WOMEN WRITING RACELESSNESS: PERFORMATIVITY AND RACIAL ABSENCE IN TWENTIETH CENTURY WOMEN’S LITERATURE

A dissertation presented

By

Sarah Payne

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

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Abstract

Ample literary criticism exists on racial passing and multiracialism. Implicit in much of this work is that one must still identify as one or more races. However, throughout the twentieth century numerous historical figures and fictional characters try to opt out of racial categorization. Yet there is a dearth of literary scholarship on what I call “racelessness.” I define racelessness as an often temporary, frequently unsuccessful existence outside of racial categorization. Influenced by theories of performativity, I argue racelessness is determined by reciprocal negotiations and constitutive negations. Characters can actively refuse race; external forces can also impose racelessness. Many examples involve a negotiation between individual desires and dominant social beliefs about race. Additionally, racelessness rarely manifests as a verbal denial of racial identity. More often, racelessness occurs during silences, omissions, and formal gaps such as dashes and ellipses. The silences, refusals, and negations that accompany racelessness are not empty voids, but significant moments that constitute meaning.

I analyze women’s writing from the 1920s through 1960s across three geographical regions: the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and Harlem. The temporal and spatial scope illustrates how historical, political, and social conditions produce different variations of racelessness. Yet the shared history of slavery, colonialism, and racial hierarchies also creates textual similarities in seemingly disparate works. I focus on eight writers: Josephine Cogdell Schuyler, Esther Chapman, Marie Stanley, Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Eliot Bliss, Zora Neale Hurston, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. There is little scholarship on many of these authors, some of whom embodied racelessness in their own lives. The neglect of these authors is not due to literary merit, but to the fact that representing, and attempting to live out, racelessness engenders social illegibility.

Examining a range of textual genres, I develop four versions of racelessness: interracial sex,
liminal racial identities, traveling and mobility, and the subversion of class status. I also analyze how these authors grappled with race in their own lives and used literature not only to represent racelessness, but to constitute the concept itself. This dissertation aims to recuperate several under-appreciated authors and to acknowledge racelessness as a literary phenomenon. I argue racelessness is a prevalent concept in twentieth century literature, but one that has evaded our attention because of its inherent illegibility. Attending to racelessness forces us not to conflate absence with emptiness and raises the challenge of representing identities premised on negation without describing them as negative.
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Introduction

Finding Presence in Absence: The Illegibility of Racelessness

“At certain times I have no race, I am me.”
Zora Neale Hurston, “How it Feels to Be Colored Me” (1928)

“[…] that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race.”
Nella Larsen, Quicksand (1928)

In 1924, Leonard “Kip” Rhinelander wed Alice Jones. Their relationship seemed to be the stuff of fairytales: a poor, working class woman swept off her feet and saved from poverty by a charming, well-to-do man. The Rhinelander family of New York had money, power, and influence. Alice, a maid, had none of these. As detailed in Earl Lewis and Heidi Ardizzone’s Love on Trial: An American Scandal in Black and White (2001), Kip’s family was opposed to their relationship because of class differences, but Kip persisted. Indeed, once word spread of their marriage, front-page headlines broadcast the union between a “society youth” and a “cabman’s daughter” (“Society Youth Weds”). Yet a month later, under intense pressure from his father, Kip filed for an annulment. What happened to the Rhinelander couple? As it turns out, their marriage not only crossed class lines, but racial ones as well.

In the annulment complaint, Kip accused Alice of defrauding him by lying about her race. During their courtship, Alice supposedly let Kip think she was white when in fact she was mixed race. A media frenzy erupted, with newspapers across the country reporting “Kip
Rhinelander Sues ‘Dusky’ Wife” and “Bride Denies Being of Negro Ancestry.” As the case continued, the Rhinelander marriage became one of the top ten news stories of 1925 (Ehlers 2). Alice’s father was in fact mixed race, but in order to convict her of fraud, the court had to decide whether or not Kip knew Alice was mixed race before their marriage. They’d had premarital sex and Alice’s physical features, the court argued, would determine her race. Thus Alice was forced to strip before the white, all male jury so they could determine if her body revealed supposedly black traits. On seeing her bare breasts, the jury ruled Kip must have known she was black. Alice was acquitted, but she still paid a high price (Lewis and Ardizzone).

The Rhinelander case exemplifies the confluence of legal, social, and biological definitions of race that pervaded the era. During the 1920s, anti-immigration legislation increased; “mulatto” was removed from the U.S. census, reinforcing a black/white binary; and Ku Klux Klan membership reached an all time high (Benn Michaels). As white women and African Americans advocated for increasing social and political rights, white men in particular felt their power threatened. A slew of regulatory efforts, both legal and extralegal, developed to police identity. Census categories, lynchings, and official legislation were just a few methods that attempted to define and control the bounds of racial identity. Anyone who defied categorization was a threat.

With limited options for racial identity, some struggled or even flat out refused to fit into a black/white binary. Alice Jones’s family was listed as white in the 1915 census, though her father’s naturalization papers listed him as “colored” (Ehlers 75). Members of the community were unable to decide if Alice and her family were white or black. Jean Toomer, a well-known Harlem Renaissance writer, was similarly ambiguous and he chose black or white on various occasions.

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government documents as it suited him (Byrd and Gates xi-lxx). In fact, authors during the 1920s peppered their writing with statements such as “I belong to no race nor time” (Hurston, “How it Feels”) and a female character notes the “blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (Larsen 114).

Those who want to refuse race seem to be responding to the racial hysteria in the U.S. Yet we also encounter similar themes in more racially fluid societies, such as Latin America and the Caribbean. Mexican writer and politician, Jose Vasconcelos, published La raza cosmica (The Cosmic Race) in 1925. In La raza cosmica, Vasconcelos imagines a “fifth race,” one that is in fact no race. Vasconcelos’s “fifth race” echoes Toomer’s idea of an “American race” that transcended color (Hutchinson, “Jean Toomer and American Racial Discourse”). Literature from the Caribbean, a region scholars often associate with racial hybridity and creolization, evinces similar themes, as characters wish to be “sexless, creedless, classless, free” (Bliss, Luminous Isle 371). Having more options for race doesn’t necessarily make someone want to participate in racial classification. The concept of refusing race, however, has received little scholarly attention, particularly in literary studies. While there is a wealth of scholarship on racial passing, multiracialism, and creolization in literature, what I call “racelessness” has yet to be fully acknowledged or understood.

I define racelessness as an often temporary, frequently unsuccessful existence outside of racial categorization. My theory of racelessness relies on two concepts: “constitutive negation” and “reciprocal negotiation.” “Constitutive negation” refers to silences, absences, and refusals that are not empty voids, but rather substantive moments that constitute meaning. Racelessness rarely manifests as an explicit denial of racial identity; it is an inherently illegible concept that seldom appears in obvious ways. More often, racelessness occurs during silences, omissions, and
formal gaps such as dashes and ellipses. I see these absences and silences as efforts to constitute meaning when language fails. There was, and is, no widespread, consistent vocabulary with which to address racelessness.

Racelessness hinges on absence and consequently, the very idea of racelessness often registers as nonexistent. In *The Dark Matter of Words: Absence, Unknowing, and Emptiness in Literature* (1998), Timothy Walsh argues, “many critics view absence in literary works as either debilitating and confusing or as a symptom of bankruptcy of meaning” (14). Absence in literature is often synonymous with failure, and failure typically does not garner critical attention. Though racelessness is constituted by absence and is therefore negative in a quantitative sense, I don’t view racelessness as negative in a qualitative sense. To elaborate, racelessness may be premised on negation, but that negation doesn’t signal a “bankruptcy of meaning” or failure on the part of the text or author. Instead, these silences, refusals, and absences are significant instances of knowledge production.

However, racelessness is not solely about one individual eschewing race. In defining racelessness, I purposely use the word “existence,” as opposed to a more agentic term like “refusal,” to indicate the reciprocal negotiation involved in racelessness. Characters can actively refuse race, but external forces can also impose racelessness. As shown in the Rhinelander case, race is never solely about personal identification; race also hinges on social recognition. Subsequently, racelessness relies to an extent on external social beliefs. Characters who defy social norms, for example, might be relegated to racelessness by society, even if that wasn’t their intention.

Theories of performativity suggest that identity is a negotiation between individual agency and external social forces. According to Judith Butler, gender performativity is “not a
radical choice or project that reflects a merely individual choice, but neither is it imposed or inscribed upon the individual” (526). Similar to racelessness, performativity involves a negotiation between individual choice and proscribed social norms. Butler distinguishes performativity from performance, noting that gender performativity is the “stylized repetition of acts through time, and not a seemingly seamless identity” (520). In other words, one is not born a gender, but acts and walks and talks in ways that consolidate the appearance of a gender. Yet gender identity is not simply a ceaseless repetition of socialized behavior. Instead, the “possibilities of gender transformation are to be found in the arbitrary relation between such acts, in the possibility of a different sort of repeating, in the breaking or subversive repetition of that style” (ibid). While gender identity may be built on reiterating gendered norms, one can also expose the constructed nature of gender by failing to repeat these norms or repeating them differently.

Gender and race are not the same thing, however. Though they are mutually constitutive identity categories, they do not carry the same histories of oppression. In *Performing Americanness: Race, Class, and Gender in Modern African-American and Jewish-American Literature* (2008), Catherine Rottenberg argues against simply transposing Butler’s version of performativity onto race, as the regulatory norms for race and gender are different. I agree with Rottenberg, but also view racial and gendered norms as intersecting. Rather than position racial and gendered performativity as two separate categories, I see them as interlocking. For example, the categories of “white” and “woman” might each have their own regulatory norms, but white women also encounter norms specific to their racial *and* gendered positions.
In recent scholarship, performativity has become somewhat of a buzzword. As Kendall Gerdes argues in “Performativity” (2014), “a rhetoric of performativity has developed that strips it of this theoretical heritage and turns it into a tool for defending the power of the subject, through the conscious presence of agential intention” (148). By “theoretical heritage,” Gerdes refers to performativity’s usage by Butler and J.L. Austin in which “descriptive language’s performativity—what it does—calls into question its referentiality—what it seems to point to in the world” (ibid). Performativity is not a catch-all term nor should we conflate it with performance. In my efforts to engage more rigorously with performativity, I emphasize the sense of negation and disruption it entails. More specifically, I focus on how racelessness disrupts, however momentarily, the iterative processes that ultimately consolidate the effect of being a race. As Rottenberg notes, “to remain viable within a society, a subject must cite and mime the very norms that created her intelligibility in the first place” (6). Racelessness defies legibility, and while the raceless subject may be less viable, she also disrupts the iterative process that would constitute her as a recognizable race. I use the term “performative negation” to emphasize the silences, absences, and illegibility that can disrupt performative norms and create a raceless identity.

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Because racelessness is not a commonly used word, a note on terminology is warranted. I use phrases like “race refusal” to indicate intentional, agentic forms of racelessness. In these instances, characters desire racelessness and often make choices to incur racelessness. Not all raceless characters want to be raceless, however. When external forces impose racelessness, I use “racial absence” to signify the lack of choice or desire involved. “Racelessness” encompasses the spectrum of options, both agentic and not. I prefer racelessness because it can refer to both
chosen and imposed identities. The term is also useful because its linguistic structure parallels its conceptual meaning. In other words, racelessness is an identity premised on absence. As a word, the “ness” of racelessness, its presence, relies on the “less,” its absence.

It’s important to note that others use the term “racelessness,” albeit to refer to a different phenomenon. Raceless writing, according to Emily Bernard, “largely focuses on black writers whose works have white protagonists” (89). Similarly, Deborah Barnes defines raceless writing as black authors’ “mimesis of white aesthetics and domestic values” (990). Anthropologists such as Signithia Fordham use racelessness to refer to black students who mimic white cultural norms (“Racelessness as a Factor”). These versions of racelessness perhaps unintentionally position blackness as the marked racial other and whiteness as a blank slate. Racelessness implicitly equals whiteness.

However, my version of racelessness evades all racial categories, not just blackness. A broader conception of racelessness challenges, rather than reinforces, white superiority. Analyzing white characters who embody racelessness reveals how one might deliberately destabilize white identity in favor of a more ambiguous racial status. Whiteness might not be universally desirable, which undermines its primacy. There are also instances of mixed race characters who are light-skinned enough to pass for white. Yet they do not pass for white or identify as black for that matter. Instead, they prefer a liminal racial identity and reject the privileges of whiteness. Defining racelessness as an evasion of all racial categories, not just blackness, places whiteness within the realm of race. Whiteness is not natural, unmarked, or disconnected from questions of race, but constructed, refused, and subject to subversion.

Naomi Zack and Carlos Hoyt take a similarly broad view of racelessness. In Race and Mixed Race (1993), Zack refers to the “racelessness of being mixed race in a biracial system”
Within a black/white racial binary, Zack argues, mixed race individuals occupy a liminal, raceless status. Carlos Hoyt, in *The Arc of a Bad Idea: Understanding and Transcending Race* (2016), uses the term “race transcendence” to indicate the “deliberate renunciation of race” (68). Both Zack and Hoyt’s work is fundamental in theorizing a material, lived version of racelessness, particularly since I analyze authors’ biographies as well as their writing. However, Zack is a philosopher and Hoyt is a social worker; they do not apply their theories to representational forms of racelessness such as those found in literature.

Analyzing literature illuminates the role that cultural forms of representation such as novels and poems play in constructing identities. In other words, literature shapes not only our understandings of race, but also of how one might refuse race. Given that racelessness is an elusive concept for which we have no established vocabulary, literature plays a particularly important role in shaping racelessness. I agree with Stuart Hall when he argues that “how things are represented […] in a culture do play a constitutive, and not merely a reflexive, after-the-event, role” (444). In other words, literature does not simply reflect or represent an external reality, but helps to construct reality itself. To be sure, identities, events, and power structures have real effects beyond the realm of literature, but as Hall notes, it is “only within the discursive” that they “have or can they be constructed within meaning” (ibid). Literature, as an example of the discursive, produces not only knowledge about racelessness, but racelessness itself. In the face of legal, scientific, and political discourse that seeks to define racial identity, often in service of white patriarchal authority, it’s crucial to examine how literature can imagine racial possibilities that defy classificatory schema.

Given that racelessness often responds to white, patriarchal power structures, gender remains crucial in understanding how racelessness manifests. While not an exclusively female
occurrence, I limit my scope to racelessness as it was lived and represented by women. For women, the stakes of racelessness are higher, particularly during the early twentieth century. Dominant cultural norms expected women to uphold feminine modesty. Black women, for example, faced pressure to espouse a politics of respectability and participate in racial uplift.\textsuperscript{2} White women encountered a different set of expectations; their reproductive capacities positioned them as gatekeepers to whiteness and their sexuality was strictly policed by white patriarchal power (Kennedy). Defying regulatory norms, whether in their lives or writing, carried different consequences for women than men. An analysis of how men occupied raceless identities is certainly warranted. However, women writers had to contend with the various constructions of female sexuality, the doubled oppression of women of color, and the material conditions that affect women’s lives and writing. Analyzing women writers allows me to define more clearly how racelessness operates across racial, gendered, and classed lines.

I focus on eight authors: Josephine Cogdell Schuyler, Esther Chapman, Marie Stanley, Jean Rhys, Nella Larsen, Eliot Bliss, Zora Neale Hurston, and Georgia Douglas Johnson. Though Rhys, Larsen, and Hurston are well known, there is a dearth of scholarship on many of these women. The lack of criticism is not due to literary merit, but to the historical exclusion of women from the literary canon. These women addressed difficult topics in ways that weren’t legible to the rest of society. Writing subversive material often required these women make themselves illegible; many used pseudonyms, changed their names, or published anonymously. Male authors did not face the same pressure to distance themselves from their work.

Attending to these women’s lives, in addition to their work, highlights the relationship between lived and represented racelessness. All of these authors depicted racelessness in their writing, and some of them also embodied it in their own lives. While debates about the connection between authors and their writing are numerous, I agree with Philip Holden when he suggests the “self isn’t fully formed prior to narrativization, but is constructed through a continually reiterated and revised narrative” (921). Those who wrote about racelessness were at times producing it in their own lives. Given that several of these authors are not well known, emphasizing their biographies helps to recover their identities and their work. Including biographical details also demonstrates the material consequences of lived racelessness, the imaginative possibilities of fictional racelessness, and the reciprocal relationship between the two realms.

Despite the obscurity of many of these women, however, they are all connected, sometimes quite intimately and at other times more tangentially. Esther Chapman traveled to Harlem when Josephine Cogdell Schuyler lived there; Josephine’s husband also reviewed one of Chapman’s novels. Contemporary reviews compared Marie Stanley and Esther Chapman’s novels and Josephine likened Stanley’s work to Larsen’s. Jean Rhys maintained a long friendship with Eliot Bliss while Hurston attended a literary salon at Johnson’s house. The thread connecting these women and their writing indicates racelessness was not a random occurrence in literature, but an established phenomenon. Though these authors may not have explicitly discussed racelessness, they were aware of each other’s work to varying extents. I not only bring renewed attention to many neglected writers, but also emphasize that racelessness is far from a random occurrence. Instead, literary racelessness was born out of specific gendered, historical, and cultural contexts.
The earliest work I examine is Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Bronze* (1922) and the latest is Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966). I associate many of the texts in my project with literary modernism, though I realize some of the later works fall outside the typical bounds of modernism. While many scholars end literary modernism in 1939 or even 1945, I agree with Susan Stanford Friedman when she argues these dates privilege a Eurocentric version of modernism.³ Extending modernism’s temporal scope allows us to consider modernisms that are not exclusively white, male, or metropolitan. I recognize that *Wide Sargasso Sea*’s 1966 publication date is still a stretch for modernism, though it’s worth noting Rhys began the novel nearly a decade earlier. Ultimately, however, I am less interested in forcing the selected texts to align with a specific literary period. Instead, I am invested in demonstrating how racelessness transcends periodization. While racelessness seems to have been heightened in modernist literature, it by no means ended with modernism. Instead, it appears throughout the twentieth century.⁴

In addition to a wide temporal scope, I also examine texts from a range of geographical regions. Many of the authors I discuss moved around during their lives, but their writing is largely associated with Harlem, the U.S. South, and the Caribbean. I center on these three regions to have a more hemispheric understanding of modernism. Just as temporal demarcations often delimit what counts as modernist, spatial definitions frequently privilege North American and European modernisms. Even within the U.S., Southern literature has historically been

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³ In “Definitional Excursions: The Meanings of Modern/Modernity/Modernism” (2001), Friedman suggests postcolonial modernization began in 1947 with India’s independence from Britain and continued into the 1950s and 60s as African and Caribbean colonies gained freedom from colonial rule (427).
⁴ For example, Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996) and James McBride’s *The Color of Water* (1995) are two late twentieth century texts that I see as engaging with racelessness.
viewed as rural, backwards, and decidedly un-modern (Duck). My inclusion of texts from the Caribbean and the U.S. South expands our view of when and where modernism occurred and demonstrates that while these regions are distinct, they are also closely linked.

Recent trends in Southern Studies also highlight the connections between the U.S. South, the Caribbean, and Latin America. Jessica Adams suggests that to isolate the U.S. South from the region just below it is to ignore the “long and indeed well-documented, as well as ongoing, history of interactions between Caribbean islands and southern states” (2). Additionally, slavery’s legacy connects the U.S. South to cities further north; the Great Migration saw large numbers of African Americans leaving the South for Northern and Midwestern metropolises during the early twentieth century. There are distinct national and regional differences between the Caribbean, the U.S. South, and Harlem. Yet slavery’s legacy intertwines these regions and the regulatory role of race remains a pervasive thread that connects diverse locations.

The Caribbean was colonized by an array of other countries and to speak of the Caribbean is to acknowledge a range of cultural and political influences. Attending to the diverse languages, cultures, and conceptions of race in the Caribbean is crucial for a fuller understanding of literary racelessness. However, analyzing the entire range of influences in the Caribbean is beyond the scope of this project and I acknowledge that more scholarship is needed on racelessness in the Caribbean. I center on the British Caribbean in part because of my own linguistic limitations. Racelessness has yet to be fully theorized in English literary studies and translating primary texts from other languages would introduce added complexity at an early stage.

The British Caribbean is also a fruitful starting point to examine Caribbean racelessness because of its connection to the U.S. South. Suzanne Bost, for example, specifically links the
southeastern U.S. to the British Caribbean, arguing that the plantation system operated quite similarly in both regions. Despite the supposedly greater degree of racial fluidity and tolerance in the Caribbean, Bost suggests the British Caribbean was still hierarchical, exclusive, and violent (98). Yet the British Caribbean did display a racial fluidity unlike the U.S. Mervyn Alleyne points to the social dimension of race in Jamaica, for instance, arguing, “Jamaica is more ideological and open in terms of race” (233). There were also instances of individuals applying to change their race in Jamaica, implying far more racial flexibility than the U.S. 5 The British Caribbean has a history of both rigid, violent racial hierarchies and a great degree of racial fluidity.

Raceless characters in British Caribbean literature often negotiate between more and less restrictive understandings of race. Caribbean literature portrays a version of racelessness influenced by colonialism and non-binary racial schema; racelessness is not solely a response to U.S. binary racial logic. Instead, colonialisitc forces often used national identity to signify race. Dominant racial logics, for example, equated whiteness with Englishness, demonstrating that one’s race is also a matter of nationality and physical geography (Lambert). Racelessness is subsequently not only about racial absence, but about spatial absence as well. Raceless characters in the Caribbean often lose their sense of national belonging. Analyzing texts from a broad geographical and temporal framework, I develop four versions of racelessness: interracial sex, liminal racial identity, travel and mobility, and subverting class status.

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My first chapter examines Josephine Cogdell Schuyler and Esther Chapman. Cogdell Schuyler was a white heiress from Texas who moved to New York City in 1927. She soon

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5 I discuss this phenomenon further in Chapter One in reference to the poet Francis Williams. See Vincent Carretta, “Who Was Francis Williams?” (2003).
married George Schuyler, a prominent black intellectual during the Harlem Renaissance. Due to the stigma of interracial sex, Cogdell Schuyler never brought her husband or biracial daughter home to meet her family. In her poems and essays from the 1920s and 30s, she frequently addresses the difficulties of maintaining an interracial relationship. Because of the one-drop rule, which viewed blackness as a transmittable contaminant, Josephine’s whiteness was tainted via interracial sex. Her whiteness was no longer pure. However, she wasn’t considered black either. Instead, as I argue, interracial sex allowed Cogdell Schuyler to occupy a raceless identity somewhere between white and black.

Esther Chapman’s novel *Too Much Summer* (1953) addresses similar themes. Chapman was a white woman born in England who spent most of her life in Jamaica. *Too Much Summer* follows Lloyd Bremerton, a white woman seeking refuge in Jamaica during WWI. Lloyd begins an extramarital affair with a mixed race man and her life starts to unravel. Her husband divorces her and assumes custody of their children and she sees no point in returning to England. Instead, she remains in Jamaica, disgraced because of her promiscuity and alcoholism. Lloyd’s interracial affair taints her whiteness and ultimately results in the loss of traditional markers of white upper-class Englishness. Analyzing Cogdell Schuyler and Chapman’s works, I argue white women who engaged in interracial sex disrupted the citational practices of white femininity and occupied raceless subjectivities. Their racelessness produces an illegibility that is both liberating and isolating. These white women could imagine possibilities beyond the strict bounds of racial and gendered norms; however, transgressing these norms often cost them personal relationships and artistic recognition.

Chapter Two turns from the participants in interracial sex to the products of interracial sex. Marie Stanley, a white author from Alabama, emphasizes the liminality of mixed race
individuals in her novel *Gulf Stream* (1930). The novel’s biracial protagonist, Adele, struggles to find a sense of belonging within the black/white binary of Southern Alabama. “Mulattos,” as they were called at the time, were not legally recognized. In literature, they often passed for white or accepted the dominant view that they were black. Stanley utilizes the tragic mulatto trope common in early twentieth century literature. Adele seems to conform to racial stereotypes of mixed race women. However, Stanley also subverts the tragic mulatto trope; Adele avoids the tragic fate we expect. Ultimately, Adele refuses to identify herself racially, maintaining an ambiguous racial subjectivity. Adele appeals to both black and white audiences, yet she denies both any answers as to where, and with whom, she belongs. Rather than choose between binary racial options, Adele rejects them both, occupying what I argue is a raceless identity.

I pair *Gulf Stream* with Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), often considered a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). *Wide Sargasso Sea* focuses on the first Mrs. Rochester, or Antoinette as she’s known in the novel. Antoinette is a white creole: a white person born in the Caribbean. She struggles to belong to either white English society or nonwhite Caribbean communities. Rhys herself was a white creole who moved to England and she often expressed a sense of dislocation and an inability to belong anywhere. Though not mixed race, Antoinette occupies a similarly liminal position as *Gulf Stream*’s Adele. She is not white like her European counterparts nor is she black or colored like much of the Caribbean population. Additionally, Antoinette both suffers and benefits from white colonialist power structures. As a woman, she is often treated as an object to be exchanged between men, yet she also capitalizes on her racial privilege to assert her authority over black characters in the novel. Like Adele, Antoinette refuses to identify herself racially and instead strategically uses silence or vague answers to thwart our ability to define her. She occupies a raceless position between colonizer
and colonized, English and Caribbean. Stanley and Rhys illustrate the power of silence and negation to disrupt performative norms. Their novels demonstrate how binary options for identity might provoke a rejection of both options rather than a choice between them.

Jean Rhys maintained a close friendship with Eliot Bliss who, along with Nella Larsen, is the subject of my third chapter. Bliss was a Jamaican-born white creole who later moved to England. Her novel *Luminous Isle* (1934) follows Emmeline (Em) Hibbert, a white creole who moves to England and then returns to Jamaica as a young woman. Em finds the insular white community in Jamaica suffocating and she continually travels throughout the island to find mental and physical stimulation. Her travels bring her in contact with non-whites and allow her to explore her desire for other women. Many white characters disdain Em’s traveling; throughout the novel, white women’s movement is seen as transgressing various social norms. Em ultimately returns to England, but it’s unclear if she will remain there permanently or if she is simply trying to evade the restrictive white society in Jamaica. Her frequent travels enable her to adopt different identities in each location. Because the meanings of racial identity vary according to location, refusing to settle in one place also makes it more difficult to fix one’s racial identity. Em’s continuous movement subsequently enables her to adopt a raceless identity.

Helga Crane, the protagonist of Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928) engages in a similar migratory journey. The daughter of a white Danish woman and a black West Indian father, Helga struggles to find a sense of belonging in either the black or white world. Her narrative begins in the U.S. South where she then travels to Chicago, New York, Denmark, back to New York, and ultimately returns to the South. In each location, Helga’s racial identity acquires a different meaning. In the South, racial uplift is a central tenet of black identity and Helga spurns the assimilationist stance of the school she works at. In Harlem, Helga finds more race pride amid
the flourishing black cultural renaissance. In Denmark, however, Helga is the only black person and simultaneously enjoys and eschews her exoticized status. None of these models of racial identity prove satisfying for long though. Helga’s continual travels represent her avoidance of any one racial option. Instead, she desires freedom from racial categorization. Yet Helga’s racelessness proves more difficult to sustain than Em Hibbert’s. Helga ultimately becomes mired in the roles of wife and mother and the novel implies she dies in childbirth. Em’s whiteness and financial means enable her to keep traveling when Helga cannot. Racelessness is then partially contingent on socioeconomic status and often relies on the very categories it seeks to escape.

My final chapter centers on Zora Neale Hurston and Georgia Douglas Johnson, two influential black writers in the Harlem Renaissance. Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948) and Johnson’s collection of poems *Bronze* (1922) illustrate how socioeconomic status constructs racial identity and thus racelessness. *Seraph on the Suwanee* follows Arvay Henson, a poor white woman living in Florida who goes on to marry the upwardly mobile Jim Meserve. Throughout the novel, Arvay’s “cracker” origins strain her marriage; the novel portrays her poor origins as a genetic disorder that must be eradicated. Arvay continually fails to embody the mythologized Southern belle that represents normative, upwardly mobile whiteness. Only after she burns down her childhood home, essentially destroying evidence of her former poverty, can she be a proper wife to Jim. Poor whites were frequently seen as inferior to financially secure whites, yet often strove to distinguish themselves from blacks as well. Unlike many other characters in this project, Arvay’s trajectory is not one from a raced identity into racelessness. Instead, Arvay leaves her raceless, poor white origins behind in favor of a raced, normative version of whiteness.
In contrast to Hurston, Georgia Douglas Johnson strategically adopted a genteel authorial position and her poetry expresses sentiments of love, religious faith, and nature. Many viewed Johnson’s poetry as apolitical and actually classified her work as “raceless,” in that she didn’t seem to address the topic of race. Yet Johnson used her ostensibly conventional poetry to address more radical views on race, specifically racelessness. In *Bronze*, Johnson utilizes nature imagery to represent the elimination of racial categories. Johnson’s seemingly conventional poetry, and her adherence to gendered and racial norms, resulted in her poetry being misread during its contemporary moment. Hurston and Johnson mobilize different socioeconomic positions, yet both reveal how racial identity, and therefore racelessness, is in part determined by financial means. Furthermore, attending to class status also illustrates how racelessness might be liberating for some, but for others, racelessness can exacerbate the social stigma incurred by poverty.

