the eye, Mimi without apparent volition drew to her side most of the younger men. (59-60)

Though not pretending to be anything other than a black woman living in a black community, Mimi is perceived as “piquant, vaguely mysterious and seductive” when in fact she is merely bookish, shy, and new to the city. But where Mimi’s othered fairness draws the interest of men, it provokes anxiety in women. In one instance when she tries to befriend the daughter of her dark skinned housekeeper,

Mrs. Plummer had called her child into the house and Mimi had heard her being scolded: “How many times I got to tell you to leave these yaller children alone? First thing you know, you’ll be coming home saying some of them’s called you ‘black’” (55).

Mrs. Plummer’s association of Mimi’s exotic fairness with the color hierarchy of black Atlanta is not without precedent, but Mimi’s attempt to fraternize with a darker peer is sincere. This is the first of several incidents that highlight her difference (if not *differance*) and teach her about the mechanics of discrimination. Jean consciously raised Mimi not to factor race in her consideration of herself and others. As a result, she is ignorant of racism and many of forms of social hierarchy, including color prejudice in the black society. Her education in such matters begins when she leaves New Orleans and is made to engage the world at large. When she is invited to a tea party for the Fleur-de-Lis women’s club, she realizes upon looking around the room “that none of the women present were darker than a light brown, their complexions varying from that shade to indistinguishable from white” (48). As is common in interracial narratives, Mimi’s fair complexion and modest personality make her subject to being viewed as “dictie.” Even in the Fleur-de-Lis club there exists the danger of fair-skin being equated with self-conceit.

For instance, a club member, Mrs. Adams, acquires “the damning reputation of being ‘stuck-up’” because she passes as white in order to attend operas and she hosts simple parties (58). Mimi’s friendships with Mrs. Adams and her daughter is enough to solidify Mimi’s reputation as well. Later, in Philadelphia, once again, Mimi is classified as one of the “Stuck-up niggers” (174).

Mimi’s adjustment to Atlanta is also affected by religious bigotry. In New Orleans, Jean and Mimi were practicing Catholics, but in Atlanta, their faith is rejected by black society, and they themselves are rejected by the Catholic churches because these are entirely white. Discussing the Daquin’s Catholic belief, Mrs. King states, “Any time I hear tell of coloured folks bein’ anything ’cept Baptists or Methodists I know some white man’s been tampterin’ with their religion” (13). Mrs. King’s word choice, tampering, connotes both deceit and lechery, as if interracial sexual relations are contiguous with religious matters. Indeed, religion has justified enslavement, colonization, and racism, just as enslavement, colonization, and racism have justified sexual predation. But, Mrs. King’s comment errs in assuming that Baptist and Methodist Christianity are devoid of white “tampterin,” seeing as both are products of English cultural exportation. Anti-Catholic sentiment is repeated later when Mimi’s step-mother, Mary Daquin, meets with Mrs. Hunter, a representative of the Fleur-de-Lis club. Upon hearing of Mimi’s and Jean’s denomination, “Mrs. Hunter turned and surveyed Jean and Mimi as though they were specimens of some new flora or fauna of a weird and unfamiliar species. Her inspection lasted but a minute but it was long enough to make Mimi squirm uncomfortably” (45). Because the Catholic churches of Atlanta are all-white, Jean, Mrs. Daquin, and Mimi are categorically refused entry (57). Rather than suffer a life without

religious community, Jean and Mimi convert to a local Congregational church. Conceding to circumstances, Jean compares religious and racial intolerance: “Coloured people here, from what I’ve seen, are always talking about ‘prejudice’ and they’re just about as full of prejudice against Catholics, Jews, and black Negroes as white people themselves” (46). Here, White clearly indicts the black community, but he does something more. He highlights the hypocrisy of a people subject to prejudice who in turn subject its members to other sorts of prejudice. The sentiment of the quote supports the novel’s larger statement that race is one of several markers used by the elite class(es) to control the access to wealth and power. Though White is sometimes considered a member of the old guard black intelligentsia, his criticism of black and white American culture has the controversial and unapologetic stance of the magazine *Fire!!* Similarly, his progressive Marxist-like criticism is not seen in black fiction until after the 1930s.

White’s depiction of Mimi becoming pregnant out of wedlock brings the novel to its discussion of black middle-class propriety and its desire to control the black female image. The Hunters and Mrs. Daquin (Jean Daquin has died from a heart-attack) use threats regarding financial security and social standing to persuade Mimi to marry Carl. Mimi’s choice to keep the baby is not motivated by Catholic faith but by her sense of beauty and motherhood. Upon hearing that she is with child, “A great happiness filled her, happiness mingled with a sweeping flame of love for Carl [...] Her face shone with a great light, the light of contentment and love. There was no feeling of shame” (148). Expecting “tears, protestations of innocence, pleas for help,” the doctor tries to explain, “I’m afraid you don’t realize how serious a thing this is. Do you know what’ll happen to you and your reputation?” (149). Upon finding out that Carl is the father, the doctor

exclaims, “The scoundrel! We’ll make him marry you and save your name from being dragged in the mud.” As demonstrated elsewhere in the novel, a man’s reputation can withstand questionable decisions regarding heterosexual practices, but a woman’s reputation cannot. A woman’s sexual encounters have to be endorsed by religious affiliation and marriage. When told about the baby, Carl reacts with fear and says, “I’ll take you to a doctor who’ll fix you up” (150). When he notes Mimi’s disappointment, he suggests running away. He elects to marry her and “give the kid a clean name.” Carl’s plan to “go away and get married—pretend we eloped” is an age-old obfuscation that overlays the autonomy of travel with the legitimization of marriage. Likewise, he expresses the convention of legitimizing by marriage both mother and child. As in *Cane* and *Quicksand*, we see that in addition to the double racial pressure pushing and pulling the mixed heritage character, being female adds another compelling force toward mobility because a woman who has experimented with sex or succumbed to temptation has little recourse in her community. Her status in society is sealed if she chooses to remain in the place where her reputation has been put into question.

Later when the Hunters and Mary Daquin confront Mimi, the parents confirm the connection of obfuscating travel and legitimizing marriage vis-à-vis a woman’s reputation. Mrs. Hunter suggests that Mimi and Carl “must get married right away and save your name. When the baby’s nearly here, you two can go off on a long trip.” According to the conventions for black middle-class women in Atlanta, Mimi’s options are limited. Mary Daquin opines, “What if Carl is a weak and worthless scamp? Any kind of a man for a husband is better than none when a girl’s in your fix” (152). Mrs. Daquin’s apologist advice resembles Dr. Anderson’s words to Helga Crane: “Some day you’ll

learn that lies, injustice, and hypocrisy are a part of every ordinary community” (Larsen 20). In both situations, the elder advisor is responding to a young woman’s response to the “suppression of individuality and beauty” (ibid.) At this crossroad of conformity and individuality, her father’s words return to her: “decide in your own mind the wisest, the best thing to be done, and then do it.”

At this critical juncture, Mimi makes a pragmatic decision yet maintains her independence. She accepts the advice given to move away, as the Hunters and Mrs. Daquin suggest, but she will do so alone. Because of their appeals, she comes to terms with the degree to which “she would be condemned,” and realizes that “she could not remain in Atlanta” (152). She concludes that “Whatever she might have to suffer, it was better that she keep her own soul free. That would certainly not be true if she married Carl now” (153). With her portion of the inheritance from her father’s death, Mimi decides to move to Philadelphia to live the next stage of her life. As in the case of Helga Crane’s flight to Denmark from Harlem, Mimi achieves freedom because of a timely inheritance from a male relative, suggesting the economic prerequisite for female independence (much like Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own* does). This prerequisite differs greatly from the male independence narratives depicted in *Cane*, *Home to Harlem*, *The Walls of Jericho*, and even *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (although this last contains elements of masculine financial dependence as well). The Atlanta section concludes with a lesson about travel’s empowering impact on feminine autonomy, a recurring function in the novel.