I suggest literary racelessness has received less attention than racial passing or multiracialism because it is a difficult concept to represent. However, the elusiveness and inscrutability of racelessness does not indicate failure or lack of merit on the author’s part. Racelessness is an inherently illegible concept. The very terms we use to discuss racelessness are themselves raced. In other words, it is impossible to examine racelessness without also invoking race. Linguistically, it remains challenging to articulate racelessness or represent it in literature. Actually trying to embody racelessness is even more complex and potentially dangerous. To locate and understand racelessness, we must acknowledge that it, like race, pervades a variety of discursive realms. If we are to recognize racelessness as its own phenomenon, and to understand its relation to other forms of identity and power structures, we must consult a wide array of sources including, novels, poems, diaries, letters, newspaper articles, and official legislation. Using New Historicist, archival, and biographical methods, I seek to expand the modernist canon
in two ways: first, by bringing attention to under-studied women writers and second, by adding a much-needed analysis of racelessness to the extant scholarship on modernism and race. My grouping of authors from Harlem, the U.S. South, and the Caribbean demonstrates the importance of modernisms that are not exclusively, white, male, or metropolitan. Drawing on theories of performativity and intersectionality, I contend with the various axes of power that not only influence the identities women choose, but the ones they refuse as well. I argue racelessness is a prevalent concept in twentieth century literature, but one that has evaded our attention because of its inherent illegibility. Attending to racelessness forces us not to elide absence with emptiness and raises the challenge of representing identities premised on negation without describing them as negative.
Chapter One
Not Quite White: Josephine Cogdell Schuyler, Esther Chapman, and Interracial Sex

“I decided to marry X if he would have me and become a member of a race which was daily forced to be humble.”
-Anonymous (Josephine Cogdell Schuyler), “The Fall of a Fair Confederate” (1930)

“Perhaps if you remain in this country, and have several lovers, you will grow less fastidious, less white. You will no longer be an Englishwoman. You are now.”
-Esther Chapman, Too Much Summer (1953)

In January 1928, Josephine Cogdell, a Texas native living in New York City, married George Schuyler. Though they remained married until Josephine’s death in 1969, she never took George home to meet her family. Their daughter, Philippa, also never met her mother’s family. The reason? Interracial sex. Josephine was a white heiress whose family was involved in the Ku Klux Klan while George was one of the most prominent black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance. Bringing George to Texas posed a serious danger, as the dominant racial logic of the time viewed black men as rapists eager to compromise white women’s sexual purity. Whites often engaged in extralegal racial terrorism to maintain what they deemed an appropriate degree of racial segregation. Traveling to Texas together would put both of their lives at risk. Despite the ideological climate in which she was raised, however, Josephine believed that by marrying George, she could “step into blackness” (Kaplan 126). Josephine didn’t alter her appearance, so why would her marriage make her blacker? The same reason she couldn’t bring George to Texas: interracial sex. Whites viewed blackness as a sexually transmittable contaminant that could taint the supposed purity of white blood. According to this logic, interracial sex made Josephine less white.
These attitudes towards interracial sex weren’t limited to rural areas in the South. Diverse locations across the U.S., from Harlem to Arizona, witnessed social stigma and even legal efforts to prevent interracial sex. Even the Caribbean, vaunted because of its ostensibly more flexible racial categories, also experienced efforts to restrict interracial interaction. However, I want to shift the attention away from white men who sought to police interracial sex and therefore the racial hierarchy. Such a focus positions white women as objects to be protected, exchanged, or competed for. Instead, I center on the white women who exercised varying degrees of agency in choosing to engage in interracial sex and transgress social norms. These women were aware of the consequences of their actions and persisted regardless, challenging both white male authority and the social construction of racial and gendered identity.

Given the taboos surrounding interracial sex, it’s unsurprising that literature during the early twentieth century addressed racial mixing. A writer herself, Josephine often used her poetry to critique the social stigma surrounding interracial marriage. Esther Chapman, a white English expatriate who spent most of her life in Jamaica, used her writing for similar purposes, particularly in her novels *Study in Bronze* (1928) and *Too Much Summer* (1953). Though Chapman may not have engaged in interracial sex herself, much of her writing addresses interracial sex from a variety of perspectives and even denounces the hysteria regarding racial mixing.

Comparing Josephine’s poems from the 1920s and 30s with Chapman’s *Too Much Summer* might seem disjointed. Over twenty years passed between the authors’ works and Josephine’s poems stem from her experiences in both the U.S. South and Harlem. Chapman’s fiction largely focuses on the Caribbean and the experiences of English expatriates. Despite the temporal, spatial, and formal differences in Cogdell Schuyler and Chapman’s works, pairing the
two demonstrates the extent to which interracial sex allowed white women to embody a raceless identity. In other words, interracial sex made white women less white, but it didn’t necessarily make them black. Instead, these white women occupied a liminal racial status that was in fact a raceless status. Josephine, however, actually engaged in interracial sex whereas Chapman represents fictional interracial relationships. Yet it’s important to examine both lived and fictional racelessness, as literature does not merely reflect racelessness, but helps constitute the concept itself. Given that no established vocabulary exists for those who refuse racial identity, fictional racelessness can both depict and shape our understanding of racial absence.

Pairing Cogdell Schuyler and Chapman also demonstrates the paradoxical privilege and loss associated with white women who represent or participate in interracial sex. Their whiteness does not exist in isolation, but is intimately connected to other facets of their identity. Subverting their whiteness via interracial sex subsequently allows these women to destabilize other aspects of their identity such as gender and class. By refusing race, these women can imagine possibilities for remaking oneself beyond the strict boundaries governing white femininity. If we view racelessness as liberating and enabling this kind of self-fashioning, white women seem to access this freedom more easily than women of color.

By the same token, however, this liberation frequently entails a fragmentation and loss of identity, as demonstrated by Josephine’s obscure writings under pseudonyms and Chapman’s protagonist who loses her sense of national identity. The personal costs of embodying or representing racelessness may affect the recognition of each author’s work. In fact, very little scholarship exists on either author. With the exception of Carla Kaplan’s Miss Anne in Harlem
Scholarship on Chapman is even scarcer, though she does appear briefly in Evelyn O’Callaghan’s work. I view this dearth of scholarship as less to do with literary merit and more to do with the role of racelessness in their works. The illegibility of racelessness as a concept can contribute to the illegibility of an author and her work.

It is ironic that the ideological construction of white womanhood as vulnerable to contamination via interracial sex allows these women to occupy a position that is not quite white, black, or interracial. To elaborate, the strict policing of the black/white racial binary inevitably results in identities that defy that very binary. Yet I also question why white women or characters would knowingly endanger their privileged racial position. Romantic and sexual motivations aside, I argue that white women who engage in interracial sex break with the citational practices of white femininity and undermine the notion of whiteness as something to strive towards. These instances of interracial sex serve as a method of disrupting the iterative processes of performativity and exposing the constructed nature of the racial hierarchy.

Weddings Bans: Outlawing Interracial Marriage

To fully grasp the stakes of engaging in or representing black/white interracial sex, it’s crucial to understand the long history of anti-miscegenation laws in the U.S. and the taboo

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6 In addition to Kaplan’s work, Bob Kent’s *A Rebel Lady in Harlem* (2016) is useful in understanding Josephine’s biography. Kathryn Talalay’s biography of Philippa, *Composition in Black in White* (1995), makes frequent mention of Josephine.

against interracial sex. The Virginia Act to Preserve Racial Integrity (1924), for example, decreed:

It shall hereafter be unlawful for any white person in this state to marry any save a white person, or a person with no other admixture of blood than white and American Indian. For the purpose of this act, the term “white person” shall apply only to the person who has no trace whatsoever of any blood other than Caucasian; but persons who have one-sixteenth or less of the blood of the American Indian and have no other non-caucasic blood shall be deemed to be white persons. All laws heretofore passed and now in effect regarding the intermarriage of white and colored persons shall apply to marriages prohibited by this act.

Similar laws throughout the country abounded. A marriage law from Arizona in 1913 declared: “All marriages of persons of Caucasian blood, or their descendants, with negroes, Mongolians, or Indians, and their descendants, shall be null and void” (“‘Marriage and Divorce’”). The frequent mention of blood recalls how biology and science were deployed in service of racial oppression. As Shawn Salvant notes in Blood Work: Imagining Race in American Literature, 1890-1940 (2015), “racial blood discourse not only provided the terminology by which Americans codified and legislated the color line […], but, even more critically, this discourse provided the terminology for constructing this division between blackness and whiteness through the invention and enforcement of punishable acts of interracial sex” (15). Furthermore, beliefs about racial blood positioned black blood as a contaminant, which could threaten the supposed purity of white blood.

The notion of contagion is also fundamental to the infamous “one-drop rule” in the U.S., which determined racial identity based on the supposedly quantifiable amount of black or white blood one had.⁸ One drop of black blood, or any degree of black ancestry, made one black. One

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⁸ For further reading on the one drop rule, see F. James Davis, Who is Black?: One Nation’s Definition (1991) and Scott Malcolmson, One Drop of Blood: The American Misadventure of Race (2000).
drop of white blood, however, was not sufficient to claim a white identity if non-white ancestry existed. The black/white racial binary operated asymmetrically; whiteness could be contaminated by blackness, but not vice versa. Gender created further asymmetry, as white men sought to limit white women’s sexuality but to enable their own.

Generally speaking, white men did not face the same social stigma as white women who engaged in interracial relationships. Critics posit different reasons why this phenomenon most often applies to white women. Baz Dreisinger, for example, argues in *Near Black: White-to-Black Passing in American Culture* (2008) that the “transformative power of interracial sex more often applies to white women,” partially because authentic blackness is often associated with black men (72, 81). In other words, “true” femininity is associated with whiteness, while black men appear more inherently masculine. Randall Kennedy, in “The Enforcement of Anti-Miscegenation Laws” (2000), points to another reason white women often faced harsher punishment than white men: white women were seen as the protectors of white racial purity because of their reproductive capacity. White women faced specific restrictions pertaining to racial and gendered behavior, particularly regarding sex. As the gatekeepers to whiteness, white women incurred more severe consequences if they failed to uphold racial purity.

It’s important to note that white women weren’t simply passive victims of white male authority; they often capitalized on their racial and gendered positions to engage in racist acts of violence as well. The grisly spectacle of lynchings included white women as active participants in the violence rather than just passive pawns in white men’s attempts to reinforce racial oppression.9 Literature of the early twentieth century reflects the danger white women posed to

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9 According to Grace Elizabeth Hale in *Making Whiteness*, a white woman named Mrs. Cranford demanded that Sam Hose be burned before her eyes and another white woman stabbed Claude Neal in the chest during his lynching (232). For further reading on white women’s participation
black men. William Faulkner’s racially ambiguous Joe Christmas, the protagonist of *Light in August* (1932), is lynched because of his relationship with the white Joanna Burden. Jean Toomer’s “Portrait in Georgia,” which appears in his novel *Cane* (1923), also reflects the connection between white women’s sexuality and black men’s bodily vulnerability:

Hair—braided chestnut,  
coiled like a lyncher’s rope,  

Eyes—fagots  

Lips—old scars, or the first red blisters,  
Breath—the last sweet scent of cane,  
And her slim body, white as the ash  
of black flesh after flame.

The white woman’s physical features, which we would expect to be sexualized, become the instruments of racial violence and reflect the destruction inflicted on the black community in the name of white womanhood.

The dangers of interracial sex persisted well past the 1920s and 30s. In fact, it wasn’t until 1967 that the Supreme Court overruled bans against interracial marriages in the landmark decision of *Loving v. Virginia*. Prior to *Loving*, seventeen states prohibited interracial marriages (Kennedy). Mildred and Richard Loving, an interracial couple, traveled to Washington D.C. to evade Virginia’s anti-miscegenation laws. When they returned to Virginia they were told their marriage certificate was invalid and they were subsequently arrested, tried, and pled guilty. The judge sentenced them to one year in prison and ordered them not to return to the state of Virginia for twenty-five years (Kennedy). Though harsh by our standards, such punishment was par for the course for those who attempted an interracial marriage. In a 1965 article for *The Atlantic Monthly*, William Zabel describes the consequences for those who violated anti-miscegenation laws:

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Because these laws make the proscribed marriages void, a spouse may be prevented from inheriting his or her mate by other heirs who prove the forbidden interracial nature of the marriage; spouses have even lost their right to workmen’s compensation benefits otherwise payable. In many states, children of such marriages are declared illegitimate and are thereby prevented from inheriting under intestacy laws (58).

Daring to engage in interracial sex or marriage then carried not only social censure, but also material consequences ranging from fines and imprisonment to beatings and lynchings. Those who persisted despite the dangers knew the risks they were taking and the challenges their relationship posed to the dominant racial order.

There were also ideological consequences of engaging in interracial sex, particularly for white women. Because the dominant racial logic positioned blackness as a contaminant, white women were contaminated if they engaged in interracial sex. Their whiteness was no longer “pure.” They weren’t exactly black, however, and they still registered as visibly white. Black communities weren’t necessarily more accepting of interracial relationships and didn’t welcome white women as one of their own. In fact, in “The Social Equality of Whites and Blacks” (1920), W.E.B. Du Bois explicitly discourages interracial unions: “The Crisis, therefore, most emphatically advises against race intermarriage in America but it does so while maintaining the moral and legal right of individuals who may think otherwise and it most emphatically refuses to base its opposition on other than social grounds” (16). Though not rooted in the biological rhetoric of many anti-miscegenation laws, Du Bois still exhibits a reluctance regarding interracial marriage indicative of a larger ambivalence in the black community. As for the white

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10 Lynching served as a constant threat against blacks, particularly after the Civil War when the number of lynchings rose drastically. White racial violence attempted to bolster white male authority in a period when both white women and African Americans were challenging gendered and racial hierarchies. Whether or not a black man actually engaged in sex with a white woman, interracial sex often served as the justification for lynching black men. As Grace Elizabeth Hale argues in Making Whiteness, lynchings often operated on the death of the “black beast rapist in exchange for the violated white ‘virgin’” (231).
women who engaged in interracial sex, if their whiteness was contaminated and they weren’t considered black, then what race were they? Analyzing the lives and works of Josephine Cogdell Schuyler and Esther Chapman, I argue white women who engaged in interracial sex occupied a raceless subjectivity.

**The Fall of a Fair Confederate: Josephine Cogdell Schuyler’s Many Identities**

Born in 1897, Josephine Cogdell Schuyler was the youngest child of a wealthy white family who had made its money through banking, racehorses, and mills. Somewhat notorious in the town of Granbury, Texas, the Cogdells were considered a temperamental, strong-willed, arrogant, “godless family” (Kaplan 94). The Cogdells also attempted to uphold notions of white supremacy, as Josephine’s father was a member of the Ku Klux Klan, though he and at least one of her brothers kept black mistresses. Josephine herself espoused the superiority of the white race, at least during her upbringing in Texas. In her anonymously published essay, “The Fall of a Fair Confederate” (1930), Josephine notes that while she interacted with many of the black servants at her family’s property, and even claimed a personal identification with blackness, she nonetheless had a “firm and arrogant belief” in the racial hierarchy (529).

After being widowed at a young age, working as a model and pinup girl in California, and becoming mistress to John Garth, an artist, Josephine boarded a train to New York in 1927. While in New York, her thoughts on race continued to evolve and she found herself enjoying Harlem immensely. Upon meeting George Schuyler, a prominent black author in the Harlem Renaissance, the two quickly began an affair and married in 1928. The Schuylers shared the belief that interracial marriage would solve America’s race problem; racial mixture would eventually dissolve the black/white binary. Yet whenever Josephine returned to visit her family in Texas, George remained in New York. Her father ostensibly knew nothing about her marriage
to George. Or if he did, he didn’t speak of it. According to Bob Kent, letters between Josephine and various family members suggest their awareness of her interracial relationship and demonstrate varying levels of tolerance. In “The Fall of a Fair Confederate,” however, Josephine writes that she will be disinherited and unable to return to Texas if the white press finds out about her interracial marriage. John Garth, upon visiting Josephine in New York, believed Josephine’s male relatives would kill George if they knew of the relationship (Kent 50).

Josephine had begun to write when she went to California, taking classes in art, music, and literature. She continued to hone her writing skills and when she moved to New York, began submitting poetry regularly to progressive magazines such as The Messenger and The Crisis. Her poems often address her evolving thoughts on race, particularly after she met and married George. “The Fall of a Fair Confederate” traces her trajectory from a fair confederate to a self-professed “Negrophile,” a label that boldly challenges the racial ideologies of her upbringing. Josephine also authored several unpublished novels such as Husbands and Lovers and Southwest. Her unpublished autobiography, From Texas to Harlem with Love, exists in fragments. In her published writings, Josephine assumes various pseudonyms such as Heba Jannath, Laura Tanne, and Julia Jerome. Some pseudonyms are much more vague such as “a young Nordic Southerner” and many poems appear anonymously.

Josephine embodied various identities as an author and even assumed different racial positions. As Julia Jerome, Josephine passed as black and authored a regular column for black readers. The speakers of Josephine’s poems also adopt various racial and gendered positions. In “A Son of Africa Speaks,” for example, the speaker is a black man who reflects on the racial violence and oppression he faces in America. Josephine’s shifting authorial identity allowed her to publish simultaneous works in the same publication and enabled her to adopt many, and
sometimes contradictory, attitudes towards race without necessarily reconciling them. There
might also have been a protective motive behind the many pseudonyms, as she often addressed
topics considered taboo for a white woman, particularly for the daughter of a Klansman. While
this fragmentation provided Josephine with a sort of freedom, it likely also resulted in the
obscurity of much of her work.

In fact, Josephine most often appears in scholarly work in relation to George or to their
daughter, Philippa. Philippa was born in 1931 and became a child prodigy, demonstrating great
aptitude for music and excelling at the piano. Yet Philippa never met her mother’s family,
though historical records indicate that at least some of the Cogdells knew who Philippa was.11
Philippa eventually embraced journalism and traveled to Vietnam during the war to report. While
there, she died in a helicopter crash at the age of thirty-five. The year was 1967, about a month
shy of the Loving v. Virginia ruling. Josephine was devoted to Philippa’s upbringing and tried to
emphasize her biracial heritage rather than force her to identify as one race or the other.
Philippa’s untimely death and struggle to find an identity might cast her as a tragic mulatta.
Josephine, however, viewed her daughter as a hybrid whose high intelligence was the result of
receiving the best of both black and white genes from her parents. Josephine tragically
committed suicide on the two-year anniversary of Philippa’s death. Barring Kaplan’s Miss Anne
in Harlem, most of the existing scholarship on Josephine discusses her in relation to her daughter
or husband, not as an author in her own right.

Turning to Josephine’s poems, we can analyze how she used her writing to navigate
conflicting attitudes towards racial identity. In “While All May Wonder” (1931), published under
the pseudonym “Helna Issel,” the first stanza reads:

11 See Kathryn Talalay’s biography of Philippa, Composition in Black and White (1997).
I cry goodbye to you, the Transient 
Thing 
Which was myself before the new road 
Made 
My feet light with the hurry of the 
Spring 
My heart light with the daring price it 
Paid (1-8).

We might connect the speaker’s past and present identities to Josephine’s evolution from a fair confederate to a self-professed “Negrophile.” The speaker refers to identity as a “Transient/Thing” and the past tense “which was myself” indicates multiplicity; she is not limited to one identity nor does she have to maintain her original identity. The idea of multiple selves relates to Josephine’s shifting ideological views on race and her movement from white womanhood to someone who embodies a more liminal racial identity. Yet the poem’s speaker does not make a clean break from her old self. Instead, she remains ambivalent about reconciling her two identities. While the speaker embodies a new identity, she still cries goodbye to the old self and notes the “daring price” she paid in order to embark on this new path. Though she appears light and excited, the stanza also implies a longing for what has been sacrificed.

The last stanza depicts a couple laughing and kissing, which seems more light-hearted and happy:

There is no good like giving all for this 
For walking by your side with laughing 
face, 
While all may wonder that we two should 
kiss, 
Who only see the shackles of your Race (9-14).

Yet as the speaker remarks, these contented moments require “giving all for this,” revealing the same feelings of ambivalence. Granted, the speaker acknowledges that “there is no good” like the sacrifice she has made, but the fact remains that she has given everything for the relationship.
Additionally, she notes the “shackles” of her lover’s race. At first, we may read this moment as referring to outsiders who disdainfully look upon their interracial relationship and associate the man’s blackness with the shackles of slavery. Though the speaker connects shackles to blackness, it remains unclear who is shackled by race. The black man may be more obviously shackled because of slavery’s legacy and the postbellum racial violence that prohibited blacks from full participation in society. We might also read the shackles as confining the speaker to a liminal position, caught between two cultures and identities, yet unable to fully inhabit either because she has sacrificed everything for her relationship.

While the speaker in “While All May Wonder” is a white woman, the speaker in “A Son of Africa Speaks” (1929) is instead a black man. Pairing these two poems highlights Josephine’s assumption of different racial and gendered identities through her writing. In “A Son of Africa Speaks,” the speaker is a black man who foretells a black rebellion against oppressive racism. The speaker addresses an unknown white man: “The gnawed bones of my sorrow you / cast upon my threshold” (13-14), implicating whites as cannibalistic and savage and inverting the racial stereotype of blacks as primitive and whites as civil. He continues: “In my harvest fields you planted faggots / to burn the flesh of my children” (17-18). Here the speaker indict white racial violence, drawing a stark contrast between fertility, rebirth, and the harvest and the death and destruction whites cause. Yet blacks will not merely suffer the destruction of whites, but will harness this pain and use it to enact their revenge using “militant manhood” (37) and ask of whites: “Is it your turn then to eat the ancient / bread of your black servant?” (66-67). The poem suggests a reversal of the racial order and one that is deserved, given the loss blacks have suffered by whites. Tropes about race and sexuality also become inverted. The speaker refers to
whites’ “impending impotency” (62) and uses the phrase “white heart of syphilis” (64), which undermines the stereotype of whiteness as pure and blackness as impure and libidinous.

Through “A Son of Africa Speaks,” Josephine steps outside whiteness in order to critique its racial ideologies. The poem utilizes a black speaker in order to reverse racial tropes and advocate for a displacement of the racial hierarchy. In “While All May Wonder” we witness a speaker torn between two identities; she simultaneously laments the loss of whiteness and celebrates freedom from whiteness. However, in “A Son of Africa Speaks,” Josephine portrays black racial oppression, revealing a willingness to explore various racial and gendered identities. Josephine believed that she “could step, with George, into blackness” and “become a member of race which we daily forced to be humble” and seems to have used her poetry to understand black racial identity (Kaplan 126).

Though Josephine often espoused progressive beliefs about race, her appropriation of blackness also merits critique. Scholarly work on Josephine has yet to point out her problematic relationship to black racial identity. In Josephine’s essays, for example, she explicitly reveals her privileged subjectivity, even after her marriage to George. In “America’s Changing Color Line” (1934), writing under the pseudonym “Heba Jannath,” Josephine argues: “it is absurd for [blacks] to denounce race prejudice in whites on the one hand while entertaining it themselves so righteously” (86). Additionally, she states: “until the World War, the white woman was as much a serf in Dixie as the black man,” arguing that white men and black women are actually the only free people in the U.S. (87). In “The Fall of a Fair Confederate,” Josephine has a similarly tone-deaf moment when she describes how she would watch the black laborers at her family’s home as a child. Observing “two robust Negroes” cleaning the Cogdell family’s linens, Josephine admires their “gayety and energy” more than the “prim elegance of the Ladies of the First
families” (528-29). She seems oblivious to the power differential that allows her to sit idly by while two black women wash her bedding.

Josephine’s writing also reveals her failure to consider the position of black women. In fact, much of Josephine’s writing on race centers on black men and white women, likely because of her own experiences with George. Yet even in her poems that describe racial oppression, such as “A Son of Africa Speaks,” Josephine conflates black oppression with black male oppression, neglecting the experiences of black women. In some ways, this absence is surprising given Josephine’s keen attention to how her own life is proscribed by gendered norms. Her critique of patriarchal dominance, however, only applies to the limitations imposed upon white femininity. Josephine imagines black women as free from gendered norms because the strictures of white femininity don’t apply to them, failing to realize that black women may in fact have more difficult experiences because of the intersection of racial and gendered oppression. Instead, Josephine romanticizes black women’s labor and portrays them as somehow less oppressed than white women, especially in the South.

We might also question the ethics of Josephine’s racial passing, particularly in her role as Julia Jerome. Likened to the “black Ann Landers” (Kaplan 153), Julia Jerome authored a regular column in The Pittsburgh Courier in the 1920s in which she responded to readers’ questions, often regarding love and courtship. The Pittsburgh Courier was a predominantly black newspaper and the Jerome column specifically targeted black female readers. Kaplan describes the column as staunchly feminist, and in many ways it is (153). Jerome advocates for equitable partnerships and encourages her female readers to continue working after marriage. Additionally, she discourages women from marrying too soon, says a woman’s first duty is to herself, and argues that marriage, in legal terms, should be made harder and divorce made easier. Yet much
like Josephine’s other writings, the Jerome column evinces contradictory attitudes towards gender roles. In “Love Often Demands Shrewdness” (1929), Jerome justifies men’s infidelity because wives too often neglect their appearance and seem too “slovenly” (A5). Additionally, she states: “men know that a girl who can only attract one man is not a prize to run after” (ibid). Despite advancing many progressive views regarding gender norms, Jerome still reverts to traditional understandings of femininity at times.

Julia Jerome also neglects the topic of race, which we could attribute to various causes. The genre of advice column, specifically one marketed towards female readers and titled “The Art of Love,” seems to circumscribe the possible topics for the column. Additionally, it’s clear that while “The Art of Love” is political in its discussion of women’s roles in marriage and dating, the column is intended to be much more light-hearted than many of Josephine’s other writings. Josephine consistently adopts a much more conversational tone as Julia Jerome and addresses her readers directly with phrases like “you know, girls.” Regardless of the cause, Josephine still lacks an awareness of black women’s racial oppression. Writing about racial oppression defaults to black men and writing about black women defaults to gender. In other words, Josephine lacks an intersectional approach to the causes in which she’s interested.

Though the speakers in Josephine’s poetry adopt various racial and gendered identities, her own passing as a black woman raises more of an ethical dilemma. One could argue that Josephine adopts blackness for her own artistic and financial benefits, appropriating the beneficial aspects of an identity that she elsewhere acknowledges as suffering the “deadening and tragic effects” of racial oppression (Heba Jannath, “America’s Changing Color Line” 84).

It is difficult to assign a definitive label to Josephine’s relationship to racial identity. Was she passing? Appropriating blackness? Attempting to embody a transracial identity? These
questions posit different ways Josephine might have challenged the dominant racial order, and though her life and writing elicit all of these questions, she refrains from providing us with a straightforward answer. She didn’t use these terms to describe herself nor did she adopt a consistent attitude towards racial identity. I do believe, however, that any and all of these terms could apply to Josephine at times. Josephine passed as Julia Jerome and certainly seems to have appropriated blackness in many instances to suit her artistic needs.

One could also argue that Josephine inhabited a transracial identity, though debates persist about the meaning and ethics of transraciality. Michael Awkward’s definition of transraciality hinges on the alteration of one’s physical appearance to inhabit another racial position. Josephine did use a “brunette’ face powder” to darken her complexion, and thus might have seemed less visibly white at times (Kaplan 121). Yet she also claimed to identify with blackness in a way that went beyond physical appearance, signaling another version of transraciality that is more akin to transgender identity. However, as Cressida Heyes rightly points out, we should be wary of this reductive analogy. Racial identity carries a history of violence and oppression and is tied to ancestry in a way gender is not, making “transracial” a more ethically questionable subjectivity than “transgender.” While certainly problematic, Josephine could have conceivably felt she was “really” black at times, given her reflections on her childhood with her family’s black laborers and her marriage to George.

It’s also tempting to see Josephine as raceful as opposed to raceless. She seems to have embraced multiple options for identity and wanted to access rather than refuse race. Instead of absence, we could instead see multiplicity. Yet we must also consider the historical context of

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12 For further reading on the transracial versus transgender debate, see Christine Overall, “Transsexualism and ‘transracialism’” (2004) and Rebecca Tuvel, “In Defense of Transracialism” (2017).
Josephine’s relationship to race. The early twentieth century did not recognize multiracialism as we do today. Selecting multiple races on the U.S. census was not an option. Granted, racelessness was also not a defined category during this time either. However, it is often easier to recognize what is present rather than what is absent. Multiracialism at least coheres into a set of recognizable categories whereas racelessness avoids easy categorization. A raceful identity is more legible than a raceless one. Josephine was invested in illegibility and refused to cohere, as demonstrated by her many pseudonyms and contradictory views on race. Her interest in illegibility aligns her more closely with racelessness. There is also a political motivation behind classifying Josephine as raceless as opposed to raceful. As evinced by the transracial debate, it is problematic to allow a white woman to claim a black identity when she has benefitted from her white racial privilege. Though Josephine passed as black in the Jerome column, I resist her claim that she stepped into blackness by marrying George. Instead, she stepped out of normative whiteness and into a raceless subjectivity.

Performativity remains a consistent thread throughout Josephine’s varied attitudes towards race. Through her writing and her lived experiences, Josephine exposes the performative nature of identity, particularly in terms of race and gender. She disrupts performative regulations pertaining to white femininity, refusing to enact the iterative norms that bolster the dominant racial and gendered hierarchy. In her marriage to George, Josephine defies the dominant racial ideologies that prohibit interracial sex. She instead deliberately challenges her white purity and therefore her racial superiority, particularly in the context of her Klan-supporting family. Romantic and sexual motivations aside, Josephine’s decision to marry George represents a conscious flouting of racial taboos and a willingness to position herself outside whiteness, yet unable to inhabit blackness either.
Her writing under various pseudonyms, in which she adopts contrasting identities and opinions, further cements her liminal position between blackness and whiteness and her belief in identity as malleable and transient. By refusing to name herself, or even to adopt a consistent pseudonym, Josephine disrupts the iterative process that would create the appearance of a stable, unified inner self. She purposefully fragments her identity along racial and gendered lines and in doing so, illuminates the irony of regulatory norms. The very norms that prohibit interracial unions and seek to maintain a strict racial divide paradoxically create space for liminal subjectivities. By connecting interracial sex to the contamination of whiteness, particularly in terms of white women, the dominant racial order opens up the possibility of a racial subjectivity that is neither white nor black, yet not necessarily mixed race either. It is instead a raceless identity.

To be sure, Josephine still appeared visibly white and enjoyed the privileges of whiteness. In fact, most cases of racelessness don’t necessarily hinge on a visibly ambiguous racial identity. While race is a scopic regime and often relies on visible markers of racial identity, racial ideology goes beyond what can be seen. In fact, racial oppression has retained a flexibility that allows racial categories to shift in order to accommodate those who defy a visible racial “truth.” In other words, dominant racial thinking determines the “truths” espoused by the body, not vice versa. Josephine always “looked white” and was undoubtedly perceived as such by many. Yet on her marriage certificate to George, Josephine listed her race as “colored,” an act that went unquestioned by the official who, according to Josephine, seemed eager to believe she had black ancestry rather than acknowledge interracial marriage (Kaplan 132). The dominant racial thinking at the time, especially among whites, was that Josephine’s racial identity was contaminated by her interracial union. The supposed contamination positioned her outside of
respectable white femininity, yet didn’t garner her access to an “authentic” black identity either. Josephine’s white skin, the visible fact of her whiteness, was then not the sole determinant of her racial identity.

Race then not only operates on a legal and embodied level, but on a discursive one as well. Much of Josephine’s relation to racial identity occurred through her writing, which removed her from any public gaze that would determine her actual race. Josephine constructed various racial identities by writing as a black woman or using the speaker of a poem to voice a black man’s racial oppression. She wrote her race into being and in the case of Julia Jerome, for example, we can assume her readers perceived her as a black woman. Her anonymously published works also indicate the discursive production of identity, or lack thereof. In these instances, Josephine’s writing produced a lack of any particular identity, revealing that while Josephine often affirmed various identity positions, she also attempted to abstain from them.

Challenging the Tripartite: Racial classification in the Caribbean

Given the dualistic nature of U.S. racial ideology, we might expect some women to challenge the rigid black/white racial binary. Rather than choose one of the limited options for racial identity, some women refused racial classification altogether. Is racelessness then solely the product of an inflexible racial ideology? In other words, does racelessness only occur in cultures with fewer options for racial identity? The short answer is no. Racelessness is not limited to the U.S. in the early twentieth century. Racelessness also occurs in ostensibly more racially fluid cultures such as the Caribbean. As scholars such as Mervyn Alleyne and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn note, the Caribbean displayed a markedly different racial classification system than the U.S. and often operated on a tripartite racial categorization consisting of whites, blacks,
and coloreds. Howard Johnson describes whites in the Caribbean as the dominant group despite their relatively small numbers while blacks were more often subordinate. Coloreds, sometimes referred to as “brown,” represented an intermediary group in which an individual had mixed racial ancestry. Additionally, the Caribbean was differentiated according to location. Nations and colonies exhibited different attitudes towards race influenced by the colonizing nation and the slaves imported to the island. The British controlled Jamaica, for example, and imported slaves predominantly from Africa (Alleyne). Spain and France, among others, also colonized the Caribbean and their influence remains evident in the region to this day.

Conceptions of race in Jamaica exemplify Caribbean racial fluidity. As Alleyne argues, race in Jamaica is “difficult to define and is constantly being redefined in the context of changing class and ideological relationships” (15). Jamaica does follow the tripartite system of racial division and acknowledges the social dimension of racial identity, as opposed to the one-drop rule espoused in the U.S. Perhaps surprisingly, Jamaica has even encouraged interracial sex at times. In 1733, for example, a bill “‘accorded a brown man and his family all the right of Englishmen born of white ancestors” though the acts that followed this bill often required a colored man to marry a white woman in order for his children to inherit the same privileges (Alleyne 204). In 1780, an act was passed that decreed the mulatto label should no longer apply after three generations and the designated individual would have all the privileges of a white person (Alleyne 205). There were also instances of Jamaicans applying to change their race, as was the case with John Williams, the father of poet Francis Williams. The elder Williams, a free colored man, petitioned the Assembly of Jamaica to be tried by a jury as a white man. The petition was approved in 1708, though the phrase “as a white man” was removed. Even still, the

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13 Vincent Carretta discusses Francis Williams at length in his article “Who Was Francis Williams?”(2003).
Assembly’s partial concession to Williams’ petition indicates greater flexibility in racial classification than in the U.S.

Those living in Jamaica seemed to have a more open understanding of race, so refusing race might seem unnecessary. Despite the Caribbean having more options for racial identity, however, those options still existed hierarchically, with whiteness at the top and blackness at the bottom. Racial identities were flexible, but not necessarily accorded the same value. Furthermore, the tripartite system doesn’t account for the existence of South Asian, East Asian, and Indigenous peoples. Even a more varied conception of race can prove inadequate. Racelessness is still an appealing option even in more racially fluid societies, as racelessness can offer an escape from regulatory racial classifications.

Yet white colonizers typically benefitted from the racial hierarchy and had a vested interest in maintaining racial identity. Bryan Moore argues that British whites in the Caribbean were different than British whites in other colonies, primarily because those in the Caribbean imagined their journey as temporary. They would, at some point, return to England. Their connection to the metropolis influenced their attitudes toward race. After slavery was abolished in the 1830s, British whites, particularly the elite, saw a greater need to emphasize their connection to their British roots. Whites often closed ranks in the face of increased rights among blacks and coloreds. In fact, loyalty to the British Crown signified how British the colonists were despite their distance from home and tenuous dominance in the Caribbean after emancipation (Moore 105). White colonists were also intensely preoccupied with social status and sought to emulate the middle to upper class norms back home. Because the white population was relatively

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14 For further reading on Caribbean racial classification, see the special issue of Anthurium, “The Asian Experience in the Caribbean” (2010) and Suzanne Bost, Mulattas and Mestizas (2003).
small, however, this created an insular environment in which everyone knew everyone else. To be seen in the “wrong” company was a serious transgression (Moore 98).

One way in which white colonists attempted to maintain social exclusiveness, and by extension white “purity” and dominance, was to engage in caste-like courtship and marriage patterns (Moore 122). As in the U.S., dominant groups were often eager to maintain their status, which hinged on notions of “racial purity.” Bridget Brereton, for example, describes how white Creoles in Trinidad strongly believed in the need to retain racial purity, so much so that legal marriage to anyone thought to have non-white ancestry meant a loss of membership in the Creole elite (53). Similarly, in Jamaica, white men placed a premium on white women’s fertility because of the reproduction of white patriarchy. Rosamond King notes that interracial relationships were rare in the Caribbean from the 15th-19th centuries, partially due to the lack of white women in the region. In the 20th century, however, Caribbean men’s access to white women increased significantly. Sex between non-white men and white women undermined hegemonic white masculinity in the colonies (King 193).

As in the U.S., it’s important to consider the role white women played in reinforcing racial hierarchies in order to maintain their racial privilege. Hilary McD. Beckles argues in “White Woman and a West India fortune: Gender and Wealth during slavery” (1998) that white women were also “colonizing agents who made autonomous ideological, social and economic inputs into the colonial system” (6). Additionally, white women owned estates and slaves prior to emancipation. White women weren’t simply passive victims of white male authority, but instead were often colonial agents in their own right. It seems unusual then that a white woman in the Caribbean would challenge notions of whiteness by engaging in interracial sex. White women
benefitted from the racial hierarchy and particularly after emancipation, the need to reaffirm white superiority became more pressing.

Esther Chapman explores white women’s sexuality in her novel *Too Much Summer*. Chapman’s representation of interracial sex between white women and non-white men demonstrates the colonial underpinnings of these interracial unions. The roles of colonizer and colonized inevitably infiltrate sexual relations and the boundaries between the two become blurred. Interracial contact threatens the supposed purity and superiority of white Englishness. I argue that Chapman’s portrayal of interracial sex reveals how white women’s racelessness can also destabilize both gendered and national belonging. White women opted for racelessness in order to challenge proscriptive gender roles associated with their expatriate status.

“you will grow less fastidious, less white”: English Expats in the Caribbean

Esther Chapman, nee Hyman, was an English woman born in Sussex who lived most of her life in Jamaica. While no complete biography exists on Chapman, we can gain a sense of her identity based on her own writings and her presence in the archive. Chapman was perhaps most notable for founding the *West India Review* in 1934 and serving as its editor. The journal’s purpose was to publish material about the West Indies and, importantly, material solely by West Indian authors. Chapman often contributed her own writing to the journal, frequently including book reviews and even serialized versions of her novels. In addition to her editorial duties at the

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15 Due to scant archival records, Chapman’s birth and death dates are currently unknown.
16 In fact, Chapman felt the need to stress these stipulations so much that her editorial foreword to the November 1937 issue noted the amount of material she had rejected based on the fact that it wasn’t about the West Indies. The journal, Chapman reiterated, was intended for resident West Indians, either immigrants or native born, the West Indian abroad, and anyone else who might have an interest in the West Indies such as researchers or institutions
West India Review, Chapman also served as an editor for the Jamaica Annual and authored several novels, many of which explore themes of racial mixing, sexuality, and national identity.

By Chapman’s own accounts, she also socialized with well to do West Indians and Americans. Her 1936 essay, “Round Trip,” which she serialized in the West Indian Review, describes her experiences in Harlem where she hobnobbed with the “Harlem intelligentsia.” As detailed in the essay, Claude McKay invited Chapman to come to Harlem where he hosted a party in her honor. While there, she also met Countee Cullen, an influential black poet in the Harlem Renaissance. Chapman socialized with many other writers and intellectuals during this trip such as Gloria and Maurice Guinness, Rachel Field and Arthur Pederson, and Albert Howson (“Round Trip”).

Although she mixed freely with men and women of different races, Chapman displayed contradictory attitudes towards race. Both in her fiction and her essays, Chapman evinced stereotypical views towards non-white people in the Caribbean, associating the region’s climate with a supposed dearth of intellectualism. The inaugural issue of the West Indian Review, for example, bears Chapman’s claim that the journal speaks to “all those to whom intellectual endeavor is a banner to be kept flying in the feeble breeze of tropical apathy” (“The Birth of an Idea” 1). Elsewhere, Chapman describes West Indians as mysterious and prideful and having essential differences that make them difficult to relate to (“These Mysterious West Indians” 1).

Yet Chapman also seemed to tolerate, if not advocate, for interracial sex. In a 1937 review of Henry Champlly’s White Women, Coloured Men (1936), Chapman criticizes Champlly for his reductive portrait of interracial relationships that posits the perverse black man as always striving for the purer, elevated white woman against her will. Chapman argues that racial mixture has occurred for too long for a book to stem its tide. As in America, Chapman continues, there is no
social evil resulting from interracial sex. In fact, “most of the evils of miscegenation are the result of the sense of social inferiority from which the half-breed suffers. With increasing intermarriage, this must diminish” (“The Lure of the White Woman” 26).

Her 1928 novel *Study in Bronze: A Novel of Jamaica* follows the life of Lucea, the daughter of a black Jamaican woman and a white English father. Throughout the text, Lucea struggles to reconcile her racial identity with various cultural norms, traveling back and forth between Jamaica and England. Early on in the novel, the narrator states: “There are those who can mix, truly cosmopolitan, among people of all races and all colours, and lose or suspend their national identity” (50). Towards the end of the novel, Lucea thinks: “She was herself, her intense, individual self, strong to suffer, strong in recovery, not part and parcel of any race or set of people. Her mixed blood gave her an independence, a freedom from both of them. She had no desire to be absorbed by a race, a country…” (247). Both moments indicate the connection between race and national identity and its inverse: loss or refusal of national identity also entails a loss or refusal of racial identity. In Lucea’s case, Chapman imagines being unmoored from identity categories as potentially liberating, yet she also recognizes the dire consequences of foregoing identity, particularly for women. Interestingly, George Schuyler, Josephine’s husband, reviewed the novel for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. He acknowledges that the novel is “competently written and the characters are well drawn,” and ultimately finds the text “depressing and yet plausible” (B3). Though there’s no evidence that Josephine and Chapman met, there’s a chance Josephine was at least aware of Chapman’s work.

While *Study in Bronze* focuses on the products of interracial sex, Chapman’s 1953 novel *Too Much Summer* examines the participants in interracial sex. The novel centers on Lloyd Bremerton, a white English woman whose husband, Adrian, exiles her and their two children to
Jamaica in order to avoid the dangers of World War Two. Lloyd resents the imposition and initially struggles to find mental and physical stimulation in Jamaica. She continually notes the “soporific” effect of the sun and the mindless chatter of the other English women exiled to the island. On meeting Laurence Wooten, another white woman on the island, however, Lloyd is revived. She and Laurence take a house together where they host parties and enhance their social circle. Laurence also receives a steady stream of male guests and is quite frank about her sexuality. Soon, Lloyd herself begins an affair with a man aptly named Van Browney, a man “not quite white” but one who could pass for white. She and Van pursue a much too public romance, one fueled by alcohol and constant arguments over the role of race in their relationship.

Racial tension ultimately ends the affair, though at this point, Lloyd has already written to her husband in England to express her discontent in the marriage, admit her affair, and request a divorce. Adrian is obstinate and we witness a series of letters between them in which he refuses to divorce her. After visiting Jamaica, however, and learning the full extent of Lloyd’s disreputable behavior, Adrian takes the children back to England before Lloyd can see them and finally grants her a divorce. At the end of the novel, Lloyd is virtually alone save her servant, Hannah. All of the other English women have returned home now that the war has ended, though Lloyd can’t seem to muster the energy to plan the voyage back. Instead, she spends her days and nights drinking and sleeping with men whom she can’t quite remember the next day. Lloyd has clearly devolved into the moral degeneracy stereotypical of the Caribbean, a state so different from the supposed moral uprightness of the white English people. The novel closes with Lloyd defying a doctor’s orders and insisting on drinking despite her poor health.

Lloyd’s degeneration does not happen overnight; rather, it is a gradual process, happening so slowly that we only realize the gravity of her circumstances until it seems too late.
Early on, the narrator hints at the risk of contamination Jamaica poses to a white English woman. The contamination not only refers to sex, but to class and respectability as well. Lloyd notes that she has made her “first compromise,” when after taking a house with Laurence, she also agrees to send the children away to school. Doing so allows the women to host parties and entertain various male guests without children underfoot. Lloyd disregards her maternal duties in favor of a social circle replete with alcohol and flirtations, sometimes with non-white men. The compromise not only refers to Laurence’s wish for the children to leave, but also to Lloyd’s jeopardizing ideas of middle class respectability. Lloyd gradually begins to disrupt the citational practices that constitute middle class white femininity. Each small transgression breaks with the performative norms governing expatriate English women.

After this first compromise, we witness a succession of moments in which Lloyd diverges from racial and gendered expectations. Observing Lloyd, the narrator notes:

When Lloyd had first come to Jamaica, she had been oppressed by what she called the prevalent blackness. It had seemed to her that the streets of Kingston were strident with hurrying black figures, noisy not only in their talk and their laughter, but in their very movements. Their manners were bad; dirty, hurrying Negroes, labourers or beggars, would rudely jostle passers-by on the streets, and it seemed to Lloyd, in those early days, an additional affront because she was a woman, and white (55).

In Lloyd’s early days in Jamaica, she positions her whiteness in opposition to a monolithic blackness, a blackness that doesn’t exhibit the decorum she expects based on her white Englishness. The repetition of “seemed” in this paragraph also subtly questions Lloyd’s first impressions of Jamaica. Jamaican behavior seemed to be an affront because of her white
femininity; the “seemed” posits Lloyd’s disdain for black behavior as a matter of opinion, not an undeniable truth.

In fact, the narrator goes on to note that Lloyd “soon came to see that this impression of solid blackness was an illusion” (55.) Instead, Lloyd now recognizes a much more diverse set of racial options including “whites and Negroes, and mixtures of white-and-Negro; there were even-hued Indians […] there were yellow-skinned Chinese; and there were men and women in whose veins ran the blood of any of these, or of all” (55-56). Lloyd’s understanding of race shifts from a strict black/white binary to a more nuanced understanding of the various racial mixtures that comprise the Jamaican population. Additionally, her understanding of this multiplicity lacks the negative affect she previously attached to the “prevalent blackness.” Instead of lamenting the lack of manners of the native Jamaicans, Lloyd now praises the physical attractiveness of racial mixtures, which she contrasts with “pallid English skins” (57).17

Acknowledging the range of racial possibilities also leads Lloyd to consider the mechanism of racial mixture: interracial sex. Lloyd recognizes that while there are proscriptions against interracial sex and marriage, these relationships continue to occur regardless. In fact, she observes an increasing tolerance and even support for interracial relationships even as there persists a “stalwart group resisting the onslaught, determined to preserve the privileges of their class and of their race” (62). Despite the white elites who wish to maintain their social and economic dominance, Lloyd believes the fight against interracial marriage is “a losing fight; particularly here, for the Colonial Civil Servants, the core of this society, were already losing influence and importance” (62). Immediately after considering the debate regarding interracial sex, Lloyd reflects on her experiences at nightclubs with Laurence, in which she drinks with

17 Josephine Cogdell Schuyler also effusively praised dark skin and disdained the “‘moldy cheese look [of] white skin’” (Kaplan 121).
“charming men, of unexceptionable manners, but fatally not white, sometimes not even apparently white” (63). She wonders why, if she feels comfortable drinking with these men, what’s to stop her from dancing with them? And dance with them she does. The implication is that if a white woman can dance with black men, why not sleep with them? With each small violation of social norms, Lloyd feels more comfortable transgressing the next taboo and breaking with the citational practices of white femininity.

Despite her increasing awareness, and even acceptance, of interracial interactions, Lloyd cannot completely free herself from her own implicit racial biases. Van recognizes her unstated racial attitudes, a point he often exploits, causing arguments. When Lloyd and Van first begin their affair, Van asks how she feels about his color, to which she says she hardly notices it. Her claims to color-blindness ring hollow, however, as she repeatedly refers to men like Van as “fatally not white.” The “fatality” of Van’s color seems to be more in reference to herself than to Van. Van does quite well for himself, despite not being permitted into the upper echelons of society. It is Lloyd’s own reputation that suffers fatally by having an affair with Van; despite her claims to racial progressiveness, Lloyd is still aware of the racial hierarchy between herself and Van.

The racial tension between the two reaches a climax when Van drunkenly antagonizes Lloyd by first trying to make her drink Jamaican rum, to which she says “It’s terribly strong” (97). Van replies: “You’re developing strong tastes, darling. A real Jamaican! Rum…And niggers! […] How do you like the taste of both on your lips?” (ibid). Van elides Lloyd’s sexual appetite with her affinity for alcohol; both indicate a departure from middle class English decorum. He further indicates Lloyd is losing her Englishness in favor of a more Jamaican identity, as she has adopted both the drink and the men of the island. Lloyd soon submits to the
drink and the next paragraph abruptly begins with Lloyd crying, “Don’t do that to me. Don’t do that to me. It’s not to be borne. Leave me alone!” (ibid). We can infer from the gap in the scene that Van is now sexually assaulting her. Lloyd cries once more, “Leave me alone, you damn nigger you! Leave me alone!” to which Van stops, silent, then “struck her on the mouth” (ibid). The scene enacts the racial and gendered stereotypes common of white women and black or mixed race men, that of the white, virginal woman and the black man who rapes her.

Lloyd’s response, calling Van a “damn nigger,” also reinforces the power differential between them. Van had diminished Lloyd’s English identity, suggesting she was becoming more Jamaican, and therefore closing a gap between them. By using a racial epithet, however, Lloyd reestablishes their difference and reminds Van of his subordinate racial position. Though Van is shocked at Lloyd’s response, it also seems as if he intended to push Lloyd to this utterance, to finally get her to reveal her true racial attitudes beneath the façade of colorblindness. In the heat of the moment, Lloyd finally acknowledges the power dynamic between them and the colonial history underpinning their fight over Lloyd’s English identity. Lloyd’s response acts as a performative utterance; her words perform an action. To elaborate, by calling Van a “damn nigger,” Lloyd reinstates a racial and colonial hierarchy. Thus while Lloyd breaks with performative norms in many instances, she also utilizes performative utterances to reestablish her racial superiority. Performativity does not operate unilaterally regarding white women engaging in interracial sex. These sexual relations allow white women to challenge white male authority; yet white women can also capitalize on their racial privilege in interracial unions as well. The subversiveness of performativity subsequently depends on the disruption, as opposed to affirmation, of performative norms.
Perhaps surprisingly, the fight between Lloyd and Van does not end their relationship. In fact, the next chapter begins with Lloyd writing to her husband for the first time to request a divorce. Instead, it is the conversation of two children that ultimately dissolves Lloyd and Van’s relationship. Lloyd’s children have come home to visit and are discussing which of their friends they should invite over as Lloyd and Van look on. Conway, Lloyd’s son, asks that he be allowed to invite Bobby Gordon to tea. Earle, Lloyd’s daughter, disagrees, calling Bobby Gordon a “common little boy […] a nasty little brute” who “never washes, he’s a dirty little nigger” (132). Upset, Conway insists this isn’t true, that Bobby Gordon is “n-n-no d-d-darker than Uncle V-v-van!” (132). Interestingly, it is Lloyd’s daughter, the white female, who displays a sense of racial superiority. She echoes Lloyd’s own language in using a racial epithet and mentions multiple stereotypes whites impose on blacks, such as being dirty and brutish.

Additionally, the comparison to Van indicates the children not only think he’s white, but that their acceptance of him is conditional based on this presumed whiteness. Lloyd has allowed her children to think Van white and most likely also instilled beliefs about white racial superiority as well. Lloyd says nothing in this moment, letting Conway’s declaration about Van hang in the air. Her silence speaks volumes and Van leaves, stating, “This is it. Good-bye” (133). Not only has Lloyd perpetuated the racist and colonialist beliefs in her own children, she also can’t bring herself to disavow these beliefs when her relationship with Van is at stake. She is willing to have sex with Van and go about publicly with him, but crucially, this doesn’t mean she has parted from her role as a white English colonizer.

Much of the disdain directed towards Lloyd’s behavior isn’t necessarily because she drinks too much or has interracial affairs, but because everyone knows she does these things. Early in her affair with Van, Lloyd has a disagreement with Laurence regarding discretion.
Laurence, who has had her fair share of romances, chastises Lloyd for her lack of subtlety; people have begun to talk, which Laurence despises. In fact, Laurence says nothing of Van’s race during this conversation. Her critique remains on Lloyd’s indiscretion. Discretion is important because of the relatively small white expatriate community and the social standards they seek to reinforce. In fact, the white community in Lloyd’s Jamaica mirrors that which Bryan Moore describes: an exclusionary community that seeks to mimic middle class English standards and subsequently enforce white dominance. Lloyd comments on this “restricted scene” in which she had “met the same persons repeatedly” (61). The insularity makes it difficult for one’s behavior to go unnoticed. Lloyd also recognizes the inability to shift the mentality of the elite whites, noting it would be “preposterous to invite people from the exclusive St. Andrew set” to socialize with Van, whom she describes as on the “border-line of society” (65). Lloyd goes about with the “wrong” company, transgressing the norms of the exclusive whites who increasingly disavow her.

In his final letter to Lloyd, Adrian also cites her disgraced reputation as reason for divorcing her. He admits that he could “perhaps have endured your affair with your coloured man. I might even have forgiven it” (176). He cannot, however, withstand the “succession of men who have followed, not your drinking and dissipation, not your wanton indifference to your children, not your callousness in letting them see the life you were leading” (176). It is not the interracial sex that Adrian abhors, but a pattern of disreputable behavior that Lloyd can’t even be bothered to conceal. He laments that once he thought he knew Lloyd and viewed her as “a fine, honest, honourable woman,” which she no longer is (176). Lloyd’s affair with Van is only one dimension of her descent into dishonor; she has also neglected her maternal duties, almost certainly become an alcoholic, and crucially, let others see this dissipation. She has failed, in
many respects, to uphold notions of respectable white femininity. Ironically, Adrian further deprives her of these markers of femininity by leaving her childless, husbandless, and alone in Jamaica.

Lloyd’s isolation at the end of the novel is also indicative of her loss of English national identity; she doesn’t seem to want to return to England nor does she have anything to return to. She isn’t quite integrated into Jamaican society either, however. Most of her social circle consisted of fellow exiles and after the war, her contacts are men with whom she has brief affairs. As with the rest of the novel, Lloyd is largely removed from the black Jamaicans and lower socio-economic classes. Van has also moved on to a relationship with a black woman where his mixed racial heritage won’t be a point of tension.

Lloyd’s liminal national identity contributes to her liminal racial identity; her English whiteness has been compromised both sexually and morally, yet she isn’t quite black either. Van points to this tension as he ends his relationship with Lloyd. On asking her if she would take a “man with thick lips and flat nose” as a lover, he answers for her: “‘No you wouldn’t. Not at this stage of your development, at any rate. Perhaps if you remain in this country, and have several lovers, you will grow less fastidious, less white. You will no longer be an Englishwoman. You are now’” (131-132). Importantly, Van frames Lloyd’s race in negative terms: less white. He does not say Lloyd will be more black or colored; rather, interracial sex produces a loss of racial identity. It is unclear if Lloyd would still be white, albeit less so, in Van’s formulation. Whiteness is typically an all or nothing identity. Yet it seems unlikely Van would consider her black or colored if she continued to engage in interracial sex. For Lloyd, interracial sex undermines our ability to define her racial identity; she instead occupies a liminal, raceless position.
Van also conflates Lloyd’s Englishness with her whiteness and suggests that both Lloyd’s race and nationality will be compromised if she remains in Jamaica and takes a succession of racially diverse lovers. This is precisely what Lloyd does. After her affair with Van ends, she has a series of affairs. One night, on falling drunkenly into bed, she “tried to remember who had taken her home. It was either Jimmie—the Chinese—or George or Rogerson” (188). Lloyd describes George as “the colour of bronze” and we know Rogerson is a black man. Once, another white woman slights Lloyd on seeing her with Rogerson. Lloyd becomes less fastidious, and therefore less white, as a consequence of her sexual endeavors. Consequently, she also becomes less English. Towards the close of the novel, Lloyd thinks to herself:

Her own people. Who were they? England was England, and the place where you belonged always retained a hold upon you. In any event, you got tired of the continual blue skies, the ever-blazing sun, the heat and the glare and the dazzling light. But even as she pondered, the sky began to darken (190-191).

The fact that Lloyd must ask who her own people are reveals her ambivalence regarding where, and with whom, she belongs. She seems to designate England as her home, noting that it retains a hold on her and offers relief from Jamaica’s climate.

Yet immediately after noting the supposed superiority of England, the Jamaican sky begins to darken. The “ever-blazing sun” diminishes, providing more physical comfort, and thus demonstrating that Jamaica isn’t all heat and glare. Perhaps Jamaica isn’t as physically unbearable as Lloyd imagines. The connotations of “darken” also recall various aspects of Lloyd’s identity that have literally and figuratively darkened. Her skin, for one, has darkened with increased exposure to sunlight. More significantly, her reputation and sexual mores have also darkened, as she has failed to enact the norms expected of a white English woman. Instead,
she has sullied her white Englishness by engaging in multiple affairs, exhibiting public
drunkenness, and racking up debts at various bars. The fact that the sky darkens immediately on
Lloyd debating where she belongs indicates that she, as well as the sky, has darkened and
therefore may be unable to resume her white English identity if she returns to England.

Lloyd’s loss of racial and national identity does not necessarily represent a transcendence
of identity categories. Her situation is not the “truly cosmopolitan” scenario imagined in Study in
Bronze. Though Lloyd does mix, particularly sexually, with men of various races and loses a
sense of national identity, she doesn’t exhibit the positive affect we might associate with a
cosmopolitan. Rather than acting as a “citizen of the world,” mingling freely with people of
various nationalities and races, Lloyd seems instead to be a citizen of no world. Granted, in the
end she does seem to lack the local attachments we might associate with a cosmopolitan, yet she
is also utterly alone, unable to mix with any society. Her suspension of national and racial
identity reads as loss and not transcendence.

The immense loss is a result of the particular combination of her race, gender, and class
and the fact that Lloyd blurs many of the distinctions that should position her as a middle class
white English woman. Lloyd is raceless and nationless, but importantly, because race and nation
have refused her, not vice versa. While Lloyd does intentionally transgress many social norms
governing correct white femininity, she doesn’t have the explicit aim of refusing white
Englishness in mind. Instead, she seems more concerned with finding mental and physical
stimulation in an unfamiliar environment, reconciling her life of ease in Jamaica with the
hardship of fellow English citizens back home, and sorting through her feelings for her husband.
Lloyd refuses certain norms, yes, but not the identity categories themselves. Rather, because of
the ways in which white English femininity is constructed, identity categories have refused Lloyd because of her failure to enact certain norms.