Despite the various ways that Mimi is battered by the divergent political agendas in black society, her arrival in Atlanta is also the source of her awakening to the

conventions of race in America. Mimi at first chafes at the petty competitiveness and materialism of Atlanta, but then she and Jean are almost assaulted during the historic Atlanta race riot of 1906 (72-6). After weeks of the local newspapers trying to increase sales by running unfounded articles about black male sexual aggression (66, 72), white fury erupts just when Mimi and Jean are in town on an errand. In White's rendering, the newspaper, with other media and civic institutions, is responsible for inciting many instances of white racial violence. Because he had passed for white in order to investigate lynchings, White's depiction of such media practices should be taken as a firsthand account.

Mimi's encounter with racial violence changes her in ways that she cannot at first comprehend or express: "She was never able to tell, even in her own thoughts, what had happened to her in that terrible moment" (73). Although what Mimi thinks of the race riot is unclear, its effect on her identity is not. Before that day, "race had been a relative matter, something that did exist but of which one was not conscious except when it was impressed upon one. The death before her very eyes of that unknown man shook from her all the apathy of the past. There flashed through her mind in letters that seared her brain the words, 'I too am a Negro!'" (74). The attack creates a sympathetic response, in which she is a voyeur but understands that she could have been a victim. Mixed with her fear is something akin to anger. In this sense, Mimi's "I too am a Negro" is an affirmation. That is, when she sees a black man chased and beaten, and hears "a great bellow of hatred, of passion, of sadistic exultation" rise from the mob, Mimi experiences a moral epiphany. There is righteous judgment in the descriptors "hatred," "passion," and "sadistic," which, in lowering the moral status of whiteness, raises her sense of the honor of blackness.

The graphic representation of Mimi's epiphany is significant to the novel's discussion of modern media and language. In realizing her blackness, "There flashed through her mind in letters that seared her brain the words, 'I too am a Negro!'" At the moment of her comprehension of the consequences of blackness, Mimi visualizes the "letters" and "the words" that signify her identity. This is an intersecting moment of function of print media and language as they function in the novel. While Mimi's internalized graphics confirm her identity, external expressions have the power of belying her race. For instance, during the riot, a rioter accosts Jean and Mimi, snatching off Jean's hat and peering into his face. Jean reflexively exclaims "Mon Dieu!" to which the attacker explains, "Scuse me, brother! I thought you were a nigger!," and hands back the hat. Because White makes sure to state that the man "peered into his face in the dim light," it seems possible that matters would have been worse for Jean in better lighting. As it is, what seems to convince the assailant of Jean's whiteness is his use of the French exclamation. The use of French signals Jean class and his whiteness. Contrasted with Mimi's clear and formal diction in "I too am a Negro," the assailant's "'scuse me, brother" suggest that Jean relatively higher level of education. The rioter conceives of Jean as his equal. Consequently, Mimi's first instance of passing for white is done without intention.

Perhaps the most important result of this confrontation is Mimi's realization of the meaning of race in America, particularly in the South. Despite her awareness of the negative consequences of her black heritage, in both black and white society, she chooses to identify as black: "Mimi dated thereafter her consciousness of being coloured from September, nineteen hundred and six" (77). In terms as profound as the Christian Anno

Domini (AD), Mimi divides her racial experience into what happened before the riot and what happened after. Mimi's close-call with racial violence is similar to the moment in *The Autobiography of Ex-Colored Man* when the protagonist witnesses a race riot. Instead of compelling Mimi to shun her black heritage as he did, the incident urges her to consolidate her black identity. Rather than respond to the fear of the incident, she responds to her outrage that she could be assaulted for the idea—because she is not visibly so—of being black. Although accidentally being taken for white, Mimi begins experimenting with passing; however, she does this not to hide but to torment representatives of white society. When the opportunity arises, she is “malicious in little cruelties to tradesmen, to hucksters, to clerks in stores who happen to be white” (77). Furthermore, she takes “acute delight in the fact that her cream-coloured skin, her Gallic name and her French accent gave her immunities she might not have possessed had she been more distinctly Negro.”

After the riot, Mimi also changes her attitude toward the materialism, racial chauvinism, and bickering she sees in black Atlanta. Upon arriving in Atlanta, she was “captiously critical of the foibles and petty vices of her friends,” but after the riot, “she began to take these as a matter of course and she found they no longer shocked nor annoyed her” (78). Mimi begins to endorse the cultural neurosis engendered by racism, and begins to find psychological safety in such defensiveness. In this context, the “tearing down of reputation” in the black community is an extension of (78)—a form of practicing—the chauvinism that fuels black Atlanta's delight in white society's “imbecilities, their shortcomings” (77). The same anger and status obsession Mimi had seen in the black community is the same maliciousness and competitiveness that she uses

in “magnifying the virtues, the excellencies of her own people” after the riot, and it is with this anger that “she tried to explain away through a process of subtle sophistry all their faults” (77). Such “sophistry” is a rebuttal to the host of negative stereotypes about blacks. For instance, the stereotype of black male lasciviousness is so prevalent that a black man’s walking past a window of a white woman home alone is enough to spark the riot. After the resulting violence, Mimi reconsiders the hyper materialism of the black middle-class. It is more than mere imitation of capitalist white middle-class America because it is also a means to physical safety. It just so happens that a side effect of the materialism is “the obsession of the men on the making of money” and “the vying of woman with woman in dress, in grandeur of entertainment and of homes” (78).

At the close of the Atlanta section, White writes, “As the train wound its way through the bare red hills of Georgia, she gazed from the car-window with the feeling that she definitely closed the pages of the first book of her life” (154). This passage is the first of several instances in the novel where figurative language involving travel, window views, and books is used to empower Mimi’s choices about identity.

### **Philadelphia: Single-Motherhood and Poverty**

Whereas the Atlanta section had Mimi coming to terms with the consequences of her racial, religious, and gendered identity, the Philadelphia section deals with the effect of her choices to embrace anonymity, single-motherhood, and employment. Mimi departs when she realizes that “she could not remain in Atlanta” because “she would be condemned, her name derided” (152). She had seen that the black middle-class will forgive a man his sexual trespass but ostracize his female partner (120, 147). When she

decides to leave, her choice of Philadelphia is determined by the anonymity it would provide:

She could give no reason why she chose that city to which to go. The nearest she could explain her choice was that Philadelphia was large, she knew no one there and she was sure she could lose herself in its vastness. (154)

In Philadelphia, Mimi seeks an absence of personal history in order to perform her first act of sustained passing. However, she doesn't pass for white as one might expect; she passes for a widow. Renting a room at a boarding house, Mimi allows herself to be misinterpreted as a widow in order to avoid embarrassment:

The old couple frequently speculated to themselves who and what she might be. To the woman's indirect and friendly questions Mimi gave evasive answers which seemed to satisfy the simple and uninquisitive nature of the elderly woman. To her neighbors she said that Mimi was a young widow grieving for her dead husband, which explanation, in view of the mourning garments Mimi yet wore for Jean. (155)

Mimi's presence in the boarding house is a titillating mystery, even for a "simple and uninquisitive" older couple. They are compelled to hypothesize "who and what she might be." Alone and in mourning garb, Mimi allows the presumptions of patriarchy and Christian propriety to form the couple's comprehension of her situation. In this way, Mimi manipulates, to her benefit, the prescribed silent and demur presence of femininity. To complete her performance, she wears a gold band on her finger "to avoid suspicion" after "Mrs. Manning [...] had glanced significantly one day at her left hand as she sought gently to induce Mimi to talk" (158). Mimi feels "a sense of her dishonesty" in falsely wearing the ring, but the lesson about the restriction of female sexuality learned in Atlanta continues to bear on her development. In Atlanta, Mimi did not feel shame about her pregnancy. But, since then, she had come to understand that "embarrassing

questions” and “talk” multiply the social surveillance already exerted upon a woman. Upon arriving in Philadelphia, she reflects, “Gone was the sense of being a deprived, a disgraced, a low creature which had assailed her those last few days in Atlanta. She was free! Free! Free!” (158). If she is to maintain her independence, she will have to assume an inconspicuous profile. Also, in light of the riot scene, she understands that cultural impersonation can save one’s life.