Finding Agency in Absence

Racelessness, particularly via interracial sex, involves different degrees of agency. Josephine Cogdell Schuyler explicitly refashioned herself through her writing, embodying various racial and gendered identities. Her marriage to George Schuyler created a further rift with standards of white femininity, allowing her to engage more fully with a raceless identity. Lloyd Bremerton, however, does not exhibit the same degree of purposeful self-fashioning; rather, her shifts in identity are incidental to her gradual transgression of social norms. Josephine seems to refuse race while Lloyd is refused by race. This distinction does not represent a strict binary regarding the options for white women who engage in interracial sex. Lloyd does exercise personal agency in refusing social norms and Josephine wasn’t necessarily allowed to occupy whatever identity she desired, unquestioned by others. Racelessness is multidirectional; individual women attempted to opt out of racial identity while also being precluded from these identities by society. Distinguishing Josephine from Lloyd demonstrates how white women who engaged in interracial sex displayed autonomy in challenging identity labels as well as how questions of identity are never solely autonomous decisions.

Pairing Josephine and Lloyd also highlights the difference between lived and fictional versions of racelessness. Josephine embodied the realities white women faced by engaging in interracial sex; bringing her husband and daughter home to meet her family would’ve endangered their lives. Too Much Summer is more than just a textual parallel to Josephine’s lived experience, however. Chapman’s representation of racelessness helps constitute racelessness
itself. In other words, there was, and is, no consistent vocabulary with which to identify racial absence. Josephine does not seem to have used such language in reference to herself. Chapman then tries to depict a concept for which she has no words. In doing so, she helps develop the concept itself. Additionally, the stakes of racelessness via interracial sex were high. Fictional depictions of racelessness, however, could offer a safer glimpse into racial absence. Yet Chapman refrains from presenting a utopic, raceless world. Instead, she emphasizes the personal costs of racelessness and the loss of national identity for an English expat living in the Caribbean.

The disparate spatial and temporal context of Schuyler’s and Chapman’s work also reveals the pervasiveness of racelessness. Race refusal occurred in societies with strict racial binaries and in societies with ostensibly more open conceptions of race. Racelessness is less of a response to the number of racial options, but more of a response to the regulatory nature of racial ideology in general. Furthermore, Cogdell Schuyler and Chapman demonstrate the temporal and spatial circulation of racelessness as a concept. Josephine’s racelessness occurred in 1920s Harlem. Over twenty years later and thousands of miles away, Chapman’s novel represents similar themes. Chapman also traveled to Harlem in the 1930s where she likely encountered different views on racial identity, which provides a glimpse of the networked nature of racelessness. Many of the authors in my project knew each other or traveled in the same social circles, so it is unsurprising that their works reveal similar preoccupations.

Despite differences in geographic location and time period, both Josephine and Lloyd broke with performative norms regarding white femininity. Both women engaged in actions, some large and some small, which ruptured the iterative process governing appropriate white femininity. Engaging in interracial sex perhaps most obviously represents an eschewal of social
norms and opened the women up to racial contamination via the racial logic of their times. Josephine and Lloyd also broke with white femininity in more subtle ways such as Josephine’s discursive challenge to stable identity categories and Lloyd’s gradual disruption of class norms. Because of the ideological construction of white femininity in relation to interracial sex, both women seem to access raceless positions more easily than women of color. Their vaunted status as middle to upper class white women ironically enables them to destabilize their supposedly vulnerable white femininity. It is the very privilege of their identities that opens up the possibility of refusing identity. If we view racelessness as freeing, these white women seem to obtain this freedom more easily via interracial sex. Yet as both Josephine and Lloyd demonstrate, refusing identity categories can also render one illegible to society and result in immense forms of loss, whether in the form of family connections, national identity, or artistic recognition.
Chapter Two

Dual Identities and Double Audiences: Racial Liminality in the Work of Marie Stanley and Jean Rhys

“What had she called it? ‘Gulf Stream.’ Not bad, that idea; that about expressed it. That alien individual flow between the invisible banks that shut it in; a warm tropic wash, the Black flowing between ‘cold walls’ that are the White.”

-Marie Stanley, Gulf Stream (1930)

“‘She is not béké like you, but she is béké, and not like us either.’”¹⁸

-Jean Rhys, Wide Sargasso Sea (1966)

Writing under the pseudonym Heba Jannath, Josephine Cogdell Schuyler published “America’s Changing Color Line” in 1934. In the essay she remarks on the recent trend of passing novels. That is, novels whose characters often pass for a different race. She mentions several recent examples of the passing novel including Jessie Fauset’s Plum Bun (1928), Nella Larsen’s Passing (1929), and Marie Stanley’s Gulf Stream (1930). While Fauset and Larsen both belong to the Harlem Renaissance canon, Stanley is now an obscure Southern writer. She seems to have established her literary presence with Gulf Stream, as it was favorably reviewed in multiple prominent newspapers. A review in the Chicago Defender actually compares Gulf Stream, albeit unfavorably, to Esther Chapman’s Study in Bronze (Jones). Who was Marie Stanley? Like many of the authors in this project, she was at least somewhat well known during her lifetime, but has since faded into obscurity. We do know she was overly fond of alcohol and perhaps struggled with mental illness, which limited her creative output. Gulf Stream was

¹⁸ Béké is a term used in the Caribbean to mean white.
Stanley’s only published novel. Despite Stanley’s difficult personal circumstances, however, *Gulf Stream* warrants renewed attention for its impact on understandings of racial identity.

The novel focuses on multiple generations of mixed race women struggling to find a sense of belonging in the black/white racial binary of Southern Alabama. Though Josephine classifies *Gulf Stream* as a passing novel, and the text does mention passing, I view the novel as less about passing and more about racial liminality. Rather than passing from one racial identity to another, I argue the mixed race characters remain suspended between racial options. Terms such as “mulatto” and “creole” appear frequently throughout the novel. While these terms have contested histories and varying definitions, they both entail degrees of liminality. Mulattos and creoles often found themselves unable or unwilling to belong to either white or black society. In the United States, mulatto identities challenged the black/white racial binary and were subsequently classified according to quantities of black and white blood.

*Gulf Stream* seems to reify the tragic mulatto trope and enforce dualistic racial thinking. The novel’s biracial protagonist, Adele, almost drowns herself in the final pages because of conflicting racial ideologies. Yet the key is that Adele almost commits suicide; she doesn’t actually follow through. *Gulf Stream* employs the tragic mulatto trope, but it is a repetition with difference. The novel ultimately denies the reader any closure by refusing to fix Adele as black or white. Stanley also avoids killing off her protagonist, which would conveniently resolve the question of where Adele belongs. Instead, Adele challenges stereotypes of the tragic mulatto and chooses a liminal racial identity over a black or white one. Her racial liminality allows her to appeal to both black and white audiences, yet she doesn’t commit to a black or white identity.

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19 I acknowledge the denigrating history of terms such as “mulatto” and “quadroon” and therefore do not employ them sincerely. I use these terms as they apply in a historical and theoretical sense.
Rather, she refuses to identify herself racially. In the context of the novel’s black/white binary, I argue Adele’s racial liminality constitutes a form of racelessness.

However, racial liminality is not strictly related to one’s appearance or racial ancestry. One’s birthplace can also produce a racially liminal identity, as evinced by Jean Rhys’s *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a prequel to Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847). *Wide Sargasso Sea* depicts the liminality of the white creole. White creoles were born in the Caribbean, but had European ancestry. Their connection to the imperial center influenced their social status in the Caribbean. White creoles were not white like their European counterparts nor were they black or mixed race like much of the Caribbean population. Similar to mixed race individuals in the U.S., white creoles occupied an in-between status. *Wide Sargasso Sea* reimagines *Jane Eyre* from Bertha’s point of view, or Antoinette as she is known in the novel. Throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Antoinette’s status as a white creole continually creates tension, from the bullying she endures as a young girl to her conflict-ridden marriage to a white Englishman. Yet Antoinette is not a consistently sympathetic character. Rhys demonstrates both Antoinette’s participation in colonialism and her outcast status as a woman trapped in a patriarchal society.

Stanley and Rhys both display an awareness of the double audience their protagonists encounter. Stanley straddles both black and white audiences while Rhys appeals to colonial and colonized readers. Both women utilize the double audience to challenge stereotypes of racially liminal women. Additionally, the protagonists of *Gulf Stream* and *Wide Sargasso Sea* thwart the imperative to self-designate their racial identities. Instead, both characters hedge, offer non-answers, or simply refuse to claim a racial identity. By appealing to double audiences, yet denying both any definitive answers, these characters disrupt the performative demand to continually (re)constitute oneself as a stable, recognizable identity within dominant social norms.
Meanings of Racial Mixing

Though both “mulatto” and “creole” have been used in the U.S. and the Caribbean, I focus on mulatto as it functions in the U.S. and white creole as it operates in the Caribbean. I do so in order to demonstrate the extent to which visible racial “truths” determine racial identity and thus racelessness. In other words, mulatto identity hinges more directly on appearance. Supposedly black and white traits evince themselves on the body and the mulatto may be able to pass for white depending on skin color. Yet white creoles are both visibly and “truly” white. They are not mixed race. The white creole’s racial liminality does not stem from appearance or ancestry, but from proximity to non-whites, residence in the Caribbean, and even financial status. Race, and therefore racelessness, is not solely about how one looks, but also about how one behaves. Analyzing mulatto and white creole characters in specific literary contexts illuminates how race is premised on action. Racelessness subsequently relies to an extent on inaction. Pairing mulatto and white creole characters emphasizes the performative nature of racial identity and how negating performative norms can produce racelessness.

The term “mulatto” was first used in the U.S. in a 1644 Virginia legal case and continued to figure prominently in law, politics, and science as the country sought to delimit the boundaries of black and white racial identity (Williamson). Describing a person of both black and white racial descent, mulatto, as well as quadroon and octoroon, supposedly quantified the amount of “black blood” in an individual. According to Suzanne Bost, mulatto’s “derivation from mule reflects an attempt to deny reproductive capacity (and thus future identity) to mulattoes” (220).

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20 Mestizo, coolie, and dougla are just a few of the terms that also denote racial mixture. For further reading, see Jennifer Rahim, “‘Dougla, Half-doogla, Travesao, and the Limits of Hybridity’” (2010).
Mulattos were considered an “ephemeral, weak, and unstable breed” that would die out in a few generations (Bost 40).\(^{22}\) Whites often viewed mulattos as having positive “white” traits, which were unfortunately tainted by supposedly “black” traits. A fair skinned mulatta, for example, was chaste, pure, and delicate because of her light skin. Yet her black blood often produced “wanton sexuality” (Bost 36). Mulatto became a U.S. census category in 1850 at the height of antebellum racial tensions; however, the term was only legally recognized for seventy years. In 1920, mulatto ceased to be an option on the census. Black and white became the only options and any mixed race individual was labeled black according to the one-drop rule.

More contemporary criticism on mixed race identity tends to fall into one of two camps: racial liminality challenges racial hierarchies, evades definition, and acts subversively or racial liminality is produced by racial hierarchies and therefore cannot be subversive. In the former category, various critics espouse the subversive potential of mixed race individuals. Werner Sollors argues in *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997) that terms such as “creole” and “mestizaje” work to refuse the black/white racial binary.\(^{23}\) Similarly, Jose Buscaglia describes mulatto as that “which is difficult to locate” (79). The mulatto subject, Buscaglia suggests, “always moves beyond and escapes reduction or definition” (77). In stark contrast to the liberatory possibilities of the mulatto, Nadine Ehlers highlights how racial liminality only exists within the context of dominant racial hierarchies: “Liminality itself is produced by dominant norms and thus not necessarily subversive or liberating” (76). Writing of multiracialism more generally, Rainier Spencer argues that

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\(^{22}\) For further reading on the idea of mulatto sterility, see Werner Sollors, *Neither Black nor White yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature* (1997).

\(^{23}\) As Marisol de la Cadena (2005) notes, Mestizo is generally understood to be someone of mixed racial descent, specifically Spanish and American Indian. Mestizaje is a related term, but usually understood as a political ideology as opposed to a racial identity.
multiracial identities only end up bolstering the very racial hierarchies they purport to challenge. According to Spencer, multiracial identities do not refuse race, but instead reinforce its dominance. 24

Rather than view mixed race individuals as either subverting or reinforcing racial ideology, I see the potential for both options, particularly in literature. Literary representations of mixed race characters often grapple with appealing to both black and white audiences. The competing audiences influence the extent to which mixed race characters challenge racial ideologies. White readers, for example, found racial mixture threatening and thus required less transgressive mixed race characters. While black authors often had to appeal to mainstream, white readerships, they did not want to reinforce racial stereotypes of mixed race individuals either. The tragic mulatto trope refers to the trend in nineteenth and early twentieth century literature of mixed race characters who straddle black and white culture, but struggle to find a sense of belonging. As one might expect, black authors approached the tragic mulatto trope differently than white authors, the former often portraying more racially subversive characters than the latter.

In the early appearances of the tragic mulatto, the character figures as a racial outsider and a sensationalized representation of ruined womanhood. 25 The tragic mulatto trope frequently focuses on female characters because women’s bodies are sites of reproduction and often face

25 In The Mulatta and the Politics of Race (2004), Teresa Zackodnik dates the origins of the tragic mulatto trope to Lydia Maria Child’s 1842 short story “The Quadroons.” However, Marlene Daut and Werner Sollors, among others, trace the tragic mulatto to Victor Sejour’s “The Mulatto” (1837) and even John Gabriel Stedman’s Narrative of a five years expedition against the revolted Negroes of Surinam (1796).
the most scrutiny in debates about racial mixture. White authors depict the mulatto as trapped between black and white races, unable to belong to either world. She is often mistaken for white, but the “truth” of her black blood inevitably outs her. Mixed race women represented both racial and sexual violations of antebellum and Jim Crow racial ideology, as evinced in novels such as Clotel (1853) and The Octoroon (1859). Fictional mulattos often met untimely deaths in order to maximize white readers’ sympathy and minimize the defiance of the racial hierarchy.

While white authors often downplayed the mulatto character’s threat to existing racial ideologies, black authors frequently emphasized her subversive potential. As Teresa Zackodnik notes, black female authors such as Frances Harper, Pauline Hopkins, and Nella Larsen portrayed the mulatto character as challenging racialized notions of womanhood (10). From the 1840s-1950s, black women writers used mixed race characters for a variety of purposes: to manage abolitionist sympathy, to critique the politics of the “New Negro” renaissance, to exploit taxonomic racial fervor, and to challenge post-WWII racial optimism (Zackodnik 9). As the literary mulatto moved into the twentieth century, she became less of a racial outsider and more of a self-consciously, racially fluid individual (Bost 78).

Black authors did not wholly embrace the literary mulatto, however. Historically, there have been many critics of the tragic mulatto figure and this criticism persists today. Writing of Pauline Hopkins’ Contending Forces: A Romance Illustrative of Negro Life North and South (1900), Houston Baker finds an “ironic transmutation of the mark, sign, and act of conbuinage (read: ‘rape’) into a symbolic black code of beauty, grace, intelligence, and historically embodied

26 Because of their reproductive capacities, women were often held responsible for maintaining the “purity” of a race. Their sexuality often induced social anxiety, particularly in connection with race.

27 Other examples of white-authored texts that employ the tragic mulatto trope include Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Uncle Tom’s Cabin (1852), William Faulkner’s Light in August (1932), and Fannie Hurst’s Imitation of Life (1933).
prominence” (Workings of the Spirit 24). In other words, the mulatto is evidence of interracial sex, which often involved the rape of black women by white men. Praising her beauty, according to Baker, bestows value on the violence of interracial sex. Given that white authors often use the tragic mulatto to appeal to white audiences, the mulatto character can function in service of racial stereotypes and hierarchies. At the same time, however, the mulatto character can strategically use these stereotypes in order to critique racial ideology. Though white herself, Marie Stanley does not solely reduce her mixed race characters to racial stereotypes. Instead, Stanley uses the tragic mulatto trope to veil her critique of racial classification. *Gulf Stream* advances a version of racelessness while still placating white readers’ fears of race mixing.

“Difficult enough, God knows, for our kind”: *Gulf Stream and the Tragic Mulatto Trope*

Born in 1885, Marie Tilney Layet was raised in Mobile, Alabama, a city steeped in notions of white honor and gentility. When her parents both died, Marie went to live with her grandmother from the age of twelve until she was sixteen. Her grandmother was a close friend of Augusta Evans, at the time a well-known Southern writer, who was also the first American woman to earn $100,000 through her writing. When Marie’s grandmother died, she went to live with an uncle in New Jersey and then cousins in Ohio. She returned to Mobile when she was twenty-four, an accomplished artist with a developing alcohol problem. Back in Mobile, she opened an art studio where she accepted students. She also began answering advertisements for silent film scripts and became quite successful as a screenwriter (Delaney).

Around this time Marie met Stanley Sheip, the son of a wealthy lumberman, and they married in 1917. The couple later moved to Spring Hill, a well-to-do neighborhood where they entertained guests and held lavish parties. Wearing bright, flowing dresses, complete with even
brighter headscarves, Marie was often the life of the party. Indeed, those who attended her parties remember thinking she was under the influence of some sort of stimulant. Marie often disappeared from social life for periods of time and it was rumored that she had gone to an institution to seek treatment. Despite the rumors, Marie continued to flourish professionally and creatively. She co-founded the Little Theatre of Mobile where she directed and acted in productions and eventually began writing fiction (Delaney).

Stanley’s job later sent him to Apalachicola, Florida where Marie began work on her first novel, *Gulf Stream*. The novel was published in 1930 under the pseudonym Marie Stanley, a combination of her and her husband’s first names. Though the publisher originally expected sales to be high, the publishing industry during the Great Depression did not fare well. Even still, the novel sold 4,000 copies during its first run. (Delaney). A 1930 review in the *New York Times*, for example, called *Gulf Stream* a “first novel of decided merit” and lauded its fresh take on the “vexed and over-written question of mixed race identity” (“Race Problems”). The African American journal *Opportunity* described the novel as a “frank study of the crossfires of the caste” and praised its “sensitive delineation” (“Review”). Other publications were more critical. In the *Chicago Defender*, Dewey R. Jones called *Gulf Stream* “obviously artificial” and “a preaching if ever there was one.” The book deserved scrutiny, but did not, Dewey argued, rank highly as a literary work. Jones’s sentiment was echoed by the black population in Sandtown, which Stanley didn’t bother to rename in her fictional representation. They were outraged at her depiction of themselves and protested her use of dialect with black characters (Delaney).

Despite selling well and garnering reviews in multiple national newspapers, *Gulf Stream* has since faded into obscurity. In fact, other than the introduction and preface to the 1993 reprint of *Gulf Stream*, there exists no scholarly work on the novel or Marie Stanley. Though a New
York producer bought the dramatic rights to the novel soon after it was published, he later dropped the project, dissatisfied with the script. Marie was devastated and suffered from a period of depression exacerbated by her alcoholism. Her spirits revived, however, when she was invited to Melrose Plantation, a literary colony, to begin work on a second novel, *Penhazard*. Publishers turned down the manuscript, however, for not being “in step with the times” (Delaney xxiii). The rejection proved too much for Marie; she suffered a nervous breakdown from which she never recovered. She died in 1936 at the age of fifty-one.

Writing of Marie’s final years during which her mental health continued to deteriorate, Philip D. Beidler remarks: “The cost of literary authority, the assertion of fictional voice, can take myriad forms of institutional reprisal” (xxxviii). Citing other female writers such as Zelda Sayre, Sara Mayfield, and Harriet Hassell, Beidler emphasizes the difficulties faced by female writers who dared address taboo topics in their work.²⁸ Likely due to some combination of gendered authorship and “depression-era cultural malaise,” the novel has received no scholarly attention (Beidler xxxvi).

Just as Josephine Cogdell Schuyler groups *Gulf Stream* with other well-known passing novels, I argue Stanley warrants attention as a modernist female author. *Gulf Stream* contributes to debates about racial identity and racial mixing by simultaneously challenging and conforming to racial stereotypes. Stanley elicited more critique from black readers than she did white ones, but there were favorable reviews in African American publications. *Gulf Stream* was even added to the “Division of Negro Literature and History” in the New York Public Library’s Schomburg

²⁸ Zelda Sayre (1900-1948), was a novelist and painter who went on to marry F. Scott Fitzgerald. She was later diagnosed with schizophrenia and confined to a mental institution until her death. Sara Mayfield (1905-1979) was a journalist who also wrote a biography of H.L Mencken. Harriet Hassell (1911-1970) was a fiction writer whose 1938 novel *Rachel’s Children* was admired during its time for its depiction of the U.S. South.
Collection, which suggests black readership (“Library Notes”). Though the novel received valid critiques, it’s also worth considering how Stanley might have anticipated this dual audience in her representation of Adele.

At times, Stanley portrays Adele as caught between black and white societies, presenting both blackness and whiteness as desirable options. Ultimately, however, Adele refuses to choose either blackness or whiteness. She never decides where she “truly” belongs. Regulatory schema such as census categories and scientific quantifications of “black blood” attempted to make legible those who defy a visible racial truth. Yet Adele does not espouse the one-drop rule that would classify her as black nor does she pass for white. Instead, she is invested in maintaining illegibility. Within the black/white binary of the novel, I read Adele’s illegibility as a form of racelessness. Her performative negations, her refusal to participate in the iterative norms that would constitute her as a recognizable race, enable her to refuse racial categorization in favor of a raceless identity.

_Gulf Stream_ follows multiple generations of mixed race women in southern Alabama during the early twentieth century. The narrative opens with Adele living in Sandtown, a poor black neighborhood. Adele is sixteen and lives with her aunt, Delly Childers. Because of Adele’s light skin and general attractiveness, blacks in Sandtown consider her conceited and aloof. They aren’t entirely wrong. A local boy, Jed, harbors feelings for Adele, but she scorns his advances because she considers him too dark-skinned. While delivering laundry to the white Fenleigh family in the wealthy neighborhood of Silver Hill, Adele meets Archie, the Fenleigh’s son. The two quickly begin an affair that ends almost as abruptly. Adele becomes pregnant and Archie goes on to marry a demure, well-to-do white woman.
At first glance, Adele seems to fit the tragic mulatto trope. The narrator makes sure to note her beauty and slim figure and that the other Sandtown residents consider her “upperty” (5). On seeing her carrying a load of laundry for the first time, her neighbors laugh and gawk, telling each other that “Adele’s done foun’ out her haid’s ez flat ez anybody’s an’ she’s toten a basket on hit putty ez you please” (6). The first window into Adele’s thoughts is when she reflects on her light skin, so light that she’s often mistaken for a white girl. She proudly notes her “French blood” throughout the novel in an attempt to differentiate herself from the black residents of Sandtown. Adele longs to leave Sandtown and this escapism finds an outlet when she begins an affair with Archie Fenleigh. Our first impressions of Adele position her as a tragic mulatto: beautiful, light-skinned, desirous of a white lover, and torn between two racial worlds yet unable to fit into either.

After learning she is pregnant, Adele becomes convinced that her child will have dark skin, and she suffers a nervous breakdown on giving birth. Adele leaves her infant daughter with Delly and goes to Mille Fleur, a mulatto colony, to assist an ailing woman, Bezelia Antoine. Bezelia was once a beautiful, light-skinned mulatto, but is now dying of tuberculosis. Faced with her mortality, Bezelia decides to impart some life lessons to Adele. Bezelia coaches Adele regarding men, advising her to never give more than she receives. She also urges Adele to travel to Europe, where her mixed race identity will be less detrimental. After Bezelia’s death, Adele almost travels to Havana with an older, wealthy white man named Jerry Benson. She ends up staying in Mille Fleur though, as Bezelia has bequeathed Adele her house.

While still living in Sandtown, Adele vacillates between desiring the privilege of the white world and wanting to maintain familial connections in the black world. Her oscillation between black and white shifts, however, when she goes to live with Bezelia in Mille Fleur.
Mille Fleur is based on an actual creole community in Southern Alabama, Mon Louis Island, which was founded by French colonists in the 18th century (Bateman). While Mon Louis’ inhabitants were white, black, and creole, the fictional Mille Fleur is home to strictly mixed race individuals. Rather than a site of racial mixing and harmony, Mille Fleur is more of an exile for those who challenge the black/white binary.

Mille Fleur’s inhabitants also seem temporally suspended, lending to the island’s strangeness. There is Bezelia, of course: the dying mulatto whose beauty once afforded her lovers and luxuries in France. Bezelia remains fixated on this time of her life, even suggesting that she and Adele travel to France together despite her illness. There is Zack, who works for Bezelia, and is mentally disabled because of the pervasive inbreeding of the Mille Fleur residents. The narrator describes Zack as a boy in a man’s body, temporally displaced. Finally, there are also the Levergne girls who are not girls at all. Rather, they are elderly women who remain indoors to maintain their light skin in the hopes of attracting a white suitor. Not only do the mulatto residents of Mille Fleur occupy a racially liminal position, but their mixed race status also creates temporal and spatial liminality.

Adele comes to feel at home in the liminal world of Mille Fleur. In fact, she doesn’t leave Mille Fleur for years despite others urging her to visit the ailing Delly in Sandtown. Adele has little to no contact with whites either, barring the doctor and the preacher who tend to Bezelia. After Bezelia’s death, Adele has the opportunity to travel to Cuba with the white Jerry Benson. Cuba is more racially tolerant and Adele could presumably pass for white if she wanted. With her bags packed for Havana, Adele’s plans suddenly change when Dr. Tom Rogers arrives, carrying news of Delly’s failing health. Torn between the white and black world, Adele forgoes her trip to Cuba and ventures back to Sandtown. Her return to Sandtown is not a wholehearted
embrace of blackness, however. Adele’s trip is brief; she soon returns to Mille Fleur with her daughter, Delia, whom she learns is actually quite light skinned. While tragic mulattos are often torn between competing racial identities, and Adele certainly is, she also makes a conscious decision to flout binary options for racial identification. She instead chooses a third option: the spatially and temporally suspended, mixed-race island of Mille Fleur.

Though Adele does embrace her liminal racial status, at other times she seems to conform to stereotypes of mixed race women. One such stereotype, which we encounter early in the novel, is that mixed race women most desire a white male lover. Adele confirms this belief when she chooses Archie Fenleigh over Jed, specifically because Jed is too dark-skinned and Archie represents the privileges of whiteness. Yet Adele is not consistent with this attitude throughout the novel. After her affair with Archie, she declines other relationships with white men. In fact, she has no romantic relationships after Archie Fenleigh. While Adele seriously considers becoming Jerry Benson’s mistress, the lure of a white lover is not strong enough to pull her away from Delly or Mille Fleur. As a teenager, Adele desires a white lover and the privileges such a relationship could bring. However, she eschews a similar opportunity as an adult, implying she has learned from past mistakes.

Later in the novel, Tom Rogers finally makes his feelings towards Adele known, telling her she doesn’t have to be alone. Meeting his eyes, Adele looks into their “gray depths” and sees a “glitter that she knew so well. Hawk glitter, male glitter” (302). By likening Rogers to a hawk, Adele perceives him as predatory; male desire is dangerous. White lovers are not the ultimate prize, but threatening. Horrified, Adele responds: “‘Oh, no, Doctor Tom, not that, from you, not that, not that’” (303). Adele refuses even to name his desire, denying white male sexuality the primacy it once held. By avoiding any romantic or sexual relationships, Adele challenges the
stereotype of mulattos as hypersexual. Furthermore, by rejecting Rogers specifically, Adele implicitly challenges his view of mixed race women as “treacherous [and] voluptuous” (222).

We could also read Adele’s lack of visible desire differently, however. By refusing to take a lover, black or white, Adele seems to atone for her transgressions with Archie. In order for Adele to appear sympathetic to white readers, she must demonstrate regret and change her ways. Had Adele continued to have relationships with white men, or even extramarital relationships with any men, white readers would likely view her as confirmation of the tragic mulatto’s hypersexuality. Instead, Adele espouses a politics of respectability and becomes unable or unwilling to name sexual desire. Adele’s refusal of various white men, while challenging stereotypes of the tragic mulatto, is also an effort to appeal to white audiences. It would be reductive to view Adele’s sexuality as either an appeal to white audiences or a challenge to stereotypes of mixed race women. Instead, Adele’s silence and refusal regarding her sexuality make her more sympathetic to white audiences while still denying the vaunted status of white men as lovers. Stanley seems to anticipate the double audience that will read her novel and simultaneously depicts Adele as challenging and conforming to white expectations of mixed race women.

Stanley’s awareness of her double audience surfaces again during Adele and Delia’s arguments about race. Throughout Delia’s childhood, Adele works to keep the girl out of sight, both to preserve her light complexion and to ensure that her mixed race identity does not become common knowledge beyond the island. Adele’s ultimate goal is to send Delia to Europe to be the

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29 In Dark Continent of Our Bodies: Black Feminism & Politics of Respectability (2001), E. Frances White notes that black women in “clubs and in church organizations used respectability as a discourse of resistance. By emphasizing the manners and morals of good black women, club and church women were able to counter racist discourse that used negative stereotypes to portray all black women as innately inferior” (36).
mistress of a white man. Yet Delia defies her mother by attending university where they teach her “not to pretend to be white” when she is not (269). Furthermore, Delia becomes engaged to a man named Melton Johnson who has “heavy thick lips [...] tight hair [and a] black face” (271). On learning of the engagement, Adele slaps Delia. Furious, she calls Delia “a white nigger after all” (272). Delia seems to embrace the one-drop rule that classifies her as black by default, eschewing the label “creole” and the pretensions of the “near-whites” at Mille Fleur. Adele, however, both acknowledges and finds fault with Delia’s mixed race identity. Adele knows full well that Delia is not “truly” white, but can only pass. She wouldn’t dare classify her daughter as black either. There seems to be no racial identity that is both socially feasible and desirable, according to Adele.

Instead, Adele seems to prefer a lack of racial identification, at least for herself. Adele does not define herself racially in the way that other characters in the novel do. Though Adele frequently acknowledges how others perceive her race, and even observes the race of others, she is surprisingly silent on how she identifies herself racially. She recognizes that she can pass for white and that others might describe her as “yellow” (7). Delly describes Adele as “bright” (16) while Archie refers to her as a “little half-breed” (47). Adele is glad when she learns her father was white, yet she doesn’t label herself as “black” or “white.” She also refuses to identify as mixed race. When Dr. Rogers first takes her to Mille Fleur, he tells her she is going to be with others like her: creoles. Adele scorns this comparison, saying the creoles are “niggers” and that she has “French blood” (100). She not only distances herself from the creole label, but also denies the possibility of a creole identity altogether, instead defaulting to the one-drop rule that classifies creoles as black. Adele asserts a national identity, but not a racial one. The closest she comes to racial identification is when she contemplates suicide. Yet she still doesn’t identify as
white or black, or anything in between for that matter. We recognize Adele as mixed race based on our own assumptions about racial identity as well as the racial logic of the novel. However, Adele herself never identifies racially and it is her mixed race identity that provides her with the very opportunity to refuse racial identity.

Adele’s feelings regarding creole identity resurface when she decides to send Delia to school in the North. She reasons there will be others like Delia: creoles. In a strange role reversal, Delia tells her mother she is not creole; she instead identifies as black. Adele seems now to acknowledge the existence of a creole identity, even if she never explicitly identifies herself with it. Like the young Adele, Delia refuses to identify as a creole, but for very different reasons. Both young Adele and Delia demonstrate some belief in the one-drop rule by associating mixed race identity with blackness, yet this same belief leads to quite different attitudes towards race. As a teenager, Adele recognizes the one-drop rule in order to differentiate herself from the residents of Mille Fleur, whom she disdains. Delia also upholds the one-drop rule, but in order to embrace blackness; she despises the way Mille Fleur residents aspire to whiteness. Both Adele and Delia refuse to identify as creoles: Adele because they are not white enough and Delia because they are not black enough. Both Adele’s and Delia’s racial politics demonstrate that racial liminality relies to an extent on the black/white binary. Yet this liminality also provides room to negotiate and find multiple meanings within a rigid racial binary.

At the end of the novel, Adele seems as if she will conform to the most tragic aspect of the tragic mulatto trope by committing suicide. After rejecting Rogers’ advances, Adele stands alone and contemplates Delia’s impending marriage to a black man. The thought induces a “retch of nausea” and she quickly decides to drown herself: “No. No. She would never submit to that […] She knew what she must do; there was nothing else” (303). Her decision to drown
herself, however, is couched in vague referents and negative statements. “Submit to that,” syntactically, refers to the retch of nausea. The repetition of “no” and “nothing” indicates a refusal, but syntactically, it’s unclear what this is a refusal of. We can only infer Adele refuses blackness and living in a world where she is confronted with her own racial identity. We assume she has decided upon suicide because there is a long literary tradition of women like her self-destructing.

Indeed, Adele does walk down to the water, contemplating Jed’s death and the debate about whether he had committed suicide. Others thought “Jed was too much a nigger for suicide…They have to have a lot of white blood in ‘em…” (85). Though the novel does not elaborate on this racist logic, we might infer whiteness results in the willpower to commit suicide. Adele thankfully observes she has “white blood enough” to drown herself (304). As Adele walks deeper into the water, she wonders how far she must walk. When the water rises to her throat, Adele abruptly stops: “Suddenly she turned. The water gave a great silvery swirl at the quick movement. She walked back to the beach, her head bent” (304). With that, the novel ends, leaving the reader with a sense of ambivalence. According to the racial logic of the novel, we might read this moment as indicative of Adele’s “black blood.” She, like Jed, has too much black blood to commit suicide. By the same token, however, she has enough “white blood” to consider suicide and nearly follow through. Adele’s head is bent, yet she is alive. Her contemplation of suicide, like her narrative in general, is contradictory and evades definitive interpretations. Interestingly, this final passage frames Adele’s thoughts as an open-ended quote, which begins: “‘Well, she had white blood enough […]’” (304). Yet there is no closing quotation mark. Instead, the moment continues with Adele’s thoughts mixing with the narrator’s. While this might simply be a misprint, it also leaves the ending of the novel quite literally open-ended.
We cannot definitively attach meaning to Adele’s suicide attempt and though her head is bent, the passage formally indicates that Adele has more to say.

In many ways, Adele does conform to the tragic mulatto trope: she is light-skinned and beautiful and seems torn between racial identities at the same time that she aspires to whiteness. Yet to read Stanley as solely following these generic conventions would be a reductive interpretation of the novel. Instead, Stanley uses the tragic mulatto trope to elicit sympathy from white audiences and provide white readers with a version of racial otherness that is non-threatening. Additionally, the multigenerational plot suggests that future generations of mixed race individuals will eschew whiteness as the ideal, revealing an awareness of black readers. However, there also exists an undercurrent in the novel that challenges black/white racial binaries. Adele maintains a silence throughout the novel that is both subtle and easily misinterpreted.

I view Adele’s silence not as passive, but as a strategic evasion of racial classification. Adele deliberately abstains from self-identifying racially. Choosing either whiteness or blackness would foreclose other racial options. For Adele to keep her options open, she must choose no race. In other words, Adele wants to retain black familial connections and the privileges of looking white. To maintain these options, she must straddle a liminal position between blackness and whiteness rather than relegate herself to one or the other. Adele remains invested in illegibility and occupies a liminal raceless position within the black/white binary of the novel. Stanley utilizes this liminality to appeal to black and white readers, yet Adele ultimately denies both audiences the answer as to where, and with whom, she belongs.
“unnameable and untraceable”: Locating the Creole

Unlike mulatto, creole can refer to a range of things, from food to language to people. Creole, as Sybil Kein suggests, has a “seemingly infinite number of definitions” (10). I am particularly interested in creole as it refers to people, as this usage also implies racial identity. Creole can mean those of African origins or whites living in the Caribbean. Additionally, sectors of the U.S., particularly along the Gulf Coast, also recognize creole populations as racially and culturally determined by African, Spanish, and French influences. The interaction and synthesis of these various cultures often produces what’s known as “creolization,” a term that according to Nicole N. Aljoe, “emphasizes the plural, constantly changing nature of culture” (20). Creolization recognizes that identity and culture exist along a “continuum of possibilities” (ibid). Similarly, Charles Stewart defines creolization as “the resilience, creativity, and inevitability of cultural mixture” (4).

While creolization can subvert rigid social hierarchies, there are also valid critiques of the term. Jennifer Rahim, for example, posits that theories of hybridity and creolization often end up reinforcing the same logic of hierarchical difference they purport to challenge. Many Indo-Caribbeans are also skeptical of creolization because it privileges the Afro-creole influence in the Caribbean (Rahim 1). There are also negative affective connotations to both creole and creolization. H. Adhlai Murdoch argues “creole” embodies “colonialism’s repulsion for the unnameable and untraceable hybrid” (146). Creole invokes the colonialist othering of non-Europeans. Interestingly, this othering is not strictly tied to racial identity, as white creoles were also considered inferior to their European counterparts.

Whereas the mulatto was denigrated because of racial mixture, white creoles were not mixed race. They existed in a liminal racial position; though technically white, they didn’t
belong with Europeans nor did they associate with people of color. According to David Lambert, white creoles often tried to emphasize their “shared British culture, common political traditions and their essential Englishness,” but met with little success (2). To whites living in England, the “‘un-English’ West Indian was symptomatic of a ‘bad’ white identity that many metropolitan Britons sought to distance themselves from” (Lambert 1-2). If they were poor, white creoles found themselves further marginalized by white Britons. Dominant racial discourse associated authentic whiteness with middle to upper-class Englishness (Lambert 103). After Emancipation, many white creoles encountered financial hardship, which exacerbated their status as “un-English.” This is not to minimize the role white creoles played in perpetuating slavery and racial hierarchies, but to demonstrate the liminal status of white creoles that enabled a form of racelessness.

While there is no “tragic creole” trope comparable to the tragic mulatto in Caribbean literature, there are numerous examples of white creole characters who do not belong to either European or Caribbean society. These characters transgress norms of race, gender, and class and are subsequently shunned by white, black, and mixed race cultures. In “The Outsider’s Voice: White Creole Women Novelists in the Caribbean Literary Tradition” (1996), Evelyn O’Callaghan describes white creole female characters as “second-class member[s] of an already precarious social group” (281). For female characters, their gender exacerbates the social marginalization they encounter as white creoles due to the patriarchal system of colonialism. The white creole woman “belongs emotionally and spiritually to no group” and with “neither blackness, nor money and ‘Englishness’ as a passport to identity,” she often finds herself isolated and alone (ibid). While the Caribbean espouses a more fluid racial ideology than the U.S., the

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30 See, for example, Ada Quayle’s *The Mistress* (1957), Lucille Iremonger’s *Creole* (1950), and John Hearne’s *Stranger at the Gate* (1956).
denigration of white creoles reveals the hierarchy of whiteness. In the case of white creole women, their gender, birthplace, and financial status combine to produce a liminal racial position. Their liminality, and the stigma it entails, reveals another dimension of creolization, one premised on absence rather than presence.

Critics may disagree about whether “creole” and “creolization” challenge or reinforce racial hierarchies, yet there seems to be a consensus that these terms imply multiplicity. In the case of the white creole, however, creole entails absence and negation rather than a vast array of possibilities. O’Callaghan suggests white creole characters “inhabit a kind of vacuum regarding their racial and cultural identity” (“The Outsider’s Voice” 278). Writing of Wide Sargasso Sea, Alexandra Neel describes Rhys as portraying “emptied out personhood” (172). In a similar vein, Sylvia Cappello points to the negative construction of creole identity in the novel. The term “white creole” connotes absence, emptiness, and negation, which stands in stark contrast to the “continuum of possibilities” we might otherwise associate with creole identity. O’Callaghan describes white creole female characters as “ultimate outsiders” who present a negative variation of creolization: “A product of two cultures, she’s yet denied and despised by both” (“The Outsider’s Voice” 281). Antoinette, the protagonist of Wide Sargasso Sea, is a white creole who remains suspended between English whites and Caribbean people of color, but unable to belong to either group. Her liminal status causes her both to subvert and uphold colonialist racial beliefs. Yet Antoinette’s creole identity is premised on silence and absence rather than multiplicity and hybridity, presenting a negative version of creolization. Wide Sargasso Sea demonstrates how debates about liminal identities such as the white creole might provoke a rejection, rather than a synthesis, of racial options.
“None of you understand about us”: White creole liminality in *Wide Sargasso Sea*

Born in 1890, Ella Gwendolen Rees Williams used many different names throughout her life before finally settling on Jean Rhys. Rhys’s father was a Welsh doctor and her mother was a third generation Dominican white creole with Scots ancestry. Rhys lived in Dominica until she was seventeen and then left for England. She remained in Europe for the rest of her life and only returned to Dominica once in the 1930s. Throughout her life, Rhys had three husbands: Jean Marie Lenglet, Leslie Tilden-Smith, and Max Hamer. Her marriage to Hamer ended with his death in 1966 after he was imprisoned for fraud. Rhys maintained a close relationship with Ford Madox Ford, who was influential in first getting her work published (Carr).

Most of Rhys’s oeuvre appeared before WWII. Novels such as *Voyage in the Dark* (1934) and *Good Morning, Midnight* (1939) follow young women in urban centers as they attempt to navigate the economic difficulties and gendered expectations imposed on single young women. After a long absence from the literary scene, due to a combination of illness and perfectionism, Rhys published *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. The novel was met with success and brought renewed attention to an author many incorrectly assumed to be dead.31 *Wide Sargasso Sea* reimagines Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* from the point of view of the first Mrs. Rochester, a white creole from the Caribbean. Considered a quintessential example of “writing back to the empire,” *Wide Sargasso Sea* has now become canonized as a postcolonial text.32

31 In *Jean Rhys* (1996), Helen Carr describes how during Rhys’s absence from the literary scene, the actress Selma Vaz Dias wanted to turn *Good Morning, Midnight* into a play but needed Rhys’s permission. Dias was unable to trace Rhys, however, and many assumed Rhys was dead. Rhys happened to see an advertisement in the *New Statesman* asking for information on Rhys and answered it just in time for Dias. The fortuitous event led to Rhys’s “rediscovery” (xiv).
32 In “‘Writing Back’: contemporary re-visionary fiction” (2006), Peter Widdowson describes the sub-genre of “writing back”: “novels which ‘write back to’—indeed, ‘rewrite’—canonic texts from the past, and hence call to account formative narratives that have arguably been central to the construction of ‘our’ consciousness” (491).
Rhys’s status as a Caribbean writer, however, was not always agreed upon. After all, she left the Caribbean as a teenager and only returned once the rest of her life. Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s oft-cited pronouncement that “White Creoles in the English and French West Indies have separated themselves by too wide a gulf and have contributed too little culturally” to be able to identify with the West Indies casts doubt on Rhys’s status as a Caribbean writer (Contradictory Omens 38). Brathwaite later recanted, however, calling Wide Sargasso Sea a “great Caribbean novel” (“A Post-Cautionary Tale” 69). I agree with Wally Look-Lai who was the first to argue for Wide Sargasso Sea’s place among Caribbean literature. The novel focuses on the “existential chasm between white West Indians and their English ancestors,” Look-Lai argues, and is therefore “among the major achievements of West Indian literature” (22).

Rather than try to fix Rhys as English or Caribbean, I examine the influence of both cultures on her life and work, particularly Wide Sargasso Sea. Wide Sargasso Sea is a Caribbean novel whose protagonist both exploits and is exploited by patriarchal and colonialist power structures. As a white creole, Antoinette simultaneously critiques and benefits from social hierarchies. She is not white like her European counterparts, nor is she black or colored. Antoinette retains some privileges of the white planter class, yet her financial straits and Caribbean origins make her inferior to European whites. Deciding where she belongs proves to be a struggle throughout the novel.

Rhys herself also felt an inability to belong anywhere. She sensed she didn’t fit in with white English society and that she was scorned because of her lack of money and Caribbean origins. However, Rhys was not entirely at home in the Caribbean either. Descended from slave owners, Rhys occupied a relatively privileged position compared to non-whites on the island. Yet her family’s finances were in a continual decline and she felt her racial privilege was
undermined by her class status. Rhys sums up her sense of dislocation in England in her unfinished autobiography, *Smile Please* (1979):

I would never be part of anything. I would never really belong anywhere, and I knew it, and all my life would be the same, trying to belong, and failing […] I am a stranger and I always will be […] I don’t know what I want. And if I did I couldn’t say it, for I don’t speak their language and I never will (100).

Rhys recognizes that while she literally shares the English language with those around her, her financial difficulties and Caribbean origins prevented her from even beginning to articulate how she would belong in English society.

*Antoinette*, the protagonist of *Wide Sargasso Sea*, feels a similar sense of dislocation.

From an early age, Antoinette experiences many moments of racial othering due to her status as a white creole and her family’s declining finances. Rhys sets *Wide Sargasso Sea* just after the 1833 Emancipation Act in Jamaica in order to demonstrate the financial effects of emancipation on the planter class.\(^{33}\) The first sentences of the novel indicate Antoinette’s difference from other whites: “They say when trouble comes close ranks, and so the white people did. But we were not in their ranks” (9). Antoinette doesn’t necessarily mean she and her family are not white, but that whiteness is stratified according to socioeconomic class. Other children on the island recognize the Cosway family’s economic precarity and how class affects racial superiority. One child calls Antoinette a “white cockroach” (13) and later when burning Antoinette’s home, the black crowd calls her family “white niggers” (25). The seeming oxymoron of “white niggers” reveals that while Antoinette and her family are visibly white, their racial superiority is compromised by their lack of money.

\(^{33}\) In contrast, *Jane Eyre* is set before the Emancipation Act.
A formative moment in Antoinette’s childhood is while swimming with a black friend, Tia. The two make a bet over whether Antoinette can perform a trick underwater. Tia claims the money, to which Antoinette responds: “Keep them then, you cheating nigger […] I can get more if I want to” (14). Feeling embarrassed, Antoinette attempts to reassert her racial and economic superiority by insulting Tia and claiming the handful of coins is of no importance to her. Tia, however, scoffs at Antoinette’s pretensions: “That’s not what she hear, she said. She hear all we poor like beggar […] Plenty white people in Jamaica. Real white people, they got gold money. They didn’t look at us, nobody see them come near us. Old time white people nothing but white nigger now, and black nigger better than white nigger” (14). “Real” white people have money and to be a lesser white is to be worse than black. While whiteness exists in opposition to blackness, whiteness itself is not a monolith. Instead, whiteness is stratified according to socioeconomic status. Because the bounds of whiteness require continual policing, failing to uphold normative, upwardly mobile whiteness is worse than never being white at all.

The racial othering of Antoinette persists into adulthood and her marriage to a white Englishman. Early in his narration, Antoinette’s husband observes her “long, sad, dark alien eyes” which he finds “disconcerting” (39). He continues: “Creole of pure English descent she may be, but they are not English or European either” (39). By positioning Antoinette as “alien” and neither English nor European, he relegates her to utter foreignness; she belongs nowhere. He also perpetuates the trope that whites born in the Caribbean are not the same as whites born in Europe. They have been tainted by their warm climates and proximity to non-whites. Daniel Cosway, Antoinette’s half-brother, reinforces Rochester’s belief in Antoinette’s otherness. Cosway writes to Rochester to warn him of Antoinette’s latent mental instability: “[…] soon the madness that is in her,” he writes, “and in all these white Creoles, come out” (57). Cosway
confirms what Rochester has suspected: Antoinette’s white creole status is indicative of mental instability and her dissimilarity from English whites.

It’s important to note, however, that Antoinette is not simply a passive victim of patriarchal control. She is also part of the colonial system and often perpetuates colonial, racist hierarchies. Antoinette’s confrontation with Tia is an early example of the ways Antoinette defines herself against a black racial other in an attempt to bolster her own social superiority. Yet this moment is not a one-off childish argument. Instead, Antoinette reinforces a racial hierarchy throughout her life. For example, Antoinette never critiques the system of slavery; instead, as Karina Smith argues, Antoinette is sympathetic to the planter class, which has suffered economic hardships in the wake of emancipation.

At one point, Antoinette’s husband notes that he cannot understand the songs Amelie sings. Antoinette replies: “It was a song about a white cockroach. That’s me. That’s what they call all of us who were here before their own people in Africa sold them to the slave traders” (61). Antoinette suggests white creoles were in Dominica before slaves and implies whites have more claim to the land than blacks or coloreds. Additionally, she blames Africans, not European colonizers, for slavery. According to Antoinette, Africans sold each other into slavery and the slave traders merely received human chattel. Antoinette fails to acknowledge how she and her ancestors benefitted from slavery and displaces responsibility onto the slaves themselves. While Antoinette does occupy a liminal position because of her white creole origins, she is not uniformly sympathetic to the plight of former slaves. At times, she defends the system of slavery and the racial hierarchy upon which it was built.

In fact, the novel as a whole is problematic in its representation of non-white characters. Gayatri Spivak’s seminal essay, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism” (1985),
argues that Christophine is “tangential” to the novel and critiques the fact that Christophine
simply disappears from the text, well before the conclusion, “with neither narrative nor
characterological explanation or justice” (272). Similarly, Veronica Gregg points to the
“profoundly racialized, even racist” structure of the novel in which black West Indians serve as
“props to Creole identity and cultural objects” (37). Though Antoinette is close to Christophine,
she does not acknowledge, let alone critique, the racialized power dynamic between them. As a
child, Antoinette learns her father gave the young Christophine to her mother as a wedding gift.
While Christophine remains with the family even after emancipation, her ties to the Cosways are
built on slavery. Once a slave and now a servant to the Cosways, Christophine has a hierarchical
relationship with Antoinette.

Additionally, Antoinette seems to value Christophine in part because she is not like other
blacks in Dominica. Antoinette describes Christophine as darker-skinned, quieter, and more adept
at languages than other black women. She also does not associate with other black people, not
even her son (12). Rhys herself recognized Christophine’s exceptional status; in a 1964 letter to
Diana Athill, Rhys laments that she made Christophine “too articulate” (Gregg 41-42). For
Antoinette, associating with Christophine does not challenge the racial hierarchy, as
Christophine is “not like the other [black] women” (12). Antoinette implicitly reinforces notions
of black inferiority by upholding Christophine’s singular status.

Like Gulf Stream’s Adele, Antoinette is not a uniformly sympathetic character. Both
Adele and Antoinette denigrate blackness in order to bolster their own sense of racial superiority.
Though both characters suffer because of their racial identities, particularly in relation to their
status as women, Antoinette and Adele also perpetuate the very racial hierarchies that position
them as other. While Adele espouses white Southern ideologies about blackness and racial
mixing, Antoinette reinforces colonialist beliefs about black inferiority. Yet these characters are not wholly unsympathetic either. Just as Adele and Antoinette occupy liminal positions in relation to race, they also occupy liminal positions in relation to dominant and subordinate social strata. Their appeal to multiple audiences enables them to refuse either audience. Antoinette does define herself in opposition to blackness, but she remains silent on any “true” racial identity she might have.

While various other characters define Antoinette’s racial identity, she is surprisingly silent on her race. Various people call Antoinette a “white cockroach” and Rochester refers to her as “Creole of pure English descent.” Talking to Rochester, Christophine tells him Antoinette is “not beke like you, but she is beke, and not like us either” (93). Antoinette does acknowledge racial identity and is aware that others perceive her as an outsider. When her mother marries her stepfather, Mr. Mason, Antoinette thinks she is “more like an English girl” (21) and that she should be “shy about [her] coloured relatives” (30). Yet Antoinette does not seem to claim a racial identity; instead she claims a sense of dislocation. After Antoinette tells her husband that Africans sold each other into slavery, she comments on her inability to belong anywhere:

And I’ve heard English women call us white niggers. So between you I often wonder who I am and where is my country and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all (61).

Antoinette recognizes the racial pejoratives refer to her and her family and goes on to acknowledge her family’s origins in the Caribbean. Yet she doesn’t call herself a creole (or anything for that matter). Instead, she wonders who she is and where she belongs, but seems unable to provide an answer. Much like *Gulf Stream*’s Adele, Antoinette continually encounters racial identities imposed on her by others. Yet both Adele and Antoinette abstain from naming
their races, disrupting the iterative processes that consolidate them as unified and recognizable identities. Everyone else identifies these women racially, but they refuse to participate in racial self-identification. They instead occupy raceless subjectivities. Antoinette is not black or colored, but according to colonial logic, she isn’t quite white either. Rather than try and instantiate herself in one of these categories, however, Antoinette maintains a silence that perpetuates her racial liminality.

Antoinette realizes the ways silence can disrupt knowledge production early in the novel. As a teenager at the convent, Antoinette receives a visit from her uncle who tells her he’ll have friends visiting soon from England. Feeling a sense of dismay, Antoinette remains silent, thinking, “Say nothing and it may not be true” (35). Events and identities are made manifest through language and by refusing to articulate the impending visit, Antoinette attempts to deny its very existence. She also uses similar language regarding herself. As a child, Antoinette ventures into the wild greenery near Coulibri to escape people. Observing the red and yellow flowers around her, she reflects, “[…] it was as if a door opened and I was somewhere else, something else. Not myself any longer” (16). Antoinette is no longer herself; in fact she is not someone else, but something else, distancing herself even further from her identity. Antoinette’s vague language dislocates her from her surroundings and her identity, but doesn’t definitively place her anywhere else. She is something that is somewhere, but we know neither what nor where she is. Antoinette refuses to articulate her own identity, revealing the possibility of denying a definitive identity.

Indeed, the failure of language or the refusal to speak is a common theme throughout *Wide Sargasso Sea* and one that has received significant critical attention. Spivak’s “Three Women’s Texts” was one of the first to argue for the significance of language in the novel and
subsequent scholars echo this focus. Jennifer Gilchrist, for example, notes that words are “ineffectual” in the novel and that Antoinette “uses flat language that disowns, rejects, or refuses pre-encoded referents” (465). Antoinette often capitalizes on the subversive potential of avoiding communication. Before Antoinette marries, she doubts the impending wedding. After talking to her fiancé, she finally agrees to carry on with the ceremony. Or so it seems. He asks her if he can “tell poor Richard that it was a mistake” and that they’ll continue with the wedding (47). Antoinette nods but provides no verbal confirmation, casting doubt on her willingness to marry him. What does she think is the mistake? Her cold feet or the impending marriage itself? Rochester’s vague referent “it” does not specify and he himself seems unsure of Antoinette’s response. Later in their marriage, Rochester observes his wife, remembering how she tried to avoid the marriage: “I’d remember her effort to escape […] In any case she had given way, but coldly, unwillingly, trying to protect herself with silence and a blank face” (53-54). Rochester recognizes Antoinette’s concession to marriage is undermined by her cold and unwilling acceptance. Additionally, her inscrutable visage, her refusal to make herself known to Rochester, thwarts his expectation of being able to know and define people and their surroundings.

In an attempt to combat what he perceives as white creole instability, Rochester tries to assimilate Antoinette to English ways, even going so far as to rename her Bertha, the name used in Bronte’s novel. Antoinette repeatedly says her name is not Bertha, asking her husband why he insists on calling her that. He replies: “Because it is a name I’m particularly fond of. I think of you as Bertha” (81). Later on, Antoinette reiterates her frustration with her unwanted renaming: “Bertha is not my name. You are trying to make me into someone else, calling me by another

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name. I know, that’s obeah too” (88). Many critics discuss Rochester’s renaming of Antoinette. Laura E. Ciolkowski, for example, describes Rochester’s actions as “blasphemously baptizing [Antoinette] the madwoman of Charlotte Brontë’s Victorian attic” (349). M.M. Adjarian further analyzes Antoinette’s renaming in terms of colonialism: “Rochester coerces his wife to subsume her identity and all the cultural and personal associations that go along with it” (206). Likening Rochester to Christopher Columbus, the “archetypal colonizer-figure of the Americas,” Adjarian compares Antoinette to the “indigenous people who first met Columbus” (207). Rochester’s renaming represents the ways patriarchal, colonial powers used language to define and delimit the identities of women and colonial subjects, usually in service of reinforcing patriarchal, colonial dominance. Antoinette recognizes this renaming as an attempt to control and remake her identity; by referring to Rochester’s efforts as “obeah,” Antoinette indicted dominant colonial logic, which positions obeah as a lesser, and corrupt, form of knowledge. The colonizer’s method of knowledge production is just as corrupt to colonial subjects as the English perceive obeah to be.

Rochester’s frustration with his inability to know applies to other characters and even the landscape. When Rochester asks Amelie about Daniel Cosway, she ultimately responds in a very low voice: “I am sorry for you.” Rochester seems not to have heard her, as he asks her what she said. Amelie responds, “I don’t say nothing, master” (73). Amelie’s response is significant for two reasons. First, she thwarts Rochester’s desire to know; instead, she possesses knowledge that

she withholds from him, inverting the typical hierarchy between colonizer and colonized.

Second, Amelie’s statement contains a double negative. We might understand Amelie’s response to mean “I didn’t say anything” or “I said nothing.” She seems to be retracting her admission of sympathy and her inclusion of “master” appears to reinstate the power dynamic between the two.

Yet we could also read Amelie’s statement more literally: she does not say nothing, which means she does say something. In Jean Rhys (2012), Helen Carr notes that Rhys’s fiction “mocks the language by which the powerful keep control,” and this sense of mocking the powerful is evident in Amelie’s interaction with Rochester (106). Amelie couches her knowledge in language that appears submissive to Rochester, working within the colonial framework in order to resist it. It is significant that Amelie, a female servant, reveals Rochester’s ignorance, much like when he is unable to understand the songs the servants sing. Likewise, Christophine remains inscrutable to Rochester and her use of obeah represents a form of power of which he knows very little. Because of the patriarchal, colonialist role of the English in the Caribbean, it is significant that it is precisely Caribbean women who undermine Rochester’s self-assuredness and knowledge making.

The landscape itself also thwarts Rochester’s desire to know and control. Rochester reflects at length on his Caribbean surroundings:

It was a beautiful place—wild, untouched, above all untouched, with an alien, disturbing, secret loveliness. And it kept its secret. I’d find myself thinking, ‘What I see is nothing—

I want what it hides—that is not nothing’ (51-52).

Rochester’s language echoes the way he talks and thinks about residents of the island and his wife in particular. He also describes Antoinette as “alien” and remarks on the way her inscrutability conceals an interior that he cannot understand. Rochester feminizes the landscape
and implicitly likens its “secret loveliness” to a woman’s sexuality. His desire to conquer the landscape mirrors his desire to conquer Antoinette. In Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest (1995), Anne McClintock discusses the ways colonialism feminized the landscape at the same time it exerted control over colonized female sexuality. Gender is “not simply a question of sexuality but also a question of subdued labor and imperial plunder; race is not simply a question of skin color but also a question of labor power, cross-hatched by gender” (McClintock 5). English colonialism does not exist apart from Rochester’s desire for Antoinette or his racial othering of the island’s inhabitants. Instead, his desire to conquer and know the land is another version of his desire to conquer and know Antoinette and the island’s inhabitants.