A great deal of the Philadelphia section concerns Mimi’s financial worries and her search for employment. Had she stayed in Atlanta and married Carl, Mimi would not have to work and her daily responsibilities would consist of managing a house. As Helga Crane experienced when she left Naxos for Chicago, the consequences of female autonomy and employment come with the risk of loneliness, vulnerability, and poverty. Without a family or social network, Mimi must find employment to support herself and her baby. Through persistence and ingenuity, “she located a boarding-place, arranged for *Petit Jean* to stay by day at a nursery, and secured work sewing by the day through scanning the want ads and inquiry through the Mannings [the boarding house couple]” (163). Although Mimi manages to make a successful transition to a working-class lifestyle, the sustainability of her situation is tenuous because of the tedium, long hours, low pay, and infrequent work. Mimi’s time of poverty in Philadelphia, in contrast to the materialism of middle-class Atlanta, exemplifies the economic fragility of the working-class in general and black women specifically, vis-à-vis the particular vulnerability where race, employment, and gender intersect.

An example of this particular vulnerability is the white-male middle-class predatory sexual fantasy that is based on the triply objectified status of black, female, and

working-class. When Mimi finds a sewing position in a white household that offers consistent hours and reasonable pay, she comes face to face with the stereotypes of race that can make employment uncomfortable and hazardous for black women. Upon seeing Mimi for the first time, the husband of her employer shows a mischievous interest in her. Trying to engage her in conversation, the husband baits Mimi with “You don’t mean to tell me you’re coloured?” (166). She respectfully deflects his questions and tries to leave the room, but he bars her exit. The danger of the situation is evident in his resembling “a fat, sleepy-eyed and sleek cat teasing a mouse before devouring it.” Like Axel Olson’s itemization of Helga Crane’s physical attributes, the husband then appraises Mimi, saying, “Those pretty little hands of yours are too delicate for hard work—and I never saw such lovely hair—do you know, I always was peculiarly susceptible to yellow hair.” During the stress of the situation, Mimi makes an allusion to visual media:

Mimi did not know whether to laugh or cry. She had seen scenes like this in the movies, and the cheap melodrama of such episodes had invariably made her want to snicker at their absurdity. But here was the thing she had laughed at in mild amusement happening to her, and it wasn’t all play, she knew, nor was she unaware of the very real danger. (166)

As in her use of travel to create self-reflexive moments, Mimi employs visual media that create emotional distance and give an objective view of her circumstances. In the above passage, Mimi uses the remove of the cinematic experience to assess her situation. In fact, her remove is so successful that she perceives the humor of the premeditated, platitudinous, and artificial seduction performed by her potential assailant, even as she acknowledges “the very real danger” of being sexually aggressed. Mimi’s past experiences with racial, religious, and class prejudice come into play and help her deal with the current threat. After a moment’s reflection upon the critical nature of her

situation, when her would-be seducer-assailant is most sure of himself—his thinking, “this is easier than I expected” (167)—Mimi calmly decides that her best course of action is to deconstruct the illusion of himself as both seducer and aggressor. She chides,

Don't be silly! [...] In the first place you are fat. In the second, you are old and bald. In the third, you are white. Fourth, you are vain and stupid and ignorant and repulsive. Don't think I'm falling back on the sentimental melodramatics of the 'poor working girl.' I'm not—I let you run along just to set the stage for telling you my opinion of you. (167)

Strikingly, Mimi diffuses the itemizing gaze of her attacker with a racial and feminine itemizing gaze of her own. Even as the husband tries to physically restrain her, she remains calm and coolly advises him not to make a scene in his own home with his wife downstairs. After immobilizing him with this threat, Mimi simply walks from the room, “A faint, mocking laugh trail[ing] back to him as he stood there after she had gone” (168). Mimi's transformation from an emotional teenager to a savvy adult is evident in her wisdom and calm in the situation. She speaks “as dispassionate as that of a schoolgirl monotonously listing the products of Brazil. There were no heroics, no tears, but only a relentless cataloguing of the physical and mental defects of the would-be Casanova.” It is clear that the lessons of her peripatetic experience—her run-ins with white racial violence, her disappointing sexual relationship with Carl, her standing up to the judgment of her and Carl's parents, the freedom of urban anonymity, her courage in single-motherhood—have altered Mimi, making her mentally and emotionally surer of herself.

Mimi's use of media to temper her experiences is demonstrated in other parts of the Philadelphia section. In a moment when she is most depressed about the prospects for her and her son, she uses literature to inspire strength and belief in herself. Mimi's finding a copy of Whitman's *Leaves of Grass* in a bookstore epitomizes the multiple

allusions in the novel that inform Mimi's construction of an independent femininity and refute the social conventions that would restrict her movements. After reading "O Me! O Life!", Mimi is figuratively transported by the lines of poetry: "The old man, the shop, the passers-by, everything was blotted out by the words, powerful, true, so applicable to her own case" (172). The entire poem is quoted, but Mimi is most inspired by the "Answer" portion, which she edits in her mind to say, "the powerful play [of life] goes on, and I, *Mimi Daquin*, may contribute a verse" (173). Touching on determination and independence, the poem literally and literarily confirms her use of travel to resolve crises:

The words gave her a comforting sense of *direction*. She had been blindly *wandering*, groping, striving towards a goal that had never been clear, indeed she had never even vaguely visualized any *destination* other than the struggle to do those things which seemed to her to be right. (italics added, *ibid.*)

Having left the city in which she was born (New Orleans) and the city where her father died (Atlanta), Mimi perceives how meaningful and literal the concepts of "direction" and "destination" have been in her life. Mimi's first-person affirmation recalls her awakening, which is also in first-person, to race and gender in the Atlanta section. After her tryst with Carl, she ponders, "Here I am [...] a woman, a Negro. Life for me if I were white would be hard enough, but it's going to be doubly so when I have a race problem added to my own difficulties as a woman" (126). The allusion to Whitman also recalls the list of books that her father hid from her when she was younger. A man who revered the arts, Jean steered Mimi towards the works of Balzac, Hardy, Maupassant, but concealed other works by the same authors because of the content of female sexuality (79). Having secretly found and read the prohibited works, Mimi would have found in them female characters representative of ideal womanhood, prostitution, avarice, assertiveness,

unattainability, and lesbian identity. In these titles, Mimi would also find examples of the limitations and hypocrisies that patriarchal societies enforces on the female subject. In internalizing cinema and print perspectives, Mimi appropriates the view, which is predominantly male, of these forms, and she separates her cognitive self from her physical self in order to see her situation objectively. In doing so, she exposes herself to hegemonic subtext of the media but pragmatically dismiss elements that don't suit her situation.

When *Petit Jean* falls acutely ill, Mimi takes on debt to have him treated. After Mimi successfully pays off the medical bill, she realizes that she cannot sustain the financial struggle she has waged because “There was little chance of her making any great progress in Philadelphia” (181). The question of income and labor in a capitalist economy is a major theme in the Philadelphia section. Being anonymous gives Mimi freedom, but, without the resource of an extended family, her employment opportunities are limited by her race, gender, and childcare responsibilities. Sophie Rogers, an aunt in New York, writes a letter, saying, “Alone you will have little trouble, especially if you come to New York. But with the baby it will be harder—you would have to be away all day—and people, even here, do talk” (181). Accepting the advice, Mimi puts *Petit Jean* in an orphanage before moving to New York. Concerned about his health and comfort, she lodges him in a white orphanage rather than a black one because “their all-too-slender resources made it problematical if he would receive the care and attention he needed” (182). The Mimi who opts to pass her son for white is a more mature and pragmatic Mimi who has learned the consequences of race in Atlanta and has learned the consequences of economic inequality in Philadelphia. The combination of travel and motherhood has

made her shrewder, “willing to go to any length to save him [...] to secure for him as much security and comfort as possible.” For *Petit Jean*’s initiation into living as a white child, Mimi chooses “a home in Baltimore, for she felt that there where so many Catholics lived there would be greater advantages for the unfortunate children of that faith” (183). Using her accumulated knowledge of religion, race, and economy, Mimi selects a location tailored to grant *Petit Jean* the greatest material opportunity.

### **New York: Passing and Capitalism**

When Mimi takes a train from Philadelphia to New York, we are treated to a convergence of travel, industrialism, media, and parallax that distinguishes White’s rendering of the interracial experience:

Just as she had had the feeling on leaving Atlanta that she had closed the pages of a volume in the story of her life, so now did Mimi sense intuitively that the second book was being shut, never to be opened again. Through the fading light of a dreary, cold day the train sped across the desolate Jersey meadows. Just dipping below the horizon, a frigid sun gave a sickly brilliance but no warmth. Mimi shivered. The dreariness of the landscape was relieved only by the lank chimneys of factories belching turgescient billows of smoke. From these dingy buildings poured streams of men as dingy as the factories from which they were emerging. Dinner-pails in hand, they plodded wearily across the waste places in knots of twos and threes, home to slatternly, waspish wives.

Into the murky darkness of Newark the train rumbled, paused momentarily, and then went into the gathering darkness. Lights began to twinkle in the dusty windows of the factories and the nondescript homes along the tracks. Into Manhattan Transfer and out again, past a fertilizer factory that filled the car with the fetid odours of offal, and the train plunged into the roaring, alarming bowels of the earth beneath the Hudson River. (184)

Repeating the effect of the book metaphor, the above passage demonstrates the compartmentalization that Mimi has learned in order to adjust to American social categorizations. At the start of the novel, Mimi does not distinguish between races or feel

a particular allegiance to any one race, for “In New Orleans she had thought all people were hers—that only individuals mattered” (54). Then, when she moved to Atlanta, she discovers “Her own people” in the revelation of the riot. Soon after however, she learns that delineations of race are somewhat arbitrary, illogical, and hypocritical, for in Atlanta she saw that “there were sharp, unchanging lines which seemed to matter with extraordinary power [...] Even though the ‘white’ one was swarthy while the ‘black’ one might be as fair as the whitest of the white. And within the circle of those who were called Negroes she found duplications of the lines between the two major groups” (54-5). Thus, in addition to being an apt metaphor for stages of her life, Mimi’s viewing stages of her life as “volumes” she is a replication of the categorical thinking to which she has been exposed. The difference here is that group categorical thinking restricts individual possibilities whereas Mimi’s pragmatic categorical thinking expands possibility by nullifying prior expectations of identity.

The quote above also exemplifies the consistent confluence of the book metaphor and travel in the novel. Each “volume” of her life begins and ends with a train ride: the train to Atlanta, the train to Philadelphia, and the train to New York. Mimi has come to associate trains with major reconstructions of her life. From the description, we can see that such moments of travel represent promise as well foreboding. The ambiguous tone of the scene can be seen throughout the description. For example, the geographic location of the train—in New Jersey, the state between Pennsylvania and New York—identifies the scene as interstitial vis-à-vis locations of significance for Mimi. Likewise, the time of day, twilight (“Just dipping below the horizon, a frigid sun gave a sickly brilliance but no warmth”) also suggests the ambiguity of the setting. The ambiguous tone in the passage

also figures in the portrayal of industrialism. Moving ever North, Mimi is rewarded with individual and economic freedom, but these come at the price of “cold” insensibility, deceit, and imprisonment in materialism. As in *Cane*, the factory is a symbol of both the progress and destruction of culture. Mimi and her father left New Orleans because, in addition to suffering insults because of the second wife’s dark skin, “modern business methods” were resulting in a demographic shift in the Creole quarter: “the new houses were filled by new people, as cheap and noisy and brazen as their homes” (33). While the technology of modernism makes it possible for Mimi to relocate during times of stress, it is also the source of other stresses. In the above passage, modern technology accompanies the creation of an oppressed labor class. Even as modernity, represented by the train, has liberated Mimi, it is also a purveyor of “belching turgescient billows of smoke,” “streams of men as dingy as the factories,” “waste places,” and “slatternly, waspish wives.” It is a monstrosity of “fetid odours” that “plunge[s] into the roaring, alarming bowels of the earth.” Thus, at the same time that Mimi is moving toward independence, she is moving to the symbolic center of industrial capitalism. In this way, *Flight*, as well as *Cane* and *Quicksand*, documents an inadvertent side-effect of 20<sup>th</sup> century formulation of capitalism: female independence.

In Pennsylvania Station, the frightful sights and sounds of modernism continues. While in the station, Mimi is “made timid by the rushing throngs,” and when she views people behind a fence awaiting passengers, the sight “made her think of prisoners or animals eager to escape.” (185). The subway train is a “roaring monster that leapt upon them from the yawning blackness.” After the fear and anxiety of mid-town, Mimi climbs out of the subway, onto a Harlem street, and she experiences the archetypal Harlem

arrival where the viewer is awed by the reality and vitality of an all-black city: “For here was a new life, teeming, exotic, individual. Hurrying along the streets, coming out of restaurants, standing in doorways and on street corners were groups of Negroes, well dressed, jubilant, cheerful.” Mimi is “thrilled by the new scene. Gone was the morbid, morose, worried air of the people she had encountered at the other end of the subway” (186). Up until this point, the train image connotes ambiguity and foreboding, but the trip to Harlem demonstrates the positive and transformative nature of the subway. Although only traveling from Pennsylvania to Harlem (a little more than 5 miles), a short distance relative to Mimi’s other travels, the cultural and psychological distance traversed is as great as any of her other voyages, and it foreshadows the profound change Mimi makes when she moves several stops on the subway, to a white neighborhood.