For example, Rochester’s repetition of “nothing” applies to Antoinette as well as the landscape. When they are preparing to leave for England, Rochester observes a boy whom he calls “nameless” crying. Antoinette says she promised the boy he could leave with them; he realizes he is not going and is distressed. Rochester angrily refuses to take the boy, thinking: “(God! A half-savage boy as well as…as well as…)” (103). We can infer he means Antoinette, yet he is unable or unwilling to articulate her presence. Instead, she exists in the ellipses, her presence made manifest by its absence. Shortly after, Rochester thinks, “Who would have thought that any boy would cry like that. For nothing. Nothing…” (104). Rochester implies Antoinette is not worth crying for; she is nothing. The repetition of the ellipses once again relegates Antoinette to the unspeakable. The fact that she is no thing, as opposed to no one, also subtly strips her of her humanity and objectifies her. Yet Rochester’s dehumanization of Antoinette partially stems from his inability to know and conquer her. He paradoxically values what lies behind her inscrutable façade and devalues her as not worth crying over. Similarly,
colonialism valued places like the Caribbean for how they could benefit the metropole, yet simultaneously dehumanized the Caribbean’s inhabitants.

While *Gulf Stream* demonstrates the subversive potential of silence, *Wide Sargasso Sea* goes a step further by revealing the violence of language itself. As demonstrated by Rochester’s renaming of Antoinette and the significance of being able to claim a white patronymic, language in the novel is both patriarchal and colonialist. Whether naming a person or the landscape, language entails a sense of classification and knowledge about a person or place. To name, in a sense, is to own. Antoinette is not merely a passive victim of this system, as she also deploys language that reinforces social hierarchies. Yet Antoinette does suffer in this patriarchal, colonialist context and her refusal to speak and self-identify indicates her refusal to participate in Rochester’s form of knowledge production. Instead, she withholds knowledge from him and abstains from his classificatory schema regarding her identity. It is Antoinette’s very status as a liminal white creole that allows her to engage both, and ultimately neither, aspects of her identity. She is both a colonizing extension of the English metropole and a colonized, othered subject in relation to her English husband. Antoinette refuses to racially self-identify within these contexts, disrupting the performative norms that compel her to continually reconstitute herself as a stable, unified identity.

**The Rules Do Not Apply**

Both Adele and Antoinette reveal the irony involved in racial classification and hierarchies. In an attempt to reinforce racial identities and preserve white superiority, dominant racial logics actually create space for identities that do not fit neatly into racial schemas. Rules determining who qualifies as white inevitably fail to account for every variable, which provides
opportunities to subvert racial hierarchies. Yet as both Adele and Antoinette seem to realize, the language about race, and identity more broadly, is profoundly racialized. To even speak of oneself in relation to race is to become raced. However, refusing to identify oneself, particularly when one’s “true” racial identity is already ambiguous, provides some room for negotiation within a rigidly racialized society.

Furthermore, it is the very fact of Adele’s and Antoinette’s racial liminality that enables them to refuse race. Their racial identities are more ambiguous and subject to questioning than say, a “pure” white woman who appears white. There then exists more social pressure to self-identify racially and assuage dominant fears about the instability of racial classification. Yet by refusing to claim a racial identity, both characters maintain the inadequacy of racial classification and even gesture towards the possibility of no classification. Their refusal of race does hinge on the acknowledgement of race and seems to enforce dualistic thinking, given that they seem to be suspended between two models of identity. Yet both Stanley and Rhys accentuate these binaristic options in order to demonstrate that rather than choose between the two, one can instead refuse to choose at all.
Chapter Three

Routes, Roots, and Race: Nella Larsen, Eliot Bliss, and Women’s Racelessness

“[…] that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race.” –Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (1928)

“To be sexless, creedless, classless, free.”—Eliot Bliss, *Luminous Isle* (1934)

While drafting *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Jean Rhys frequently wrote her friend Eliot Bliss to solicit feedback on the manuscript. In between asking after Bliss’s health and encouraging her to write, Rhys lamented the difficulty of representing Antoinette’s madness and discussed her thoughts on *Jane Eyre*’s Mr. Rochester: “obviously a money grubber and a prig.” ("Letter to Eliot Bliss"). Bliss was encouraged by the fact that Rhys was writing and publishing well into her seventies. A writer herself, Bliss’s diaries indicate she worked on several other projects throughout her life ("Eliot Bliss Diaries"). However, she never published again after her novels *Saraband* (1931) and *Luminous Isle* (1934). Bliss’s novels did not garner the same attention as Rhys’s, yet her work explores similar themes. Both *Saraband* and *Luminous Isle* follow female protagonists who explore their sexuality, their racial identity, and their feelings of being torn between the Caribbean and England. *Luminous Isle* in particular uses the transatlantic voyage, and travel in general, as a vehicle for exploring fluid identity categories.

Despite being relatively obscure today, *Luminous Isle* has much in common with other female-authored modernist texts, particularly Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* (1928). As evinced by the epigraphs, Helga Crane and Emmeline (Em) Hibbert, the protagonists of *Quicksand* and *Luminous Isle*, voice a desire to escape identity categories. Both of these women engage in a search for identity that takes them on peripatetic travels within and across countries, partaking in
multiple voyages across the Atlantic. Not coincidentally, both of these quotes occur during transatlantic voyages, the ocean’s flux prompting fluid interpretations of identity. Women’s travels are often non-linear and not necessarily determined by a destination or goal, as Heidi MacPherson suggests in *Transatlantic Women’s Literature* (2008). Instead, the “in-between” space of the Atlantic and metaphors of movement, as opposed to stasis, indicate moments of self-discovery for female writers. At the heart of women’s transatlantic travel are questions of “multiple, irresolvable identity performances” (MacPherson 23). *Quicksand* and *Luminous Isle* demonstrate how traveling enables female characters to assume different identities.

Both Helga and Em embody various identity constructions related to their gender, race, and class. These identity constructions vary according to where each character is. Helga travels from the U.S. South to Chicago to Harlem. She then journeys across the Atlantic to Copenhagen, returns to Harlem two years later, and finally resides in the U.S. South. In each location, her biracial heritage acquires different meaning and she struggles to find a fulfilling relationship to racial identity. Em, a white Creole born in Jamaica, travels to England as a child, returns to Jamaica as a young woman, and then leaves again for England, presumably never to return to the Caribbean. She continually rebels against gendered norms, eschewing marriage and childbearing in favor of perpetual mobility. Importantly, both characters also exhibit queer desire for other women. While never explicitly stated, let alone consummated, their desire is tied to their continual movements and refusal of identity categories. Just as gender and sexuality influence identity, so too does place. A refusal to settle in one place can create an identity that is similarly rootless.

Because identity constructs vary according to geographic location—race is conceived differently in Jamaica than in England for example—Helga and Em’s continual travels allow
them to embody various forms of identity. Yet the fact that these characters prefer to remain en route, rather than actually arrive anywhere, reveals a rootlessness that applies to their identities as well. Their refusal to definitively occupy one space indicates a refusal to occupy one identity. Additionally, because dominant racial logics link racial identity to where one lives or is from, an inability to fix people geographically can render their racial identity similarly indeterminable. While perhaps ultimately unsuccessful, the continual change of geographic location, and subsequently racial and gendered identity, enables a form of racelessness.

Much of the existing criticism on these two novels attends to racial and gendered performance and the ways both characters destabilize performative norms. Yet the relationship between racial identity and performativity is also contingent on geographic location. Different locations elicit varying possibilities for disrupting performative norms. In other words, different locations create different norms regarding what can and cannot be said or done. In both novels, what cannot be said or done manifests as textual gaps and silences, from references to a vague “something else” to formal disruptions such as dashes and ellipses. The resulting silences represent potential moments of disrupting performative racial norms. Both Quicksand and Luminous Isle, I argue, reveal how women’s travel creates a type of racelessness contingent on the ways spatial locations produce varying performative norms, and therefore different possibilities for disrupting these norms.

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36 Much has been written about the relationship between race and physical space. Examples include Katherine McKittrick, Demonic Grounds: Black Women and The Cartographies of Struggle (2006); Michael Keith and Steve Pile, Place and the Politics of Identity (1993); and Barbara Boswell’s recent work on apartheid in South Africa.
Modernist Mobility

The trope of the transatlantic sojourn occupies a central place in the modernist canon. As Matthew Eatough suggests in “Transatlantic Modernisms” (2016), the transatlantic voyage is “codified within modernism’s central institutions” (103). By the early twentieth century, sea travel was faster and safer than it had been previously. Ships were more comfortable for passengers and fare was relatively cheap. The ocean voyage in particular, according to Mark Rennella and Whitney Walton, “offered the opportunity to engage in self-examination” and “presented new imaginative and creative possibilities” (366). Passengers came into contact with a variety of travelers of different identities and backgrounds, which presented opportunities for questioning previously held beliefs. The liminal status of a ship in the Atlantic, neither here nor there, provided room for exploration and (re)making the self.

Yet as Eatough also notes, the now codified transatlantic voyage represents only one version of the transatlantic voyage. The journey wasn’t necessarily a universal experience that leveled all social hierarchies. Rather, gender, race, and class continued to shape travelers’ lives once ships left their ports. Various scholars argue for the centrality of gender and race in analyzing both literary and historical moments of travel.37 In Penelope Voyages (1994), for example, Karen Lawrence notes how women have traditionally been excluded from the paradigm of the journey plot. Focusing on female travelers, Lawrence argues the “trope of travel provides a fertile imaginative field for narrative representations of women’s personal and historical agency” (20). The voyage itself afforded women with mobility and relative freedom.

Paul Gilroy’s foundational text The Black Atlantic (1993) urges attention to race in discussions of transatlantic travel and imagines a plural Atlantic that cannot (and should not) be

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37 See, for example, Inderpal Grewal, Transnational America: Feminisms, Diasporas, Neoliberalisms (2005) and Heidi MacPherson, Transatlantic Women’s Literature (2008).
represented solely by a white, middle-class, male perspective. Omise’eké Natasha Tinsley builds on Gilroy’s work by emphasizing the black queer experience of transatlantic travel. Focusing on the transatlantic slave trade, Tinsley explores the queer relationships that developed during the Middle Passage. At sea, Tinsley argues, “currents of historical, conceptual, and embodied maritime experience come together to transform racialized, gendered, classed, and sexualized selves” (192). The ocean “obscures all origins” and can enable new identity formations (ibid).

This is not to minimize the violence of the Middle Passage. As Tinsley points out, the ocean’s fluidity represents “concrete, painful, and liberatory experience” (193). Transatlantic travel can symbolize trauma, as in the case of being forcibly removed from one’s country. Yet for Helga Crane and Em Hibbert, the transatlantic voyage can also produce anonymity and rootlessness, which allows both characters to reimagine their identities. Neither Helga nor Em engages in a sexual relationship during a transatlantic voyage. Yet their travels prompt more fluid conceptions of identity, and this fluidity is conducive to challenging not only racial norms, but sexual ones as well.

While the transatlantic voyage represents the most obvious, macro-scale form of travel in *Quicksand* and *Luminous Isle*, both protagonists travel within countries as well. Helga Crane travels throughout the U.S. and Em Hibbert journeys across Jamaica. Their smaller voyages function similarly to the transatlantic voyage in that the process of traveling to a new location opens up imaginative possibilities for self-identification. Farah Griffin considers *Quicksand* part of the African American trend of migration narratives in which a character leaves the oppressive South in hopes of finding new opportunities in the urban North. The new metropolitan landscape is “usually experienced as a change in time, space, and technology as well as a different concept
of race relations” (Griffin 5). Helga leaves the rural South for multiple urban centers; in each location she encounters a shift in racial ideology.

Em Hibbert’s movements do not carry the same historical implications as Helga Crane’s. Whereas Helga’s travels reflect the larger trend of African American migration to Northern cities in the U.S., Em travels in order to defy the insular white creole community in Jamaica. Rural areas confine Helga and restrict her opportunities, but for Em, rural landscapes allow her to subvert racial and gendered norms. Both Tinsley and Elizabeth MacMahon argue that Em’s voyages to the mountains allow her to escape the watchful eyes of other whites and to explore her same sex desire. Granted, Em ultimately does leave for England, appearing to forego the Jamaican countryside for urbanized England. Within an intranational context, however, Helga prefers urbanity while Em desires rural areas. Their preferences indicate how their racial identities influence what locations they find desirable. Metropolitan areas might hold more potential for people of color whereas less populated areas might allow whites to transgress social norms more covertly. Despite this contrast, both Helga and Em’s regional travels remain influenced by their race, class, and sexuality. Each new location positions their identities in varying contexts. Regardless of the type of voyage, whether transatlantic or intranational, Helga and Em prefer the process of traveling rather than the finality of the destination. Their desire for movement reveals their preference for identity as process rather than finite essence.

“Leaving, she would have to come back”: Helga Crane’s Transatlantic Travels

Born in 1891, Nella Larsen’s life closely resembles that of Helga Crane, the protagonist of her 1928 novel, Quicksand. Larsen was born to a white Danish woman and a West Indian

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38 For further reading on Larsen’s life, see Charles Larson, Invisible Darkness: Jean Toomer & Nella Larsen (1993); Thadious Davis, Nella Larsen, Novelist of the Harlem Renaissance: A
man, though her father was absent from her life. Her mother remarried a white man who resented Larsen’s biracial identity. At some point during her childhood, Nella and her mother visited Denmark where Nella’s formal education began at a private school for immigrant children at age eight. Larsen briefly attended Fisk University and then traveled again to Denmark where she stayed for three years with her mother’s family. When she returned to the U.S., she became a nurse, serving as head nurse and teacher at the Tuskegee Institute. She became disillusioned with Tuskegee, however, and returned to New York where she became a librarian and married Elmer S. Imes.

Larsen published several short stories as well as two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing* (1929), both of which explore racial identity, particularly as it intersects with gender and sexuality. Both novels generated positive reception when they were published. In 1930, however, Larsen was accused of plagiarizing her short story “Sanctuary,” which closely resembled Sheila Kaye-Smith’s “Mrs. Adis” (1922). The scandal plagued Larsen and she never published anything else. She receded into obscurity and worked as a nurse for the rest of her life. Larsen died alone in her New York apartment in 1964; her body wasn’t found for several days. Though her work was popular during its contemporary moment, her novels went out of print and she remained an obscure figure until she was recuperated during the 1960s and 70s with the renewed attention to feminism and black civil rights.

Over the course of *Quicksand*, Helga engages in a migratory journey that takes her from the U.S. South to Chicago, New York, Denmark, back to New York, and finally, back to the


39 Two of Larsen’s biographers, Charles Larson and Thadious Davis, dispute the idea that she traveled to Denmark. Writing after Larson and Davis, George Hutchinson argues that Larsen did, in fact, travel to Denmark, citing historical and archival evidence.
South. The daughter of an absent West Indian man and a deceased Danish woman, Helga is a product of interracial sex, a stigma that haunts her throughout the novel. The novel opens with Helga working at a school for African Americans called Naxos, which is based on the Tuskegee Institute. Helga abruptly decides to leave Naxos and end her engagement with a fellow teacher, James Vayle. She also visits the school’s principal, Robert Anderson, to announce her resignation. The encounter ends with Helga lashing out at Anderson, a telling moment of passion that Helga only begins to articulate later in the novel.

After leaving Naxos, Helga arrives in Chicago where she tries to gain employment as her money dwindles. On the brink of starvation, Helga finally finds a job as the travel companion and editor of Mrs. Hayes-Rore, a “race woman” traveling to New York to give speeches on racial uplift. Once in New York, Helga decides to stay in Harlem indefinitely and moves in with Anne Grey, Mrs. Hayes-Rore’s niece. Helga finds the embrace of black culture in Harlem more stimulating and fulfilling than the white appeasement she encountered at Naxos. Soon, however, Helga begins to tire of Harlem and the black community. Just as she is becoming restless, Helga fortuitously receives a sum of money from her maternal uncle, which he suggests she use to visit her mother’s family in Copenhagen.

In Denmark, Helga is renewed. Her aunt and uncle, the Dahls, dote on her, buying her extravagant clothes and jewelry. Yet their efforts stem from a thinly veiled belief in Helga’s exoticism. In the streets, the locals gape at Helga and remark “Den Sorte,” Danish for “black.” The Dahls also encourage Helga’s relationship with a famous artist, Axel Olsen, largely in order to further their own social standing. Olsen does propose, but only after Helga becomes

40 “Naxos” is an anagram for “Saxon,” which subtly indict the desire to appease and emulate whites at the school.
disillusioned with what she thought was Denmark’s racial progressiveness. Helga decides to return to New York to attend the wedding of Anne Grey and Robert Anderson.

Once back in New York, Helga seems happy to have returned to a black community. At a party, she bumps into Anderson as she comes out of the bathroom. He kisses Helga, sparking her desire for him. She later invites Anderson to her apartment, believing they’ll consummate their relationship. On arriving, however, Anderson apologizes for the kiss, blaming his behavior on alcohol. Confused and upset, Helga slaps Anderson and once he leaves, proceeds to drink herself sick. The next day, leaving her apartment during a rainstorm, faint and nauseous, Helga stumbles into a storefront church where the congregation calls her a “scarlet ‘oman,” mistaking her for a “pore los’ Jezebel” (p. 113). Initially wary, Helga eventually breaks down and succumbs to the orgiastic attempt to save her soul. Leaving the church, Helga invites the Reverend, Pleasant Green, home with her where they have sex.

Helga’s narrative quickly changes course, as she marries the Reverend the next day and moves back to a small Alabama town with him. She at first tries to fulfill her role as the Reverend’s wife, though the locals view her as pretentious and aloof. She also begins having children, which eventually strain her beyond her capacities. On the birth of her stillborn fourth child, Helga descends into a long sickness, barely aware of her surroundings. When she begins to recover, she laments the life she gave up in New York and makes plans to leave her husband. Not long after she regains her strength, however, Helga becomes pregnant with her fifth child, which will not only prevent her from leaving, but also presumably kill her during childbirth.

Though criticism has moved beyond reading Helga as a tragic mulatta, many still view Helga’s continual movements as indicative of a lack in her life, largely due to the psycho-social trauma of her mixed race identity and lack of familial connections. As a result, critics often
couch Helga’s potential to refuse racial identity in negative affective language; refusing identity is read as tragic, empty, and a form of social death. Mary Esteve posits self-evacuation and no consciousness as the only option outside of racialization. Martha J. Cutter also remarks that Helga’s relationship to identity brings her to a “void of nothingness—the nothingness of identity stripped from its social moorings” (78). While I don’t dispute the negative consequences that follow Helga’s inability to settle on an identity or a location, I also don’t want to relegate racelessness solely to the realm of nothingness or emptiness. While racelessness does manifest in performative negations, it is also made present by virtue of these negations. In other words, racelessness obtains a presence through its absence. There can still be content and substance in negation and refusal.

The importance of absence and negation in *Quicksand* brings me to the role of performative negations in the novel. Various critics analyze Helga’s movements in relation to race, focusing on how Helga’s transnational migrations, and mobility in general, subvert notions of stable identity categories.41 One strand of this criticism suggests Helga’s movements indicate a performative relationship to race, yet many of these arguments often end up conflating performativity with performance or intention. In "'Black Was White': Urbanity, Passing and the Spectacle of Harlem" (1999), Maria Balshaw argues that Helga moves “decisively from one performance of identity to another” in her desire to refuse racial belonging (317). Balshaw doesn’t provide any explication of performance and performativity nor does she distinguish between the terms, indicating that performativity in *Quicksand* is synonymous with racial

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performance. In “From Naxos to Copenhagen: Helga Crane’s Mixed Race Aspirations in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*” (2013), Sika Dagbovie-Mullins also seems to use performativity and performance interchangeably. Helga “recognizes the performativity of race, another thing that can be worn […] Helga realizes the necessity of omitting her background and ‘performing’ a black bourgeois identity” (Dagbovie-Mullins 39). Rather than read Helga’s relationship to race as agentic performance, we might instead view her attitudes towards race as primarily performatory by virtue of what she does not do. Attending to performativity emphasizes that what Helga does not do or say is just as significant in the construction of her identity as what she does do or say.

It’s important to note that Dagbovie-Mullins also uses the term “racelessness” in reference to Helga. While in Denmark, Dagbovie-Mullins argues, Helga initially believes in the possibility of “a kind of ‘racelessness’” though she eventually realizes the impossibility of this option (43). Racelessness appears in quotes, implying artificiality, perhaps because racelessness doesn’t succeed for Helga. Yet Dagbovie-Mullins doesn’t expand on the term nor does she use it again. As a result, Dagbovie-Mullins reproduces the silence and inarticulateness surrounding racelessness. Elsewhere in the article, Dagbovie-Mullins posits that Helga’s frequent movements represent an attempt to live a life “unrestricted by racial burdens and classifications,” though she doesn’t connect this argument to racelessness (28). In fact, the bulk of the article focuses on Helga’s biracial subjectivity, which Dagbovie-Mullins distinguishes from racial disavowal or a racially split identity. Instead, Helga embodies a “black-sentient mixed-race identity, one that refuses to abide by racial scripts but still acknowledges and honors a black connection” (Dagbovie-Mullins 28). I want to push Dagbovie-Mullins’ use of racelessness further by
providing a more robust analysis of how racelessness operates in *Quicksand*, particularly as a performative negation.

Throughout *Quicksand* we witness the inadequacy of language to describe certain states and feelings. Early on in the novel, for example, Helga struggles to define her restlessness and desire to leave Naxos: “It wasn’t, she was suddenly aware, merely the school…There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself” (37). Asking herself what she wants in life, she admits she doesn’t know, but “there was, she knew, something else” (ibid). The repetition of “something else” indicates a quality beyond language. Helga knows there must be something else, but struggles to define exactly what that something is. “Something else” reappears throughout the novel, itself becoming a shadowy character in the text. During Helga’s first sojourn in Harlem, when she begins to feel restless again, she notices how “her need of something, something vaguely familiar, but which she could not put a name to and hold for definite examination, became almost intolerable” (90). Sharing a cab ride with Helga, Robert Anderson thinks she is still “seeking for something” (95). Even in Denmark, this something follows Helga. When she tries to explain to her Danish uncle why she won’t marry Axel Olsen, she struggles: “I can’t explain any better than I have…it’s just something—something deep down inside of me” (155). The repetition of “something” gestures towards a state beyond articulation, revealing language to be inadequate for conveying Helga’s perception of not only her environment, but herself as well.

Several critics focus on Helga’s vague language in terms of her racial identity and her sexuality. Deborah McDowell and Amelia DeFalco, among others, discuss the difficulty of representing black female sexuality and view Helga as repressing her sexuality, or what the novel’s narrator calls that “nameless and […] shameful impulse” (161). Helga can only gesture
towards sex and desire rather than name them explicitly. Others read Helga’s vague language as her inability to articulate a biracial identity within the black/white binary of the U.S. Both interpretations end up attributing Helga’s inarticulateness to repression. I agree that in many of these instances, Helga indicates a sexual or racial feeling that she is unable to define precisely. The vague yearning that arises in Anderson’s presence, for instance, implies unacknowledged sexual desire for him. Yet I don’t think Helga’s vague language solely points to repression. I view the inadequacy of language as a symptom of spatially contingent social norms, which delimit what can be said. Certain topics are taboo in different places. For example, characters speak more openly about interracial marriage in Denmark than they do in Harlem. Depending on the social setting, characters might vaguely allude to interracial sex rather than discuss it outright. Their allusive language is substantive, however, as it still points to interracial sex without naming it directly.

In The Dark Matter of Words (1998), Timothy Walsh analyzes the use of “filler words” such as “something” in literature. Many critics, Walsh argues, view absence in literature as either detrimental to the work or indicative of a “bankruptcy of meaning” (14). Walsh, however, attributes more significance to the use of such vague language. As readers, we register absence when the expectation of something is thwarted or deferred (Walsh 26). We expect Helga to name the condition that incites her restless travels and inability to belong contentedly to one society. We expect her to define herself in relation to racial identity. Instead, however, she indicates a vague “something” that registers as absence. According to Walsh, such gestures indicate a breakdown in the signifying process of language; words can fail to signify and some things cannot be signified. The breakdown of signification manifests elsewhere for Helga as well, not just in the use of “something.” At Naxos, she has the “uneasy sense of being engaged with some
formidable antagonist, nameless and un-understood” (37). During her second year in Denmark, there came “an indefinite discontent. Not clear, but vague [...]” (140). Helga’s struggles with articulation undermine the primacy of language; there are things that exist beyond language and that cannot be encompassed by language. Helga’s language, though vague at times, belies the failure of signification and therefore the instability of socially constructed identity categories.

For example, Helga defines herself and her surroundings in negative terms. Arriving in New York, Helga describes the city as “not kind” and “not strange” (81). A year into her stay, she finds New York “not so unkind, not so unfriendly, not so indifferent” (85). Her description of her surroundings reveals an inability, or perhaps an unwillingness, to define things as they are. Instead, Helga defines things in terms of what they are not. Similarly, she imagines Copenhagen as having “no Negroes, no problems, no prejudice” (103). With places in particular, Helga imagines what the space does not represent. Describing places as what they are not, rather than what they definitively are, reveals that places, much like identities, are flexible. Negations imply room for disruption; though different places adhere to different social norms, places are not fixed entities. Instead, places and their norms are continually constructed, neither this nor that.

Later in the novel, there is a telling moment when Helga defines herself in negative terms. Fru Dahl has just been lecturing Helga on the necessity of marriage. She asks Helga if Axel Olsen seems interested, to which Helga says she doesn’t know: “‘Honestly, I don’t. I can’t tell a thing about him,’ then fell into a little silence. ‘Not a thing,’ she repeated. But the phrase, though audible, was addressed to no one. To herself’” (137). The end of this excerpt, “to no one. To herself,” conflates Helga with no one. “To herself” also appears as a sentence fragment, divorced from the context of the passage, much as Helga herself exists apart from Danish society. The fact that “Not a thing” is only audible to Helga, and addressed to herself, implies
Helga herself is not a thing. Much like the other examples of negative framing, Helga defines herself in terms of what she is not. Racelessness is also made manifest by what it is not, evident in the very structure of the word. The “ness” indicates a presence or state of being contingent on the “less,” the state of absence. Helga’s presence often registers based on what is absent, specifically in terms of a singular identity.

Other characters also refuse to speak throughout the novel, which can reinforce dominant power structures, but can also represent an opportunity for subversion. The topic of racial mixing frequently induces willful silences or omissions, but notably, only in the U.S. On their train ride to New York, Helga confides her family history to Mrs. Hayes-Rore, including her parents’ interracial relationship. Mrs. Hayes-Rore pretends not to hear Helga’s story: “The woman felt that the story, dealing as it did with race intermingling and possibly adultery, was beyond definite discussion…it is tacitly understood that these things are not mentioned—and therefore they do not exist” (80). Mrs. Hayes-Rore goes on to change the subject as if Helga had never mentioned her parents. By refusing to acknowledge interracial sex, Mrs. Hayes-Rore reinforces the dominant ideologies that position race mixing as taboo. Furthermore, as the narrator indicates, what remains unspoken does not exist, relegating interracialism to nothingness. Before they meet Anne Grey, Mrs. Hayes-Rore advises Helga to lie about her family background: “[…] what others don’t know can’t hurt you […] She [Anne] can fill in the gaps to suit herself and anyone else curious enough to ask” (83). The silences and gaps in meaning reveal a performative rupture—omissions and absences interrupt the signifying process, producing gaps that need to be filled in order to obtain coherent meaning. Filling these gaps represents opportunities for disrupting meaning, in that the interpretation of Helga’s identity becomes unpredictable and unstable.
Race mixing causes other characters to react similarly. At a cabaret in Harlem, Anne disgustedly observes the interracial couples dancing: “‘Now you know, Helga Crane, that can mean only one thing.’ […] As she ended, she made a little clicking noise with her tongue, indicating an abhorrence too great for words” (111). When Helga returns to Harlem after living in Denmark, she encounters James Vayle at a party, who fumes at the idea of race mixing. Gesturing towards a black woman talking to a white man, James comments, “‘And I don’t like that sort of thing. In fact I detest it […] You know as well as I do, Helga, that it’s the colored girls these men come up here to see. They wouldn’t think of bringing their wives.’ And he blushed furiously at his own implication” (172-73). Both Anne and James hint at interracial sex, but they refuse to name it directly. Doing so positions interracial sex, of which Helga is a product, as unspeakable and virtually nonexistent. Helga’s origins, and in a sense Helga herself, become unspeakable, positioning her outside of language. Yet in Denmark, when Helga expresses her wariness of interracial sex to Fru Dahl, her aunt scoffs at Helga’s concern, arguing that the Danes don’t harbor such prejudices. While Fru Dahl’s statement is arguable at best, there is still more openness regarding the topic of interracial sex; it is not deemed unspeakable as it is in the U.S. Interracial sex serves as an example of the ways certain ideas, and subsequently certain identities, become unspeakable depending on the location.