Mimi’s move to Harlem enacts another instance of parallax perspective and self-reflexivity. Upon first arriving, Mimi “looked back on her days of suffering and poverty almost as though it had been a terrible dream” (188). As with her book metaphor, Mimi looks on earlier stages of her life as related to her life yet somehow set apart from her current self. In addition to her contemplations, external messages suggest the merits of compartmentalization. For instance, her aunt Sophie Rogers, with whom she lives, encourages Mimi to separate herself from her past, saying, “Your problem now as I see it is to forget the past and decide what you’re going to do with your future” (189). Mrs. Rogers takes her message of compartmentalization further, extending it to dealings with men. For Mrs. Rogers, dissemblance is a useful tool for a woman’s maintaining her “inner self” (192). She advises Mimi to “never, never argue with a man. On the other hand, don’t fall into agreement too easily with his opinions.” Instead, Mimi should

“express an opinion different from what you’re sure is right and then—not too easily—let him convince you of the error of your reasoning” (191). Mimi objects that such tactics “sounds dangerously like opportunism—er—it might even be called deceit,” but Mrs. Rogers implies that society is not ready to accept intellectual or physical directness from women. For her, “the important thing is to work out for one’s own guidance the philosophy in keeping with one’s ideas and ideals and then extract from life all the happiness one can without destroying what’s more important than everything else—one’s inner self” (191-2). Mrs. Rogers’ strategy for interacting with men parallels the feigned ignorance practiced by blacks on plantations during the eras of slavery and share-cropping. The irony, of course, is that black women are applying the same strategy in their subordinated positions to black men.

Mimi’s understanding of the gender-race matrix and the competing interests between black men and women continues when she visits the Manhattan Casino dance club with her aunt. Peering around the room at the variety of shades of black skin and discussing the aesthetic merits of each, Mrs. Rogers explains the economic potential of having fair skin. After Mimi divulges her preference for “red skin” instead of a “sallow, colourless type,” Mrs. Rogers says, “No—you’re right, there is no colourlessness there—but those you see who are so fair they can pass can get ahead lots faster than those with lots of colour. Do you see that girl who looks like white—the one with the black dress covered with *passementeries*? She works down town in one of the most exclusive shops in New York. She’s a forewoman and makes more money than three-fourths of the men in Harlem” (199). In the social hierarchy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, all other things being equal, black women ranked lower than black men in terms of financial and political

influence. But, as Mrs. Rogers points out, a fair-skinned woman could economically surpass her darker male peer and achieve a financial independence rare for most black men.

Aside from the bickering and gossip, Mimi is content with Harlem's society and culture. As she later admits, "I never thought I'd want to leave my own people" (207). But, when her housekeeper from Atlanta comes to Harlem and begins circulating embellished accounts of Mimi's past (203), Mimi decides that passing for white is the only way to preserve the privacy, independence, and respect that she had built in New York. The rumors immediately alter her life, causing Mimi to be "avoided at church, on the street, at the few affairs which she attended" (204). Once again, the media plays an inciting role in the arc of the narrative, but a black newspaper is the culprit this time. On one hand, print media in the form of literature, such as the Whitman poem, has helped Mimi construct an independent spirit. But on the other hand, print media is responsible for carelessly creating social injustices in her life. It was sensationalist newspaper headlines that caused the Atlanta race riot of 1906. Now, on the level of personal slander, it is a society paper that callously destroys the security of Mimi's social-life in Harlem (204-5). Mrs. Plummer, the source of the gossip, is motivated by class competition and jealousy. She tells her interlocutor, "These society coloured folks make me tired [...] They look down on us ordinary folk but they're carrying on their deviltry just as much as any of us" (202).

Through the cosmopolitan Mrs. Rogers, White uses the crisis to express a humanist view about gossip and class competition. Upon hearing the news, Mrs. Rogers tries to calm Mimi by explaining that "People have gossiped from the beginning of time,"

and “coloured people are no better than anybody else. The motive is the same everywhere in the world and with all races and sexes and classes” (206). Although the prior statement expresses an inclusive ethics that asserts the equality of blacks to all other races, it would have upset some blacks who advocated that black literature only portray positive images of black identity. Not shying away, White extends his humanist statement and comments on the Du Bois’s propaganda debate when he has Mimi recall “a story which Booker Washington had told in which he likened Negroes to a basket of crabs—when one of them had with great energy climbed almost to the top of the basket and freedom, the others less progressive than he would reach up with their claws and pull him back to their level. This had seemed to her then merely an effective story coined for oratorical purposes, but now its applicability was forced upon her with painful truth” (211). Despairing, Mimi decides to leave Harlem and pass for white. The source of Mimi’s dejection is the motif that probably most put off White’s potential black readership, for she laments that “the very intolerance of her own people had driven her from them” (212). Whereas many “mulatto” narratives portray the protagonist as passing into the white world for individual profit or fear of white violence, *Flight* illustrates how black society, namely by its reactive austerity and vindictiveness, can exert an expellant force on interracial characters.

When Mimi decides to pass, she takes advantage of traveling yet again. Her move to “the lower Nineties” of Manhattan is not far, “In the matter of linear feet and rods and miles,” “but in other ways she might as well have been halfway round the world from the scenes she had once known” (209). Contrasted with the “exotic,” “jubilant,” and “cheerful” setting of Harlem, her new neighborhood is peopled with “Sleek and well fed,

powdered and rouged and lipsticked” whites who are “swallowed up by the yawning and insatiable pits” and “whirled to down-town jobs by the rushing, roaring subways” (210). Beneath the “sleek and well fed” exterior, her new neighbors are harried by the dehumanizing pace of industry, “swallowed up” and “whirled.” In this way, they are the counterparts to the inhabitants of the earlier industrial New Jersey scene. Though lacking the dirt of the factory town, Mimi’s new neighborhood is full of “small business men and stenographers and manicurists and clerks [who] dashed madly for the nearest subway or elevated station.” The frenetic movement of Mimi’s new neighborhood is directed toward acquiring wealth. Back in the Atlanta section, when Mimi’s father tries to explain his difficulty adjusting to the new city, he explains, “The whole world’s gone mad over *power and wealth*. The strongest man wins, not the most decent or the most intelligent or the best. All the old virtues of comradeship and art and literature and philosophy, in short, all the refinements of life, are being swallowed up in *this monster, the Machine*, we are creating which is slowly but surely making us mere automatons” (italics added 54). While machines make it possible for Mimi to achieve independence and liberty, the machine metaphors that run through the novel also correlate with the greed of modernity and the blind faith of industry.

Modern machines and industry, as portrayed by White, are the manifestations of an economy that exploits some classes of whites as purposely as it does blacks. Mimi’s employment as a white woman allows her a rare view of whiteness operating on subordinated whites. Although not expressly stated, one of Mimi’s great discoveries is the passing of whites as other whites. For instance, a coworker at a high-end dressmaker confides in Mimi that “My real name’s Bernstein—but you can’t get by in some of these

places if they think you're a Jew" (218). Like Mimi, Sylvia Smith (Bernstein) would be dependent and limited if it were not for her ability to assess her circumstances, think pragmatically, and mobilize. Of her past, Sylvia says, "I was born way down on the East Side—father and mother came here from France when they had only one child. I was the third and there were four after me—no chance down there at all. So I made up my mind I was going to get somewhere and I pulled out of that hole and here I am" (220). Thus, in Sylvia as well as Mimi, White links the American romance of geographic mobility and the American narrative of social mobility.

From Sylvia, we also learn the true ethnicity of their employer, Madame Francine. Sylvia reveals that Francine "says she is French, but you and I are lots more French than she is—every time she opens her mouth and spills some French words, you can hear Killarney all through it" (220). Rising in the ranks of the fashion house and working as an assistant to Francine, Mimi gets close enough to discover "the abundance of nervous energy beneath that calm which enabled Madame Francine, who had been born Margaret O'Donnell, to reach the heights she had attained" (229-30). Understanding the cultural prejudice against the Irish and the cultural advantage of the French in the fashion industry, Francine does not rely solely on focus and energy to succeed in her field. Instead, in addition to disposition and intelligence, she dons the cultural and ethnic stamp of the elite. By changing her name and dropping the occasional French word, Francine is in effect passing as a class of white acceptable in her profession.

At Francine's, Mimi discovers that the struggle between the sexes of which Mrs. Rogers had warned her extends beyond racial differences. Such negotiations for "power and wealth" takes place even at the highest levels of white society. At the fashion house,

affluent white husbands force their wives to use personal checks so that the husbands can track the wives' receipts and make sure they are not having affairs. In retaliation, the wives pay more than the listed amount at boutiques so the wives can collect the credited difference in cash and finance their secret lives (231). In other cases, husbands who have mistresses arrange to have two accounts at Francine's, one for which bills are sent to the home address and one for which bills are sent to the man's office. This situation, devoid of race antagonism, exemplifies how gender dominance is exercised through money, and, vice versa, how money (and subterfuge) can enable resistance to gender dominance. Although Mimi's passing for white at the fashion house is an act of deception, she marvels at the "Duplicity, deceit, lying, dishonesty, all around her" (ibid.). In this way, New York is emblematic of American middle- and upper-class greed and moral corruption.

The New York section also attempts to bring an international perspective to bear on white American culture. First, the expatriate view on race in America is suggested when Mimi accompanies Francine to Paris. Unlike her travel mate, Mimi feels "the thrill and mystery of departure" as she stands on the deck of the ocean liner to Europe (232). While in Paris, "the torn and unkempt streets could not destroy her happiness—*c'est la guerre*, she heard on every side, but for her there was no destroyed beauty—she saw beyond the disorder and envisioned the city as it was before shells and neglect had ruffled its beauty" (233). The city so inspires her that "She did not want to return to America," but "bring [*Petit*] Jean to France, educate him there and blot from her memory and his all the dark days in their own America" (233-4). Mimi's thoughts express the black

expatriate's high esteem of European cities like Paris, believing these cities to be more racial progressive and more appreciative of black culture.

White makes another comment about international culture in his depiction of Mimi's return to the United States. Back in New York, Mimi takes stock of her accomplishments: her traveling, her position at Francine's, and the safety of *Petit Jean*. But, she notes as well that her "victory brought with it many things which were not so pleasant" (236). That is, she suffers from loneliness and boredom, for she trusts no one other than Mrs. Rogers. When she is most lonely, she seeks the cultural diversity that New York has to offer: "she would often walk at night through to her unknown and queer sections of the city, peering into doorways, watching the ways of the varied peoples that make New York a world within itself" (237). The neighborhoods to which she walks embody the cultures of Spain, Gypsy, Turkey, Judaism, "Roumania," Italy, and France (237-8). These neighborhoods represent unmistakably swarthy-skinned and, for the most part, marginalized whites; and the neighborhoods contain the cultures of Europe that embrace passion, color, and exuberance that is, in the States, associated with black folk and black working-class culture. Again, White demonstrates that easy polarizations between classes or races are not possible. And once again, it is Mimi's movement between environments and her racial appearance (or lack thereof) that makes this discourse possible.

After France, Mimi escalates her performance of whiteness when she marries a white stock-broker named Jimmie Forrester. Now an executive at the fashion house, Mimi has achieved archetypal middle-class feminine security and independence. Mimi is married, no longer needs to work, lives in a large house. Mimi's move to Downtown,

Manhattan to live with her husband suggests an interesting correlation. The ethnically “whiter” and more economically stable Mimi becomes, the farther downtown she moves: first moving to the nineties from Harlem, then working in the fifties, then moving to Gramercy Park (in the teens), and finally the Forrester family house off Washington Square (in the aughts). In her life of luxury and idleness, Mimi experiences another self-reflexive moment involving parallax. Thinking back on her former life of employment, “She saw now how steady had been the grind of the past eight years at Francine’s—she had loved it, but now that she saw it in *perspective*, it made her shudder to see how much of a machine she had become” (emphasis added 262). Through the actual change of time and place, Mimi perceives a change in herself. Even as a well-paid employee, she is deadened by unrelenting work. She cites love as making her “human” again. But, Mimi’s marital life comes at other costs.

Jimmie Forrester is a witty and caring man, but he symbolizes the worst of upper-middle-class white America. Of his main client, the Crosbys, Jimmie admits, “she’s a nut and he’s cranky as the devil but I do make a lot of money out of him” (266). In another scene, Jimmie leafs through a newspaper, and he comments, “over in Texas they lynched another nigger. They’re cleaning things up. This Klan’s stirring up things all over—little rough, maybe—but these kikes and Catholics and niggers got to be kept under control” (264-5). For the sake of security, Mimi is at first in denial about Jimmie’s behavior, but the materialism and anxiety of middle-class white culture becomes unavoidable.

Although Jimmie represents a class of ease, Mimi perceives in the group a general unease. Watching dancers at an expensive club, Mimi comments to Jimmie, “They dance [...] as though they were saying: ‘This night is costing me a couple of hundred dollars

and I will get two hundred dollars' worth of fun out of it!" (267). For Mimi, "There was always that strained, unhappy expression on the countenances of these people" who "rushed madly here and there, each as though upon his efforts depended the future of civilization and life and everything else. Like cogs in a machine" (267). In White's description, the white middle-class is guilty of trying to convert qualitative life experiences into quantifiable monetary value. They are also guilty of overestimating their individual importance to civic and corporate America. This impulse of the white middle-class is perhaps a side effect of working under capitalist corporations. White's use of "cogs" suggests another reason. Two features of modern markets make industrial capitalism possible: mechanize agriculture and assembly-line work. Both make production and profit predictable and seamless, and they make the replace of component parts and workers more efficient as well. The disposability of workers seems at first only applicable to the working class. However, the novel suggests that middle-class whites are as much affected by the economic model. As "cogs" of capitalism, their movements are predictable and rote, and they as individuals can be replaced by identical mechanical parts. Despite her reservations about white New York, Mimi does not yet consider passing back into black society.

White's depiction of Mimi's encounters with Chinese culture offers another example of the effect of international perspective. When Jimmie invites the young professor Henry Meekins to dinner, the academic criticizes American industrialism. He describes the Ford car assembly line as "a dull, deadening thing which saps every bit of individualism from [the worker]" (269). By contrast, the Chinese worker has less advantages but "is still a craftsman and not a mere tender of a dehumanizing machine." In

this scene, Meekins also connects American capitalism and religion, stating, “[The Chinese] see us now for what we are—an army waving banners of Christianity but with guns in our hands, the folds of the banner hiding traders and industrialists who see that missionaries are sent where there are rich resources to be found.” Here, as in the Atlanta section, the precepts of religion are manipulated to exercise power. In Atlanta, religion is a divisive force that excludes Jean and Mimi, being Catholic, from white churches as well as black. In Meekins’ discussion, the precepts of Christianity justify colonial and assimilationist efforts.