Silence also has subversive potential, however. For example, Helga remains silent regarding her desire for Audrey Denney, a woman she admires from afar in Harlem.42 When she first notices Audrey at a Harlem cabaret, Helga reflects at length on Audrey’s appearance,

42 Some might argue Helga is unaware of her desire for Audrey, given that she never directly acknowledges it. Her admiration of Audrey’s body, however, is far more sexual than her observations of James Vayle, Axel Olsen, or Robert Anderson. Helga may very well be aware of her attraction to Audrey, even if she never explicitly articulates it.
noticing her “brilliantly red, softly curving mouth,” her “pitch-black eyes […] veiled by long, drooping lashes,” and “the extreme décolleté of her simple apricot dress [which] showed a skin of unusual color a delicate, creamy hue, with golden tones” (109). The sensual description of Audrey and the objectification of her body imply a sexual desire that Helga never explicitly articulates. For one, Anne Grey detests Audrey because she associates with whites. Even a platonic relationship with Audrey would be difficult given that Helga lives with Anne. Additionally, a same-sex relationship would be an even greater affront to social norms. Yet Helga’s veiled desire for Audrey persists despite Anne’s admonition. Rather than participate in Anne’s denigration of Audrey, Helga “remained silent, watching the girl” (112). Helga’s silence allows her to observe Audrey and entertain a desire that in many ways is unspeakable.

Helga’s unspoken desire for Audrey could be interpreted as further evidence of her sexual repression. Yet the invective to speak desire, and in particular queer desire, positions “coming out” as the ultimate goal. The “disclosure imperative” presumes that coming out is a necessary milestone in achieving a healthy sense of one’s sexuality. Not disclosing one’s sexuality is often read as dishonest or self-hating. In Epistemology of the Closet (1990), Eve Sedgwick analyzes how compulsory heterosexuality constructs the closet. Homosexuality is the aberration which must continually name itself in order to become legible as non-heterosexual. Scholars such as Jack Halberstam and Lisa Tillmann argue the closet is a male-biased construction while others such as Jeffrey McCune and Wenshu Lee highlight the white-centric focus of the closet. As Tony Adams suggests in “Paradoxes of Sexuality, Gay Identity, and the Closet” (2010), it is problematic to idealize the process of coming out; doing so positions coming out as a “discrete linear process with a definitive end” (238). Instead, Adams argues, we shouldn’t attach negative evaluations to when or how a person chooses to come out.
Based on the work of these queer theorists, I read Helga as thwarting the disclosure imperative, perhaps because it’s unsafe for her to disclose her sexuality, but also because she eschews categorization. The closet, as a white, male-biased construction, places Helga even further from societal norms. As a mixed race, sexually ambiguous woman with no family attachments, there is an even greater imperative for her to position herself within hegemonic social hierarchies in order to render herself legible. Yet as we’ve seen with Helga’s continual movements and her changing attitudes towards race, Helga is at times willing to render herself illegible if it means escaping the strictures of identity labels. Helga’s silence regarding her desire for Audrey Denney disrupts a linear model of sexual identity. Though her lack of disclosure positions her as heterosexual by default to those around her, her silence also allows her to retain an ambiguity that thwarts definitive categorization. Helga’s queer desire, much like her travels, is intimately tied to what can and cannot be said and thus the ways one might refuse identity.

Helga’s own attitudes towards race might seem to contradict her status as raceless. Only once does she explicitly refuse race. More frequently, Helga claims both a black identity and seems to gesture towards identification with whiteness. In Chicago, for example, Helga feels at home among the “multicolored crowd” (64). Later, when an old woman in Denmark asks Helga what race she belongs to, Helga replies that she is “a Negro” (133). When she meets James Vayle again in Harlem, Helga tells him: “I’m a Negro too, you know” (171). Helga never explicitly claims whiteness and we might agree with Martyn Bone who argues Helga has internalized the one-drop rule that classifies her biraciality as blackness. Alternatively, we could simply view Helga as identifying as black at times. She also dissociates from blackness, however. Before heading to Denmark, Helga demands to know why “should she be yoked to these despised black? […] They’re my own people, my own people, she kept repeating over and
over to herself. It was no good” (101). Soon after, she reflects: “She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people” (102). Helga’s statements could be read as identification with whiteness. Given the binary racial system in which she exists, black and white are her only options. Yet on a closer look, these sentiments indicate movement away from blackness but not necessarily movement towards something else. Helga vacillates between identifying with and against blackness, but she doesn’t necessarily supplement blackness with a viable racial alternative. Her movement away from blackness gestures towards the possibility of a raceless subjectivity.

Importantly, Helga’s attitudes towards race are highly contingent on her geographic location. Several critics read Helga’s continual movements as an effort to find fulfillment, given her lack of familial attachments and the stigma of her racial origins.43 She feels a stronger connection to black culture and community in Harlem, particularly compared to the politics of respectability espoused at Naxos. Yet Helga feels more unique and admired in Denmark and embraces white Danish culture because of her exotic status within it. Her racial identity acquires different meanings in Naxos versus Harlem versus Denmark and it is this continual shifting of identity that Helga desires. On the boat to Denmark, Helga relishes the “blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race,” indicating a desire to step outside of racial classification (114). For most of her narrative, Helga only remains in each location for a brief time, refusing to permanently settle in one place and one racial identity. Towards the end of the novel, Helga reflects at length on her desire for mobility: “This knowledge, this certainty of the

division of her life into two parts in two lands, into physical freedom in Europe and spiritual freedom in America, was unfortunate, inconvenient, expensive” and imagines herself moving from “the prejudiced restrictions of the New World to the easy formality of the Old, from the pale calm of Copenhagen to the colorful lure of Harlem” (163). Helga’s divided life can easily be interpreted as trying to reconcile her biracial identity and maintain connections with blackness in the U.S. and whiteness abroad. Yet her desire to continually move between these worlds also indicates an ongoing desire to shift her identity as well.

Helga’s continual movements allow her to occupy various racial identities throughout the novel, from a member of the flourishing scene in black Harlem to an exotic foreigner in Copenhagen. Because Helga avoids settling in one place, she avoids permanently embodying one racial identity. Helga’s refusal carries over into other aspects of her life, from thwarting the imperative to disclose her sexuality to refusing to say what things are. Instead, she often defines her surroundings and herself in terms of what they are not. It would be easy to view Helga’s raceless mobility as ultimately detrimental, particularly given the conclusion of the novel. Yet it is when Helga stops moving, when she settles in Alabama, that she becomes entrenched in one model of identity and mired in the roles of wife and mother. As Helga’s narrative demonstrates, racelessness is often made manifest in negative linguistic terms. However, racelessness is not necessarily negative in any qualitative sense. Instead, racelessness can provide opportunities for evading restrictive racial categories and when combined with movement, can enable more fluid models of identity.
“I must have other lives”: Em Hibbert Journeys through Jamaica

Modernist writer Eliot Bliss, like Larsen, engaged in a series of transatlantic crossings, which also appear in her writing. Born Eileen Norah Lees Bliss in 1903 in Kingston, Jamaica, Bliss was the daughter of Eva Lees and John Power Bliss. Her father was an English army officer in the West Indian regiment in Jamaica and later in Sierra Leone. Bliss spent her early years in Jamaica, but was then sent to England with her brother, John, to obtain a Catholic education. She returned to Jamaica in 1923 where she remained for two years. While in Jamaica, she began to show talent as a writer. Four of her poems were featured in the 1922-23 issue of *Planter’s Punch*, a Jamaican literary magazine. As a white creole in Jamaica, however, Bliss was viewed with disdain by both the British-born whites on the island and the black population. She didn’t feel as if she belonged to the white or black community, to Britain or the West Indies (Calderaro, “To be sexless”). In 1925, Bliss departed for London; she never returned to Jamaica again.

Once back in London, she changed her name to Eliot out of reverence for both George Eliot and T.S. Eliot. While there she earned a degree in journalism from University College London. She became involved with the modernist literary scene in England and maintained close friendships with writers such as Jean Rhys, Dorothy Richardson, and Anna Wickham. Bliss published her first novel, *Saraband*, in 1931 and her second novel, *Luminous Isle*, in 1934, both of which are feminist bildungsromans. Though *Saraband* was successful at the time of publication, Bliss had trouble finding a publisher for *Luminous Isle* and was disappointed in the

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44 “Poems by Miss May Farquharson and Miss Eileen Bliss,” *Planter’s Punch*, 1 No. 3 (1922-23), 7. A photocopy of these poems also exists tucked in one of Bliss’s diaries at the University of Tulsa, which is where I first encountered them.
novel’s reception once published. Despite help from Vita Sackville-West and Harold Nicolson, the book was not well received. As Alexandra Pringle notes in the introduction to the 1984 reprint of *Luminous Isle*, the circumstances surrounding the novel, as well as Bliss’s own personal and financial difficulties, “conspired to silence her, almost entirely” (xii). Bliss also wrote a third novel, *Albatross*, in 1935, though it seems to have been lost. While scant work exists on Bliss, Michela Calderaro has been instrumental in recovering Bliss’s life and work in articles such as “‘To be sexless, creedless, classless, free.’ Eliot Bliss: A Creole Writer” (2003) and “Finding Bliss at McFarlin” (2015). Calderaro also located many of Bliss’s poems and published them as a collection, *Spring Evenings in Sterling Street*, in 2015.

For much of Bliss’s life in England, she lived with Patricia Allan Burns, her romantic partner. Bliss’s life does seem to have been fraught, however. Moving to England permanently meant she severed ties with her direct family. In the nineteen diaries she left, she makes frequent mention of feeling depressed and lonely. Additionally, her diaries reveal her struggle with rheumatoid arthritis, which often interfered with her ability to work. In spite of her chronic pain, however, Bliss’s entries reveal she was consistently at work on novels, plays, and poems and was diligent in maintaining various correspondences (Eliot Bliss diaries). Her friends remembered her as admittedly difficult and pessimistic, but also generous and understanding. She was a “stimulating, if demanding companion, with a beautiful sense of the absurd.”

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Jim Hepburn fondly recalled Bliss in his 1990 obituary for her, found in Bliss’s papers at the University of Tulsa. Ephemera. Patricia Allan-Burns collection of Eliot Bliss, 1907-1994,
Luminous Isle follows Emmeline (Em) Hibbert through adolescence and young adulthood as she journeys between England and Jamaica. The novel opens when Em is a child living at the army garrison in Jamaica. Her father is a captain at the garrison and because of his relative absence from her day-to-day life Em is devoted to him. Em has a fraught relationship with her mother and feels closer to the black and creole women who take care of her. A formative moment of Em’s childhood is her encounter with Mrs. Drummond, another white woman living on the island. Em is inexplicably attracted to Mrs. Drummond, which hints at Em’s future desire for other women. Tellingly, her attraction manifests most intensely when the two observe ships leaving for England and America. The connection between queer desire and mobility becomes a pervasive theme in the novel.

We find Em again on a boat returning to Jamaica after some time in England—she is now twenty years old. Once back on the island, Em’s situation is not much changed from her childhood. She is still expected to comport herself according to her social status and she harbors feelings for different women in the novel. Em also begins to articulate her frustration with gender norms at this point, lamenting that she must become “more like what that world thought a young girl ought to be” (59). She continues by noting “all sex-consciousness is a super-imposed idea” (ibid). Throughout her two-year stay on the island, Em struggles with the restrictive norms of garrison life and the pressure women face to marry and bear children. Em attends various social events, navigating the gossip and exposure created by such a small, insular community eager to preserve its superiority.

2011.009.1.5-9. The University of Tulsa, McFarlin Library, Department of Special Collections & University Archives.
While Em has several flirtations with men on the island, her deepest attractions remain to women. On a trip up to the mountains, for example, Em encounters a young black woman, Rebekkah, and walks with her for a while, noting Rebekkah’s “supple hips” (202) and eyes that have “an almost lover-like glow” (205). They end up exchanging gifts and remaining in contact while Em is in Jamaica. Em also reencounters Mrs. Drummond, who returns to the island for a brief visit. She observes Mrs. Drummond’s “pale creamy cheek” and the “exquisite bloom of [her] skin” (167). The two of them lunch together, during which Em feels they are “speaking to each other in a sort of cipher language,” implicating their veiled desire for each other (169).

Despite these attractions, however, Em becomes engaged to a much older man, Ellis Lister, in the latter half of the novel. He can provide Em with financial security and seems entirely devoted to ensuring her happiness. Marriage, even to someone like Lister, is not what Em imagines as freedom though. Lister also seems jealous of Em’s youth and energy and her ability to attract younger men. He holds racist views as well, which incite arguments between them, such as when he says Em cannot entertain non-white guests once they marry. Tension between Em and Lister continues to mount and the novel closes with Em returning alone to England. Though still engaged to Lister, we feel she will end the relationship.

Much of the existing scholarship on Luminous Isle focuses on Em’s gender subversiveness. In Thiefing Sugar: Eroticism between Women in the Caribbean (2010), Omise’eke Natasha Tinsley provides one of the few extended analyses of Luminous Isle. Tinsley questions what it means for a woman to love another woman in the Caribbean when both “woman” and “love” have been volatile, policed concepts in the history of the region. Women’s eroticism, she argues, represents the potential for resistance to the colonial symbolic and economic order (20). Focusing largely on Em’s desire for Rebekkah, Tinsley analyzes Em’s
unwillingness to submit to one model of racial-sexual identity. By desiring black womanhood, Em identifies with an othered race and fashions herself into a “symbolic mulatta” (72). In other words, Em’s desire for Rebekkah does not literally alter her skin color, but figuratively darkens her as a white woman within the colonial system. The symbolic “blackening” of white women, however, does not eschew racial privilege, but draws on it. White women’s erotic self-fashioning, Tinsley posits, does not actually transcend racialized subjectivity (79).

Importantly, Tinsley points to the pervasive liminality in the novel and Em’s refusal to settle on one model of identity. The only option for sustaining continual self-recreation is for Em to refuse to locate herself in any sector of West Indian society. Em instead “chooses a vacillation that keeps many roads open while committing to none” (90). The novel, Tinsley concludes, leaves readers with nothing definite: “neither black nor white womanhood, neither straight nor gay partnership” (99). While this liminality unsettles the colonial order, it doesn’t necessarily replace colonialism with anything else. Luminous Isle refuses the colonial order, but seems unable to transcend it or find plausible alternatives.

Tinsley argues that women’s eroticism doesn’t transcend race, and I agree. However, transcending race is not necessarily the same as refusing race. Transcendence connotes movement beyond, rather than movement away. To transcend race implies an ability to move beyond current racial ideology whereas to refuse race does not carry the same feeling of success. Instead, race refusal eschews racial ideology but is unable to find an enduring, viable alternative. Additionally, Tinsley’s reference to Em’s vacillation indicates the significance of movement in the novel. She refers to Em’s continual self-recreation as a “mobile consciousness” (100). Em’s literal movements are also indicative of her refusal to occupy one identity category, though it’s important to distinguish Em’s desire for traveling versus her desire for actually arriving.
Throughout the novel, she prefers the process of traveling rather than the destination. Similarly, Em prefers a procedural model of identity rather than a finalized one.

One of the first instances of Em’s desire to remain en route rather than arriving is on her return to Jamaica at the beginning of the novel. On the boat over, Em reflects: “At sea one felt quite safe; safe in a way that one never did on land, sunk in an eternal half-static movement—traveling towards what? Illusion, perhaps that one ever travels at all. One goes backwards and forwards. Ebb-tide; full-tide” (49). The fluidity and flux of the ocean contrasts with the stability of land, and contrary to what we might expect, Em finds this perpetual motion safer than solid ground. The actual journey back and forth between England and Jamaica represents a preferable model of identity for Em in that it embodies constant movement rather than a fixed identity. She expresses this desire for movement to another passenger later in the voyage, telling him: “I wish it was the beginning and not the end. Somehow I like getting to a place so much better than arriving there” (72).

Near the end of the trip, Em thinks to herself, “[…] she had come so far—nearly arrived—and she didn’t really want to land….Why, in fact, need one ever get anywhere?” (76). Tellingly, Bliss represents Em’s thoughts as fragmented and incomplete, open to interpretation; the dashes and ellipses disrupt the unity of Em’s thoughts. Bliss follows this passage with a meta-commentary on fiction writing in which Em disdains the literary focus on action and doing: “The disappointing part of most of the people in books was that they always had to be doing something and getting somewhere in such a horribly definite way” (76). The passage not only reiterates Em’s distaste for anything definitive, but also highlights Bliss’s own authorial views. Influenced by Dorothy Richardson’s Pilgrimage (1915), with its focus on a female stream of
consciousness, Bliss herself also eschewed textual order and completeness (Calderaro, “To be sexless”).

The conclusion of the novel does seem to exhibit closure, in that we find Em on a boat back to England, presumably never to return to Jamaica. She appears to have decided which society she will live in, which in turn will affect the identity expected of her. While the novel’s ending could be read as Em preferring England over Jamaica I agree with Tinsley, who suggests the conclusion only continues the liminality represented throughout the novel. On the deck of the ship to England, Em leans over the railing, feeling the breeze, and thinks to herself: “An unseen presence was replying to her in the sea breeze, in the strong salty air. To be sexless, creedless, classless, free. A soul swinging wide across the universe—out of a small dark space” (371). Em directly expresses her desire to escape various identity categories in order to obtain some kind of freedom. She wishes to be a “soul swinging wide,” indicating vacillation, and one who leaves a “small dark space,” eschewing enclosure. Additionally, we never witness her return to England, which leaves Em’s future open to interpretation. Instead, we leave her in a state of in-between, traveling between two countries and two models of identity, but not necessarily espousing one over the other. The final passage of the novel demonstrates Em’s preference for movement and flux, literally and in terms of her identity, rather than a choice of England over Jamaica.

Em’s macro-scale movements across the Atlantic are only one form of her mobility. In Islands, Identity, and the Literary Imagination (2016), Elizabeth McMahon also points to the

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novel’s “telescopic perspective that moves from the periphery to the center of the island” (109). When Em meets Rebekkah, she is actually journeying to the mountains to visit a group of friends who are not part of garrison life. They live a more bohemian existence apart from the strict social codes of whites in Kingston. The journey through the mountains represents a movement away from white social norms located on the edges of the island and towards the mountains at the center of the island. Em’s movement from periphery (whiteness) to center (blackness) de-centers whiteness as that which one should emulate. McMahon argues Em’s visit represents a moment of self-discovery in which she learns her “true home” is among such a progressive community. Em feels a greater sense of belonging with the artistic community in the mountains. Her self-discovery, however, actually accelerates her departure from Jamaica, as she realizes she can no longer live according to the strictures of garrison life. While I agree with this interpretation, I don’t necessarily think Em’s self-discovery in the mountains indicates a unified sense of self. Her stay in the mountains illuminates the unsustainable nature of her life in Jamaica, prompting her to look elsewhere for fulfillment. However, she doesn’t necessarily have the answer as to where this fulfillment lies. Her movement away from Jamaica, and consequently away from the mountains, also indicates a movement away from the progressiveness she has found, which England cannot promise.

Em’s journey to the mountain is also a formative moment in her desire for other women. It is on this journey that Em first meets Rebekkah. While their meeting represents a more explicit moment of queer desire, Tinsley argues that Em’s experience in and with the mountains also involves a queering of the landscape. Em’s specifically interracial desire for Rebekkah “mixes up colonial geographies of whiteness” (5). The journey through the mountains during which Em encounters Rebekkah is one of the most sensual descriptions of the landscape, as Em observes
the “rich flower-smells” (202) and the “rushing water pouring over the rock, the fine spray in the air mingling with the dust” that fills her with joy (197). The lush wetness coincides with Em’s admiration of Rebekkah’s figure. According to Tinsley, Em’s interracial desire, coupled with her journey away from whiteness, “point to contradictions in colonial ideologies of white womanhood, as well as in easy understandings of same-sex desire as colonizing or colonized” (72). Em’s movement up the mountains facilitates her encounter with and desire for Rebekkah, which in turn destabilizes Em’s own position as a white woman within the colonial order.

Not all of Em’s movements are subversive, however. McMahon points to another series of movements that lack the linearity associated with Em’s journey to the mountains. The “endless ‘round’ of chaperoned social occasions” represents another trajectory, albeit a circular one (McMahon 109). Indeed, Em does seem caught within an unceasing cycle of dinners, sporting events, and dances, all of which require implicit but strict codes of behavior. She counts the days until her movements are no longer “controlled and censored” (97). In fact, it is during these social occasions that Em expresses her harshest indictments of social norms particularly as they pertain to gender. During one occasion she thinks to herself: “I shall never be a mother” and likens a baby to a “kind of small monster […] An octopus taking all one’s energy from one” (105). Later on, she reflects on a former schoolmate who has conformed to expectations of women, thinking her “a dull, young middle-class woman, stupid, and a coward” (161).

Yet Em does break from this circular pattern of white, middle-class expectations as she often visits other whites of whom her mother does not approve. Em’s frequent visits incite social censure, however, and her mother tells Em: “People are beginning to ask where you are. After all, you are our daughter—,” reminding Em of the place she occupies within the hierarchy of West Indian society (98). Later in the novel, Em fights with her parents for attempting to restrict
her movements. When Em is restricted to moving within one social group or location, she feels stifled. However, when her movements happen across different spaces and social groups, she is able to occupy a wider range of identity positions, given the ways in which social norms shift in each locale.

While Em engages in a series of movements, she also admires mobility in others, particularly women. Throughout much of the novel, Em watches another young woman, Joy Raeburn from afar. Em admires Joy’s athletic prowess and physical appearance, though many in the garrison community disapprove of Joy. While conversing with a group of older garrison women, Em praises Joy’s athletic capabilities, admiring that Joy’s strength enables her to play polo with men. Mrs. Sadler disapprovingly responds: “No doubt she does play. That girl would play anything” (115). She continues expressing her disdain: “Running about with all those young men and getting engaged to them one after another […] Having motor-car accidents at midnight on lonely roads […] I don’t like the way she gets herself talked about” (116). The collective disapproval of Joy stems from her movement and fluidity. Every negative comment Mrs. Sadler makes relates to movement: “play anything,” “running about,” “motor-car accidents.” Even “gets herself talked about” attributes agency and action to Joy rather than to the ones actually doing the talking. Joy’s mobility is a source of concern and disdain for most of garrison society, as Joy’s actions challenge expectations for young women. For Em, however, Joy’s relative freedom and agency proves admirable and attractive.

Not only does Joy literally exhibit movement, she also more figuratively represents mobility in terms of class and sexuality. When Em finally does converse with Joy, we realize Joy speaks in dialect while Em does not. In fact, Joy is the only white person on the island who speaks in dialect, implying a lower social status than most other whites. At one point during the
novel, Em asks a male companion what he thinks of the Raeburn family, to which he replies that he finds the family too striving. His statement indicts the Raeburns as lower class, but capable of climbing the social ladder and obtaining a social status into which they were not born. Joy also appears somewhat androgynous and based on her flirtations with men and women, seems to exhibit a more fluid sexuality beyond heteronormative strictures. Observing Joy at a dance, Em reflects that Joy is without “any of the conventional appearances of femininity, without either any of the English gawkiness or hoyden boisterousness of manner. Her charm like the charm of a tree or a flower—imperishable, sexless—probably not the type of beauty everyone admired, precisely because it belonged to no type […]” (133). Joy defies categorization: she is sexless and belongs to no type. Additionally, she is neither English nor hoyden\textsuperscript{48} in mannerisms and her class status is more ambiguous than others in the novel. Tellingly, however, Joy marries a white man by the end of the novel, a man for whom she has no strong feelings. Joy’s marriage registers as disappointing, yet inevitable, to Em, and we realize that women’s mobility is only temporarily sustainable within this world. One can only defy categorization for so long until she is expected to assume her rightful place in society.

As with \textit{Quicksand}, there is also a pervasive attention to the inadequacy of language in \textit{Luminous Isle}. For example, Em struggles to define herself and instead often resorts to allusive language. Onboard the ship returning to Jamaica, Em reflects: “I know the essence but not the nature of what I want to do in life—how queer. To go about and even grow up with a nameless essence hiding in one’s brain and occasionally appearing” (50). We can surmise the nameless essence refers to Em’s sexuality, given that her desire for other women is never explicitly stated. However, attributing Em’s statement to her sexuality is still a guess—her language remains

\textsuperscript{48} A British term meaning boisterous or rude.
vague enough that we cannot definitively name this essence for her. Later during the same voyage, Em thinks to herself: “But there had been times since childhood when she had felt herself treading upon the fringes of real things” when the “superimposed and made-up personalities […] had faded away” (56). These “real things” remain vague and intangible, though Em implies this realness lies underneath the various social roles people perform. Em herself only treads on the fringes of real things, however, placing her in a liminal space between the real and the “made-up.”

Towards the end of the novel, Em meets Lister in the garden after having a fight with her parents. He asks her why she is upset and while she tells Lister it’s because of her parents, she thinks to herself: “It was many things. Things pushed aside for many months—pieces of flint sticking upwards in her heart […] a world of impossibilities about which she did not allow herself to think” (268). Again, we can guess that these things refer to the restrictive norms of garrison life, Em’s queer desire, or the color prejudice she detests. Yet this “world of impossibilities” is both vast and nondescript and we cannot definitively know what these many things are. Em herself might not even know, given her continual reference to “essences” and “somethings” which she struggles to define.

One glaring linguistic omission, particularly for my purposes, is Em’s silence regarding race refusal compared to her refusal of gender norms. As noted, on Em’s final departure from Jamaica, she wishes to be “sexless, creedless, classless, free.” Em does not mention being “raceless;” race remains the obvious absence in her list of identity constructions. We might suppose that Em does not believe in the possibility of being raceless, given her statements regarding racial essentialism. She does seem more willing to espouse the construction of gender rather than race. Yet Em does invoke race in this list of identity categories. Em’s sex, creed, and
class are all shaped by her whiteness and the social norms she so desperately wants to escape are heavily influenced by race. Though Em doesn’t explicitly say “raceless,” in a way she does not have to. Race is the “unseen presence” in her list, much like the unseen presence replying to her. “Sexless, creedless, classless” invokes race, and thus we recognize race by virtue of its absence.

Despite Em’s omission of raceless, however, there still exist various instances of racial ambiguity, which point to the inadequacy of the racial classification system. When Em first meets Valentine Prender, another man on the island, she observes that it is “impossible to tell at once whether he was fair or dark” (187). She also recalls Captain Carey’s remark about Prender: “I believe Prender on the whole, dislikes women” (ibid). For Em, the acknowledgment of Prender’s racial ambiguity recalls his ambiguous sexuality; destabilizing race has the potential to destabilize sexuality and vice versa. Interestingly, Em soon develops a close relationship with Prender, which is somewhat romantic. However, the relationship never progresses and Prender returns to England despite lingering feelings between the two.

Em subtly conflates racial and sexual ambiguity elsewhere in the novel, such as when Mrs. Drummond returns to Jamaica. Em and Mrs. Drummond are to attend a dinner party held by one of the other garrison women. While trying to select a dress for the evening, Em’s servant, Belle, suggests that Em wear her black and white dress. Em thinks to herself: “But Belle could not know that what one wanted was a dress which would be fitting to meet Mrs. Drummond in—a dress like a poem” (164). Em’s desire to appear attractive to Mrs. Drummond cannot be stated, either explicitly to Belle or to Em herself. Instead, her desire is couched in artistic language, as Em wants to appear as a poem.

Em decides against the black and white dress: “Black-and-white was too disciplined; for one’s enemies—or for an evening of diplomacy with a sly friend” (164). Shortly after, Em
thinks, “Artists, as a rule, were people of nondescript colouring” (165). Em literally finds the black and white dress too disciplined in appearance, yet we might also read her opinion as indicting racial ideology as well, given her follow-up thought on nondescript coloring. Em wishes to appear like a poem to Mrs. Drummond, likening herself to an aesthetic and artistic object and associating artistry with ambiguous coloring. Em expresses a tangled association between queer desire, aesthetic sense, art, and ambiguous coloring that goes beyond simply deciding which dress to wear. She connects opting out of the rigid black-white aesthetic to her desire for Mrs. Drummond, revealing that while Em more explicitly subverts gender and sexuality, she does so as well with race.

Queer desire and racial ambiguity also appear in Em’s interactions with Rebekkah. When Em first encounters Rebekkah, we hear Rebekkah taunting the postmistress: “What are you? […] You not white woman—you not nigger. What den you t’ink yourself to be? […] Ah’m sure Ah doan know where you belong” (203). Though Em is not the woman Rebekkah designates as neither black nor white, the moment is still significant. It is Rebekkah’s argument with the post-mistress that catches Em’s attention and sparks her admiration of Rebekkah’s “powerful body,” “flashing eyes, and “slow, rich powerful voice” (203). Em finds her “magnificent” in this moment (ibid). Verbal declarations of racial ambiguity occur simultaneously with unstated queer desire. While Em herself is not the racially ambiguous woman, her same sex desire is inseparable from moments that question racial ideology.

Though Em’s same sex desire is more explicit than Helga’s, Em still thwarts the imperative to disclose her sexuality. Em seems to conform to the expectations for white women of her social class by becoming engaged to a white man. Yet she ultimately leaves the reader with a sense of ambivalence; we have a strong sense she’ll break her engagement with Lister and
we don’t know if she ultimately settles in England or continues to travel. Em’s refusal to settle in one place, one sexuality, and therefore one racial identity enables her to embody a raceless position. The conclusion of Em’s narrative seems more optimistic than that of Helga’s, which demonstrates the influence of race and class in trying to refuse race. As a white woman of some financial means, Em is able to sustain her mobility in a way Helga is not. While racelessness refuses categorization, the ability to sustain this refusal is to an extent contingent on the very identities racelessness seeks to escape.