Additionally, Meekins makes a direct comment about modernist and industrial ‘faith.’ For him, America’s true “gods are steam and electricity and steel,” which enable its members to “travel farther and faster than ever before” (ibid.). But these technological advancements have “made it possible to spread faster and more easily bigotry and hatred and intolerance and give more power to the mob” (271). This idea of industrial advancements that empower prejudice recalls the role that newspapers play in inciting the Atlanta riot and the similar role of the black society column that ostracizes Mimi. More than the diatribe of a Luddite, Meekins’s views come in the aftermath of WW I and anticipate the technology driven destruction performed in WW II. At Meekins’ words, “Mimi sat without speaking, glad to see Jimmie aroused from his habitual complacency, glad to hear Meekins confirm and make more concrete some of her own vague dissatisfactions” (ibid.). In her reaction to Meekins, Mimi’s discontent with participating in whiteness is beginning to take hold. Mimi’s second encounter with Chinese culture occurs at the dinner-party of Jimmie’s clients, the Crosby’s, where American insensitivity to diversity is on full display. For instance, Mrs. Crosby admits to Mimi, “I told Horace

he oughtn't expect me to entertain this Chinaman—Chinks always give me the creeps” (275); and later, Mrs. Crosby commends herself for having hired Japanese waiters “to make him feel right at home.” Perceived as white, Mimi is granted access to the private cognitive workings of individual white supremacy. And, on account of her minority status, cosmopolitan travels, and education, Mimi is perhaps the only person at the party to comprehend fully the harmful nature of derogatory names and the racist insult of the careless and specious grouping of separate ethnicities. When Mimi talks with the guest of honor, a Chinese government official named Mr. Wu Hseh-Chuan, he confirms Meekins’ interpretation of the Sino-American relationship, pointing out the hypocritical use of violence and Christian missionary work in China (281-2). Moved by his intelligence, Mimi asks Mr. Wu for his opinion of the West, and her phrasing of the question is a conscious construction of the parallax perspective. She asks, “What is your notion [...] of the outcome of all this? Where will it end? From your *distance* can you *see* whether we of the West are *headed* towards greater wisdom or destruction?” (emphasis added 282). Including herself in the body of West, specifically America, in her question, Mimi volunteers herself as an object for viewing and assessment (an international gaze if you will). In so doing, her question could be understood to ask “given the actual geographic and cultural distance between American and China, what is the perceived ethical direction or movement of the West?” Mr. Wu’s reply returns us to some familiar themes in the novel. He remarks, “The great nation or people or civilization is not that one which has the greatest brute strength but the one which can serve mankind best. The machine has been created—and it in turn is mastering its creators [...] only your Negroes have successfully resisted mechanization” (282).

In a scene resembling Helga Crane's visit to a minstrel show while in Denmark, the incident that ultimately decides Mimi's return to black society comes at a Carnegie Hall performance featuring black musicians. The two men perform a medley of classical music, works like by Bach and Schubert, and Negro spirituals, such as "Nobody Knows de Trouble I See." Elsewhere in the novel, music psychologically transports Mimi, but here, Mimi enters into a trance-like state in which she travels in space and time through African American history, namely tribal Africa, enslavement and the Middle Passage, and plantation slavery (297-9). By the end of the performance, Mimi concludes that "Whatever other faults they might possess, her own people had not been deadened and dehumanized by bitter hatred of their fellow men" (299). Regarding her itinerant life, she determines that "These songs were of peace and hope and faith, and in them she felt and knew the peace which so long she had been seeking and which so long had eluded her grasp" (299). Mimi's music-inspired epiphany resembles both Helga's minstrel show epiphany and her conversion in the storefront church. For instance, Mimi's Carnegie Hall scene and Helga's Harlem church scene contain moments of rapture that put the characters in touch with an older cultural tradition and a less inhibited identity. Yet, there are significant differences. Mimi is inspired with "peace and hope and faith" whereas Helga's experience seems inspired by embarrassment, penance, and capitulation. Also, Helga's conversion is the first step of sexual awakening and motherhood. Mimi, by contrast, has already had these milestones. Her epiphany contains a rapturous meditation, on race, class, and gender, that convinces her that identifying as black is more important than the insults and trials she suffered within the black community. In the atmosphere of

the Negro Spirituals, Mimi experiences a direct connection with her African ancestry, and decides that this is her sincere “inner-self.”

However, White ends the last sentence of the novel with an ellipsis, and such unclear endings is a prominent feature of progressive interracial novels, such as *Cane* and *Quicksand*. After the Carnegie Hall scene, the narrative cuts to Mimi leaving the home she shared with Jimmie:

“Free! Free! Free!” she whispered exultantly as with firm tread she went down the steps. “Petit Jean—my own people—and happiness!” was the song in her heart as she happily strode through the dawn, the rays of the morning sun dancing lightly upon the more brilliant gold of her hair...  
(300)

The ellipsis here could suggest that Mimi ‘lives happily ever after’ or, as White as depicted throughout the novel, that things are not as simple as they seem on the surface. In *Cane*, Toomer’s ellipses contain dark secrets, such as the infanticide in “Karintha,” and they portray muddled emotion, such as indecision in “Bona and Paul.” Also, the open-ended conclusion for “Kabnis” has stumped many readers. In *Quicksand*, ellipses make a prominent appearance in moments of tension, such as when Axel Olsen, speaking in Danish, itemizes Helga’s features (71), or when Helga, in a haze of despair, hears the Harlem church congregation’s prayers for her (111), or the nurse’s reading of “The Procurator of Judea” when Helga is bedridden after her fourth child (132). Also, just before the final sentence of *Quicksand*, there is an ellipsis moment though it is not punctuated. In *Flight*, punctuated ellipsis is abundant and generally imparts a parallel move away from tension whereby a conflict is evaded for the time being. So, it is reasonable to be suspicious of an optimistic interpretation of White’s ellipses conclusion. In several ways, however, the elliptical ending is appropriate because of the questions

that remain: who are Mimi's "own people" and to where will she return? Are her own people cosmopolitan black Harlem? Are they the working-class blacks of Philadelphia? Are they the black middle-class of Atlanta? And what of the Creole heritage of which Jean was so proud? In other words, these are questions of imagined community. In each city, she experienced a distinct configuration of black identity. What is clear by the novel's end is Mimi's developed maturity regarding race, sex, and class. Also, Mimi's story can be viewed as a more adaptive version of Helga Crane's. Mimi has faced the same hypocrisy within both the black and white spheres, but Mimi could be said to have been more successful at sustaining her flight and resisting the quicksand of race, gender, and especially motherhood. In this way, the title is apt. By calling the novel *Flight*, perhaps White did not mean so much Mimi's fleeing from adversity as much as her sustained heights of autonomy and freedom.

For all the progressive elements of *Cane* and *Quicksand*, they utilize more easily recognized and accepted content or forms than *Flight* does. This is especially true of the novel's Marxist inflected commentary about American culture. *Cane* is fragmented, but its overt focus on the black folk fed into popular interest in black culture. Although *Quicksand* challenges notions of black politics and black femininity, it in part appealed to black bourgeois aesthetics while also titillating some white readers' fascination with mixed race motifs. *Flight*'s narrative form draws on the naturalist and melodramatic traditions, but its content and themes would not sit easily with much of its audience. For instance, readers looking for romantic portrayals of black folk culture will only find a few depictions: the blues 17; chain-gang song 93; honky-tonk dance 97; Negro spirituals 297. Although the folk informs Mimi's revaluation of black culture, the above scenes are

relatively short and don't quite comprise the main tone of the novel. Readers looking for middle-class themes would find them, but these readers would also find a great deal of criticism against black middle-class puritanical, hypocritical, and materialistic tendencies. Those interested in a race uplift message would enjoy the depictions of black material success, education, genial disposition, and musical artistry, but these readers would frown upon the novel's depictions of intraracial bias stemming from classism, colorism, religious bigotry, and sexism. *Flight* rejects easy treatments of race, gender, and class issues, so it was bound to want for a large, sustained audience. Now that almost a century has passed since the book's publication, readers may now have the perspective with which to take another look at Walter F. White and appreciate his narration of the journey of a fair-skinned, mixed race woman at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## CONCLUSION

While some scholars have interpreted travel and machinery as separate phenomena in the works selected here, this study examines their relative connection and influence as a mode of mixed race representation. As a result, *Here, There, and In Between* puts these texts in dialogue with traditions from which they have been excluded. First, analyzing travel in interracial literature supports the body of scholarship that argues for the intercultural basis of the Harlem Renaissance. By nature suggestive of transcendence, relativity, and change, travel analysis is ideal for studying the dichotomy of the Harlem Renaissance and Modernism. Similarly, analyzing travel in mixed race texts legitimizes their consideration in black migration studies, even as it questions the suitability of black migration symbology in mixed race poetics. Lastly, instead of reinscribing the conventional subtext of fragmentation and helplessness, a metaphorical reading of travel aligns these works with the long-standing narrative tradition of journey as epistemological process.

Revising the mixed race narrative does not mean, however, that the genre should be idealized. Many times, the protagonist half seeks and is half pushed into nomadism. But this purgatory is not without its insights. In the preceding chapters, travel enables the depiction of a variety mixed race related issues. In the selected works, travel allegorizes the quest to resolve conflicts arising from race binarism. In addition, these works chronicle tensions within black society and the effects of black reactions to white racism. Not merely concerned with mixed race issues, these novels dramatize religious prejudice, patriarchal dominance, and the destructive aspects of industrialism and capitalism. Due to their insider-outsider perspective, the mixed race characters in these works cross

boundaries of race, class, and gender, and they return with deep insights into the complexity of the Harlem Renaissance era.

In *Cane*, the presence of modern technology is significant in the rural as well as the urban setting, and not just for the debilitating effects of industrialization. A positive view of technology is the first step to comprehending the way in which critics have overlooked Toomer's excitement about modernity, technology, and America's future. Coupled with technology, the image and act of travel in *Cane* informs the performance of mixed race subjectivity, a position that was viewed as distinct from black and white in the 19th century but was collapsed into the black social status during the early 20th century because of rising racial tension. If we centralize the importance of mixed identity and travel in *Cane*, a semi-autobiographical map emerges that documents the trial and error of a multiracial man using travel to explore the possibilities of his identity and the race discourse available to him. In "The Divided Life of Jean Toomer," Alice Walker writes that *Cane* was partly a swan-song to "the 'Negro' he felt dying in himself" (65). Her comment errs by asserting that he passed for white from then on. In truth, he merely never returned to the black life of the South. In the 1930s, Toomer talked openly to his first wife, Margery Latimer, about his black ancestry and "New America" philosophy. This was also true of his second wife, Marjorie Content, in the 1940s. Additionally, his draft registration of 1942 documents him as "Negro." In effect, Toomer continued his pattern of living on both sides of the color line as he had done before traveling to Georgia. What his journey to the South did was initiate the solidification of his belief in a culture of progressive race blending. This belief became more evident upon his return to the North and famously rejected several editors' requests to classify himself according to

America's quixotic racial divide. His journey taught him that he could only look backward so much before returning to the present and begin looking forward to the exhilaration of a racially mixed future.

Pivoting as much on interracial heritage as on the objectification of the black female body, *Quicksand* critiques both white and black essentialist notions of race. Moving Helga across state lines and national borders, Larsen shifts the narratives between racialized localities to allegorize 20<sup>th</sup> century racism and black public responses to oppression. Additionally, Larsen uses the distinct visibility of the interracial character to facilitate a critique of those uplift and resistance ideologies. Her use of travel performs an insertion, in literature at least, of mixed race representation into modernist discourse—the period's questioning of individuality, its crisis between the present and tradition, and its anxious embrace of the future. We should see Helga's undertaking of travel as attempts at resistance. Rather than limit the mixed race genre as preoccupied with the past, as many scholarly interpretations would have us do, we can view it as looking toward the future. Not running away from race but running to a new conception of race identity, Helga's story cuts across national, racial, and class boundaries. In addition to resisting these strict categories of identity, her voyages connect her to and validate an interracial and transnational heritage, which Larsen uses to render an insider-outsider position and create a Gulliverian critique of racially essentialist and gender biased practices.

Challenging stereotypes of black and interracial identity and giving fresh insights into black femininity, *Flight* is a legitimate peer of *Cane* and *Quicksand*. So, why is it hardly mentioned in discussions about Harlem Renaissance literature? Surely, White's

very public role at the NAACP is a towering example of black leadership and activism, but it should not overshadow his literary work. Some scholars have argued that the craft of *Flight* does not match the quality of other great Harlem Renaissance works, but the question of craft is a criticism that has been leveled against most works of the period at one time or another. Although *Flight* may not be a perfect novel, White's dramatized critique of religious prejudice, patriarchy, colorism, and capitalism is a feat that few works of the period match. Today, we know of *Cane* and *Quicksand* not because they had never fallen out of print, but because the political climate of the 1970s and '80s made visible the cultural and historical merit of each work. In hindsight, it is understandable that a book like *Flight*, questioning turbulent forces within black society as it does, would go undiscovered during the militant black arts and black feminist aesthetics of the latter 20<sup>th</sup> century. But the cultural winds have shifted again, and *Flight* will reward our time and attention if we give it a chance. Moreover, White's novel is an example of mixed race narratives that demonstrate the clear connection between mixed race appearance, transportation, and subject development.

Although some critics might view the ideology of the authors in this study as promoting a naïve cosmopolitanism or elitist interracial eugenics,<sup>34</sup> these authors are better understood as searching for a poetics within a cultural climate where race binarism was de rigueur. In respect to that climate, we should be more impressed than we have been with their creation of a poetics that correctly anticipated the positive cultural shift and proliferation of mixed race imagery at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We can confidently estimate the vindication Toomer might have felt reading the *New York Times*

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<sup>34</sup> Interracial eugenic attitudes are also detectable in the works of Pauline Hopkins and Alain Locke.

(2003) title that pronounced the millennial generation as “Generation E.A.: Ethnically Ambiguous.” Similarly, we can imagine Larsen’s reaction to the *Times* series (2011) called “Race Remixed” that, over the course of 6 months, reported on the growing acceptance of mixed race families in America. In this climate, Walter White might not have had a reactive need to assert his blackness, or he might have more readily acknowledged the breadth of his mixed race heritage the way Toomer had. As the accounts in the above articles attest, being interracial in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is not without struggles, such as belligerent questions or presumptions about racial allegiance or heritage. But, even as being multiracial now carries the distinction of being a millennial identity—in a hundred years, mixed race identity has gone from “marginal” to “millennial”—<sup>35</sup> there is yet more work to be done in respect to travel and mixed race identity. First, travel continues as a central theme in many mixed race narratives. This is evidenced in works such as Barack Obama’s *Dreams from My Father*, Kwame Anthony Appiah’s *In My Father’s House*, and Danzy Senna’s *Caucasia*.<sup>36</sup> However, as Michele Elam warns, we should be wary of a hagiographic celebration of interracial identity as indicative of a “post-racial” era. But hagiography of this sort is clearly not a danger for the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, where the mixed race figure in literature had few champions and there were few conceptual models for appreciating its subjectivity. This dissertation does not idealize the character but merely gives it a more sensitive reading.

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<sup>35</sup> This is a reference to Park’s “marginal man.”

<sup>36</sup> Representing autobiography, cultural theory, and fiction, this sample of titles demonstrates the link between travel and mixed race identity across genres.

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