**Finding Success in Failure**

As evinced by both Helga’s and Em’s travels, women’s mobility can serve as a form of freedom and agency. Rather than remain restricted to one place, and therefore one model of identity, both characters engage in a series of movements, which allow them to embody many spaces and many identities. Yet women’s mobility is not monolithic; race, class, and sexuality influence Helga and Em’s travels. Helga’s biracialism plays a significant role in her journey between Denmark and New York, for example, while Em’s white creole identity affects how she, and others, perceive her travels throughout Jamaica. In each location, their identities take on different meanings and influence how they exist in these spaces. Additionally, each location enforces different norms of what can and cannot be said and thus to an extent, what identities can and cannot exist. In both novels, we witness the inadequacy of language, the willful silences of characters, and the formal breakdown of meaning. The ways Helga and Em try to address what cannot be spoken represent potential moments of performative disruptions. Spatially contingent social norms create different performative regulations, and therefore varying possibilities for disrupting these regulations.
Both novels, however, cast doubt on their protagonists’ ability to sustain perpetual movement rather than settle in one place. *Quicksand* is especially pessimistic regarding lasting options for women’s movement and agency, particularly for women of color. Helga is unable to prolong her travels and split her life between Harlem and Copenhagen. Instead, she ends up deprived of all movement, convalescing in her bed as her repeated pregnancies continue to drain her. Em fairs notably better than Helga; she is able to continue traveling through the end of the novel at least. Undoubtedly, Em’s whiteness and familial connections provide her with more options than Helga. In both novels, we sense that women must at some point stop moving and thus relinquish some of their agency. It would be easy to read Helga and Em as ultimately failing to subvert racial ideology and live a raceless existence; to varying extents, they both seem to succumb to social norms. Helga adopts a black identity premised on the traditionally feminine roles of wife and mother while Em becomes engaged to a racist white man, despite her attraction to women and her interracial friendships. While they do not transcend race to find a viable alternative, their refusal of racial categories constitutes a success in and of itself. Helga and Em need not permanently dismantle the racial hierarchy to be viewed as subversive. Instead, we can read the movements they do engage in as embodying more fluid identities, exposing the performative norms of various spaces, and attempting to disrupt those norms.
Chapter Four

Money Matters: Classed Racelessness in Zora Neale Hurston & Georgia Douglas Johnson

“You come from some big high muck-de-mucks, and we ain’t nothing but piney-woods Crackers and poor white trash. Even niggers is better than we is, according to your kind.”

-Zora Neale Hurston, *Seraph on the Suwanee* (1948)

“Smile then into the face of poverty for in its school is found the discipline through which master men are made.”

-Georgia Douglas Johnson, “Homely Philosophy: Poverty” (1927)

In 1923, the African American magazine *The Messenger* released a special issue on the “New Negro Woman.” “Yes, she has arrived,” the editorial announced, “Like her white sister, she is the product of profound and vital changes […] the New Negro Woman, with her head erect and spirit undaunted is resolutely marching toward the liberation of her people in particular and the human race in general” (757). The emphasis on stoicism, racial uplift, and emulating whites reflects the politics of respectability espoused by many in the New Negro Movement.49 Black women in particular faced high standards of propriety; they were expected to subsume their sexuality and emulate white Victorian models of femininity in order to uplift the black race as a whole. These ideals extended to black women’s writing as well. Zora Neale Hurston, for example, received criticism for her literary depictions of black rural life, her use of dialect, and

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49 According to James Smalls, the New Negro movement aimed to promote an image of African Americans as “industrious, urbane, independent, distinct and apart from the subservient and illiterate ‘Old Negro’ of the rural South.” The movement was particularly influential during the first three decades of the twentieth century and reached its zenith during the Harlem Renaissance.
her frank representation of black female sexuality. To many of her contemporaries, Hurston did not uphold a politics of respectability.

In fact, Hurston went so far as to challenge the idealized view of white women as models of femininity. Her 1944 novel *Seraph on the Suwanee* focuses almost exclusively on white characters, a controversial move for a black author. The novel’s protagonist, Arvay Henson, is far from the mythologized Southern belle. Arvay comes from an impoverished town dominated by turpentine mills and hookworm. The narrator depicts the Hensons as stereotypical “poor whites”: they eat clay, show signs of eugenic inferiority, and socially, are considered beneath black characters. Though Arvay eventually marries into a wealthier family, she must first lose all traces of her “Cracker” origins in order to have a successful marriage. The novel uses the eugenicist discourse of the early twentieth century that positioned poor whites as an inferior breed. Poor whites deviate from normative, upwardly mobile whiteness. In addition to exposing the socioeconomic stratification of whiteness, *Seraph on the Suwanee* also represents a strong departure from the politics of respectability expected of black women writers.

Several critics juxtapose Hurston with Georgia Douglas Johnson, a writer best known for her 1920s poetry collections. Whereas Hurston seemed to defy a politics of respectability, Johnson garnered praise for her adoption of a respectable, middle-class identity. Johnson’s contemporaries often described her poetry as sentimental, feminine, and “raceless,” in that she didn’t address the topic of race. Even *Bronze* (1922), widely considered Johnson’s most racialized poetry, lacks the explicit race consciousness of many other Harlem Renaissance writers. According to Claudia Tate, Johnson adopted “an intensely feminine authorial posture (xlvii) whereas Hurston “rejected the posture of the lady” (lxvii). While Johnson’s work “did not ostensibly challenge the gender conventions of her age,” Hurston’s writing reveals an “immodest
commentary [that] emphatically challenged masculine authority” (Tate xliii). Johnson, ever the lady, wrote ostensibly conventional work that appealed to readers’ sense of propriety. Hurston’s oeuvre, however, largely focuses on rural poverty, a noticeably less genteel subject matter than Johnson’s love poems.

Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* and Johnson’s *Bronze* might seem diametrically opposed. The former explores the plight of poor whites and was heavily criticized on publication whereas the latter elicited praise and adhered to contemporary gendered expectations. Yet *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *Bronze* are actually different sides of the same coin; they both depict the varying degrees to which class influences racial identity, whether for poor whites or upper to middle class blacks. Both works also demonstrate the socioeconomic dimensions of racelessness as well. Johnson conformed to a politics of respectability and had her poetry deemed raceless because she appeared not to address race. However, I argue Johnson strategically adopted a conventionally feminine authorial posture in order to advocate for a version of racelessness that eschewed racial identity. *Seraph on the Suwanee* more directly breaks with a politics of respectability and exposes whiteness as continually constructed. Yet the novel forecloses the possibility of a viable, poor white identity. Instead, all evidence of white poverty is extinguished until Arvay can assume her role as the right/white wife of Jim Meserve. The novel positions poor whites as a raceless demographic that must ultimately assimilate to normative whiteness or cease to exist. Hurston and Johnson demonstrate that racelessness often hinges on whether or not one can afford it: personally, socially, and quite literally, financially.
From “Poor White” to “Pure White”: Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee*

In his contribution to *I’ll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition* (1930), Robert Penn Warren describes the general attitude towards poor whites as “beyond the pale of even the most generous democratic recognition” (258). The national discourse of progress and advancement, which sought to modernize the rural South, viewed poor whites as a distinct demographic that hindered modernization. The disdain directed towards poor whites was not solely due to their financial straits. They were poor, yes, but according to the eugenicist racial logic of the early twentieth century, poor whites also evinced signs of genetic inferiority. Often thought to have descended from convicts and indentured servants, poor whites were considered weak stock, a status only exacerbated by endogamy (Duck 96). Evidence of “weak stock” included “deformity, feeble-mindedness, albinism, alcoholism, miscegenation, and criminality” (Jackson 642). Poor whites incurred stigma for their “inability to be productive, to own property, or to produce healthy and upwardly mobile children” and undermined the “American dream” of upward mobility (Isenberg xv). According to eugenicist logic, they should be purged for the greater good of “normal” society. Rather than examine the role capitalism played in perpetuating poverty, eugenicists entertained sterilization as a legitimate solution to the problem of poor whites. It was as if the “whiteness of whites cannot be white enough,” Jackson suggests, “but must be purged and sterilized” (644).

Because dominant racial logic associated whiteness with financial security and upward mobility, poor whites were an aberration. They were not the right kind of white. The racial hierarchy positioned poor whites as on par with, if not beneath, blacks. Whiteness continually reconstructs itself to give the appearance of a cohesive whole and to present whiteness as natural and inherent. Poor whites exposed this fallacy and were therefore distanced from normative
whiteness. Yet poor whites weren’t considered black either. In fact, many poor whites felt their proximity to blackness and some enacted racial violence to bolster their sense of racial superiority. Poor whites likely would not consider themselves raceless. They instead insisted on their whiteness, but this insistence was born out of feeling their claim to whiteness was tenuous (Baron).

Economically secure whites distanced themselves from their poor counterparts, sometimes going so far as to consider them a different breed (Isenberg). Blacks also viewed poor whites as inferior, or “so much social debris,” as Penn Warren put it (258). Within the black/white binary of the early twentieth century, poor whites were a problem and the solution often involved eugenicist ideas of breeding and sterilization. Though poor whites often clung tightly to their white identity, dominant racial logic positioned poor whites as a raceless demographic that undermined white superiority; consequently, poor whites either needed to assimilate or cease to exist.

Representations of the South often distinguished poor whites by their “supposed psychological and physical degeneracy” (Duck 96). Erskine Caldwell gained widespread popularity for his fictional depictions of poor whites in novels such as Tobacco Road (1932) and God’s Little Acre (1933). Tobacco Road, for example, follows the Lester family, poor white tenant farmers in Georgia. The Lesters are hyperbolic depictions of poor whites: the turnip thieving family is violent, promiscuous, impoverished, and has physical deformities. Caldwell claimed he exaggerated the Lesters’ circumstances in order to draw attention to the desperate conditions in the rural South. Yet his novels also reinforced racial and socioeconomic stereotypes and allowed readers to distance themselves from the plight of rural Southerners. The dire socioeconomic situation was not seen as a national problem, but a regional one endemic to the
supposedly backwards South. (Duck). Additionally, both Caldwell and his father were eugenicists who saw sterilization as the answer to rural poverty (Keely). Even in his attempts to show the nation the effects of poverty, Caldwell still viewed poor whites as a problem and the solution was eradication.

Zora Neale Hurston’s *Seraph on the Suwanee* is not as hyperbolic as Caldwell’s work, yet her novel does display similar eugenicist themes. *Seraph on the Suwanee* is set in Sawley, Florida, where the white residents endure oppressive poverty, lack any sense of propriety or manners, and show signs of physical and mental defects. Though Sawley’s residents would like to imagine themselves as socially superior to blacks, the novel depicts the poor white characters as not only inferior to financially secure whites, but also beneath blacks. Arvay Henson, the novel’s protagonist, ultimately transcends her impoverished origins and enters an upwardly mobile marriage. She effectively passes for a different socioeconomic class, but in order to do so, she must eradicate all evidence of her poor white beginnings.

*Seraph on the Suwanee* portrays Arvay’s trajectory as one from a raceless identity to a normative white one and the immense costs of this transformation. A poor white identity is not viable within the context of the novel. Arvay’s husband rapes her into submission in his desire to make her the meek, affable, idealized Southern belle he upholds. All other signs of her socioeconomic origins disappear, die, or burn. Granted, Arvay does gain a great degree of financial privilege in her shift from the wrong to the right kind of white. Yet the novel also indicts the eugenicist logic that presented assimilation or eradication as the only options for poor whites. Arvay’s transformation grants her economic advantages, but also reveals the violence of imposing normative whiteness.
Born in 1891, Zora Neale Hurston spent most of her childhood in Eatonville, Florida, which inspired the setting of many of her novels. Hurston attended a boarding school for part of her youth, though she eventually left because of lack of funds. After lying about her age, Hurston enrolled in high school and obtained a diploma in 1918. She went on to study at Howard University and in 1928 earned a degree in anthropology from Barnard College. While at Barnard, she studied under Franz Boas whose mentorship greatly influenced her work on folklore (Hemenway). Priscilla Wald argues that under Boas, “Hurston learned to confound the categories of observer and observed and to examine the means by which culture shapes subjectivity” (79). Indeed, much of Hurston’s writing explores how society shapes racial and gendered identities. Publishing during the Harlem Renaissance, Hurston developed friendships with other writers such as Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes. She also secured a white patron, Charlotte Osgood Mason, whose financial assistance supported Hurston’s anthropological research trips (Hemenway).

Hurston’s status as a Harlem Renaissance writer is debatable because her best known work, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, appeared in 1937, occurs in rural Florida, and doesn’t espouse the racial uplift politics of many other Renaissance writers. 50 Throughout her career, many of Hurston’s contemporaries objected to her use of dialect and refusal to portray racial uplift. 51 In some ways, her politics were relatively conservative compared to many other

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50 The Harlem Renaissance is frequently associated with the 1920s, modernity, and urban centers such as New York and Chicago. For further reading on the Harlem Renaissance, see George Hutchinson, *The Harlem Renaissance in Black and White* (1995) and Houston A. Baker, Jr., *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987).

influential black writers of the Harlem Renaissance. Her controversial article “Court Order Can’t Make the Races Mix” (1955) opposed the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, which ended school segregation. However, Hurston was not as politically naïve as her critics thought. Instead, as Carla Kaplan notes, Hurston was a “serious feminist” who “thought in profoundly political terms and estimated value with a steady eye to social goods” (*Zora Neale Hurston*, 14).

Though controversial, Hurston was savvier than some believed. Later in her life, Hurston struggled financially and professionally, relying on public assistance and working odd jobs such as cleaning houses. She died in 1960 and her grave remained unmarked until 1973, when Alice Walker traveled to the Florida cemetery and marked an unknown gravestone as Hurston’s.

Hurston’s exploration of racelessness is not limited to her fiction. Her essay “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” (1931) details her own process of racial identification beginning when she is a child in Eatonville. During her early years, Hurston seems unaware of her color; in fact, she says she remembers the day she “became colored” (emph. added). Hurston’s depiction of race as a process of becoming, rather than inherent, undermines the eugenicist discourse of her time, which sought to link race with biological traits. Later in the essay, Hurston remarks: “I do not always feel colored […] I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background.” Hurston’s race becomes most evident in the presence of whites, indicating how whiteness must continually construct a racial other in order to bolster its own racial identity.

Not only does “How It Feels to Be Colored Me” draw attention to the constructed, and therefore fallible, nature of racialization, Hurston also explicitly refuses racial categories as well.

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52 According to James McWhorter, in “Why Zora Neale Hurston Was a Conservative” (2011), Hurston espoused a politics of self-help and eschewed assistance or preferential treatment from whites.

53 Walker describes this experience in her 1974 essay, “In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens: The Creativity of Black Women in the South.”
She declares: “At certain times I have no race, I am me […] The cosmic Zora emerges. I belong to no race nor time. I am the eternal feminine with its string of beads.” Hurston positions herself as independent of a race; race is ancillary to her identity. The cosmic Zora transcends racial categorization. Analyzing this passage, Barbara Johnson argues “Hurston suspends the certainty of reference not by erasing these differences but by foregrounding the complex dynamism of their interaction” (289). Hurston undermines the process of signification and presents identity as fluid and ever changing. Using “I,” “she,” and “Zora,” to refer to herself, Hurston disrupts the subject/object divide. Her declaration, “I am me” also elides subject and object, and unsettles the process of signification. The performative nature of racial identity demands that race be continually reconstructed; by destabilizing the referentiality of race, Hurston questions the very notion of race itself. Priscilla Wald echoes this interpretation, suggesting that Hurston “challenges rather than succumbs to the binary opposition of the color line” (85). Rather than espouse a neat black/white racial binary, Hurston refuses the binary altogether and eschews the elision between race and one’s identity. One can exist apart from race.

As Hurston demonstrates in *Seraph on the Suwanee*, however, existing apart from race is not uniformly liberating or desirable. Published in 1948, *Seraph on the Suwanee* was Hurston’s last novel. Critics have generally treated the text as the “other” in Hurston’s otherwise successful oeuvre. Focusing on a poor white family in Florida, *Seraph on the Suwanee* deviates from Hurston’s prior work, which depicts black folk life. Many viewed *Seraph on the Suwanee* as pandering to white publishers and audiences. For example, in *Zora Neale Hurston: A Literary Biography* (1977), Robert Hemenway argues Hurston “largely turned her back on the source of her creativity” by writing about white people (307). Mary Helen Washington makes a similar critique in “A Woman Half in Shadow” (1979): “[…] apparently Zora wrote this strange book to
prove that she was capable of writing about white people. The intent may have been admirable, but […] the result is an awkward and contrived novel, as vacuous as a soap opera” (136). To make matters worse, Hurston was wrongfully accused of molesting a young boy during this time. *Seraph on the Suwanee* was astonishingly used as evidence against her. Hurston’s detractors claimed the novel supported immoral female sexual behavior, which would explain Hurston’s supposed actions. Though she was eventually cleared of all charges, the novel’s reputation suffered.

The late twentieth century saw more positive critical attention to *Seraph on the Suwanee*. Ann DuCille was one of the first to argue for the novel’s subversive potential. By focusing on whites, DuCille suggests, Hurston is able to address the gender politics of marriage without falling into racist stereotypes of black men and women (*The Coupling Convention*). The advent of whiteness studies has also seen more criticism that seeks to explain Hurston’s focus on whiteness as more than pandering. Chuck Jackson, for example, connects Hurston’s examination of poor whites with early twentieth century eugenicist beliefs, noting how the “rural, poor, ‘cacogenic’ white family doesn’t fit neatly into a black/white binary” (648). Instead, poor whites were considered “evidence of wasteful or weak human stock” that must be cleansed from a supposedly more pure, economically stable form of whiteness (Jackson 642). Veronica T. Watson echoes this claim in *The Souls of White Folk* (2013), noting that the dominant construction of whiteness was synonymous with economic security and social and cultural elevation (94). Connecting socioeconomic status and gender, Watson suggests that Arvay Henson, the novel’s protagonist, must “relinquish her lower class self in order to perform upper class white femininity in socially acceptable ways” (90). Building on Jackson and Watson’s claims about class and gender, I contend that *Seraph on the Suwanee* positions its poor white
characters as a raceless demographic and the Arvay’s trajectory is also one from racelessness to whiteness. Arvay’s class status remains intimately tied to her racial status and as her financial situation changes, so does her race. She leaves behind her liminal poor white identity, which I argue is a raceless one, to enter a more recognizable, normative form of whiteness.

When we first meet Arvay Henson, she is living in Sawley, Florida, where the residents “had always been of the poor whites who had scratched out some kind of an existence in the scrub oaks and pines, far removed from the ease of the big estates” (7). The landscape is “scratchy” and inhospitable to most crops due to the turpentine mill, which also employs many of the locals. The narrator describes Arvay’s father, Brock Henson, as a “Cracker from way back” (8) and the general air of Sawley is “ignorance and poverty, and the ever-present hookworm” (1). In *White Trash: The 400-Year Old Untold History of Class in America* (2016), Nancy Isenberg notes that hookworm was considered a “white trash disease” associated with lack of proper sanitation. The afflicted were “literally dwarfed and disfigured by the disease” (198). The residents of Sawley, just like the landscape, remain disfigured by the socioeconomic conditions that reinforce poverty and destitution. Additionally, Sawley is some distance from “the ease of the big estates,” or more wealthy whites who own plantation style manors. Sawley’s residents are geographically segregated from upwardly mobile white communities, indicating how normative whiteness polices its literal, spatial boundaries. From the outset, we understand that Sawley’s inhabitants are not like other whites, and in fact, are inferior.

Hurston’s description of Sawley echoes the eugenicist discourse of the early twentieth century. Chuck Jackson contends that from 1900-1940 especially, eugenics strongly influenced American culture and the national conversation centered on ideas of selective breeding in which “good” marriages could strengthen the future of white America (642). It is clear early in the
novel, however, that Arvay does not entirely belong in the Sawley community, as she seems unlike the more stereotypically “white trash” residents. She feigns epileptic fits to evade male suitors and at sixteen has dedicated herself to missionary work in order to avoid marrying. The other townspeople consider her “queer, if not a little ‘tetch’d’” (6). In actuality, however, Arvay longs for her sister’s husband, the Reverend, Carl Middleton, and is ashamed of her sexual desire.

Arvay’s singular status is further cemented with the arrival of Jim Meserve, “whose ancestors had held plantations […] before the War” (7). Though Jim’s family lost their wealth during the Civil War, he still retains an air of financial and social elevation. He is quite handsome and every woman in Sawley fawns over him. Jim, however, only has eyes for Arvay and scoffs at her religious aspirations. Initially, Arvay rejects Jim’s courting and demands she be left alone. Despite her protests, Jim persists with his advances. During one evening at the Henson’s home, Arvay suffers one of her “episodes” and the Hensons recruit Jim to help restrain her. Attempting to drop turpentine in Arvay’s mouth to stop the fit, Jim instead drops turpentine in her eye. Thereafter, Arvay is “cured” and subsequently agrees to marry Jim if he promises not to drop any more turpentine in her eye. Thus begins Jim’s pattern of making Arvay submit to his authority and transforming her into the passive, agreeable wife he desires.

Even after Arvay agrees to marry Jim, however, she is still too headstrong for his liking. Jim seeks advice from his black employee, Joe Kelsey, who believes men should make women “knuckle under. From the very first jump, get the bridle in they mouth and ride ‘em hard and stop ‘em short […] Take ‘em and break ‘em” (46). Likening women to horses, Joe perpetuates the dehumanization of women, particularly poor women and women of color. Additionally, the eugenicist discourse during the early twentieth century also used metaphors of livestock and
breeding, often comparing poor whites to mules. As I note in Chapter Two, mixed race individuals, or “mulattos” as they were called during this time, were also compared to mules and even considered a separate breed. Similar to mixed race individuals, poor whites complicated the black/white binary, particularly its socioeconomic connotations. Whereas mixed race individuals were deemed black by default, poor whites needed to conform to normative, upwardly mobile whiteness. By making Arvay “knuckle under,” Jim hopes to transform her into the right kind of white wife.

Given the racial hierarchy of the time, we might also find it unusual that Jim seeks advice about his white wife from a black man. Whites often considered black men a danger to white women. The fact that Jim discusses Arvay with Joe not only demonstrates the closeness between the two men, but also reveals Arvay’s social standing. She is not the idealized white Southern belle who must be protected from black men. Instead, her lower class status, and thus her lower racial status, enables Joe to discuss raping Arvay with impunity. Though Jim repeatedly claims not to care about Arvay’s poverty, his actions indicate he does not view her as the idealized white Southern lady.

In fact, Jim heeds Joe’s advice and during his next visit with Arvay, he takes her under the mulberry tree and rapes her. Immediately after, he tells Arvay, “I love you a million times more, darling” (52). Jim’s affection for Arvay directly correlates to his ability to dominate her. Arvay later protests that she was raped, saying she should have called for her father. Jim callously says it would’ve been useless, just a “trashy waste of good time and breath” (57). He continues: “Sure you was raped, and that ain’t all. You’re going to keep on getting raped” (57). Jim’s use of “trashy” and “waste” indict Arvay’s lower socioeconomic position. Had Arvay protested during her assault she would’ve undermined the gender dynamic Jim created in which
the woman wholly submits to male force. To challenge male authority is trashy and a waste of time. Instead, Jim expects Arvay to surrender to the role of wife, which he believes entails successive rape. After foreshadowing future rapes, Jim calls Arvay a “wonderful woman” (57). His view of Arvay as the “right kind” of woman, as a suitable wife, is tied to her complete submission to his authority.54

Jim exemplifies the Southern white man who in the postbellum South strives to reassert his racial, gendered, and financial dominance over newly freed slaves and white women advocating for more political rights. Veronica T. Watson connects Jim’s behavior towards Arvay with the mythologized Southern white woman. The ideal Southern lady, the belle, was little more than an “attractive coquette” and a “morally passive, decorative object” (64). By the twentieth century, Watson asserts, “silence, obedience, and loyalty to the institutions of the South are celebrated as qualities that define a lady” (63). In attempting to elevate Arvay’s class status, Jim tries to make her into the idealized Southern belle whose value lies in her “unquestioning support of the patriarchal order and her commitment to white supremacy and class elitism” (Watson 65). In order to project a monolithic, superior version of whiteness, Jim’s wife must embody the Southern belle ideal and he enforces Arvay’s submission and silence through sexual assault.

After Arvay marries Jim, they live for a time in the turpentine camp, though they enjoy more economic security than most of the workers. Arvay soon becomes pregnant with her first child and begins to crave clay: “Arvay had seen many people in Sawley eat clay, but she had never touched it herself” (64). Clay eating, or geophagia, is commonly associated with expectant

54 For further reading on the role of sexual assault in Seraph on the Suwanee, see Susan E. Meisenhelder, Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: Race and Gender in the Work of Zora Neale Hurston (1999); Adrienne Akins, “‘Just like Mister Jim’: Class Transformation from Cracker to Aristocrat in Hurston’s ‘Seraph on the Suwanee’” (2010); and Laura Dubek, “The Social Geography of Race in Hurston’s Seraph on the Suwanee” (1996).
mothers, as pregnancy can induce cravings for dirt and clay (O’Rourke). Yet there is also a class dimension to Arvay’s clay eating. As Deanne Stephens Nuwer notes, as “early as 1851, the epithet ‘dirt eater’ was linked to whites who were not acceptable on any level of Southern society” (142). There was a social stratification between those who ate clay and those who did not. Those driven to eat clay often did so because of poverty and famine. However, clay eaters’ impoverishment did not garner them sympathy. Instead, they were “stigmatized for not contributing to society and stereotyped as abhorrent in contemporary newspaper accounts” (Nuwer 153). Late nineteenth century newspapers characterized clay eaters as “the lowest type of the white race found in the United States” (“Eaters of Clay”) and a “miserable race of beings with only just enough to eke out a wretched existence” (Maryland’s Clay-Eaters”). Arvay’s cravings not only allude to her pregnancy, but also to “clay-eaters” in the rural South who ate dirt and served as evidence of the region’s poverty and supposed backwardness.

Jim, however, “exploded with disgust” upon learning Arvay had eaten clay, proclaiming he “better not find any more of the goddamned, filthy, dirty stuff around the place” (65). Jim abhors Arvay’s clay-eating, a learned behavior from her upbringing in Sawley, which reiterates the class difference between the two. Though Arvay has married out of poverty, she still fails to uphold the upper class feminine ideals Jim seeks in a wife. Instead, she continues to expose the constructed nature of white identity and breaks with performative norms expected of white, financially secure women. Arvay’s filthy, dirty origins have infiltrated Jim’s wealthy, antebellum pedigree and he must police the boundaries between cleanliness and filth, between “pure” whiteness and poor whiteness.

The birth of the Meserve’s first child further accentuates the socioeconomic divide between Arvay and Jim, particularly given that the narrator frames the child’s appearance in
eugenicist terms. The child is “nothing like Jim at all” (67). Instead, he favors Arvay’s Uncle Chester, whom “they seldom talked about” and was “sort of queer in his head” (68). The infant’s “defects” include his egg-shaped head, his “string-like fingers,” and his too-long feet that lack arches (68-69). Clearly, the child has inherited his deformities from the lower-class relatives on his mother’s side. Though Jim does not directly comment on the child’s appearance, he declines to participate in naming his son. Jim refuses to claim his son, whom the novel portrays as evidence of genetic degeneracy, as his own. Naming one’s child is a performative utterance that calls the child into being and establishes familial and patriarchal connections. However, Jim is only interested in participating in this process if he can reaffirm his racial superiority. Because Earl undermines white ascendancy, Jim abstains from naming him. Arvay alone decides to name the baby Earl and disrupts Jim’s patriarchal authority within the family. Earl’s naming exposes the constructed and policed boundaries of whiteness. He represents the degeneracy of poor whites and Jim must continually deny him in order to preserve his sense of racial superiority.

Earl stands in stark contrast to his two younger siblings, Angeline and Kenny, who resemble Jim and embody normative whiteness. As Earl develops into a teenager, he begins to demonstrate increasingly aggressive behavior. When Jim suggests Earl be sent away, Arvay lambasts him for his favoritism: “‘Earl is always wrong because he’s like my folks. Tain’t never nothing wrong with Angeline and Kenny because they take after your side” (126). Arvay implicitly draws a distinction between the “wrong” kind of whites and the “right” kind, rupturing the iterative process in which whiteness continually constructs itself as a cohesive whole. She continues by noting Jim’s class prejudice, particularly in regards to her family: “You come from some big high muck-de-mucks, and we ain’t nothing but piney-woods Crackers and poor white trash. Even niggers is better than we is, according to your kind” (126). Again, Arvay
acknowledges the hierarchy of “kinds” of whites and repeats the oft-held belief that poor whites are socially inferior to blacks.

Arvay’s distinction between different kinds of whites echoes the national discourse that positioned poor whites as existing outside dominant versions of whiteness. Even into the twentieth century, poor whites were still “adjudged a breed apart, an ill-defined class halfway between white and black. Under no circumstances did they ever socialize with, let alone marry, respectable whites […] they were like a mule to a horse or a hound to a dog” (Isenberg 226). Not quite white, but not quite black either, poor whites existed in a stratum all their own by virtue of their socioeconomic position. White supremacy was premised on the belief that whites were endowed with superior intellectual and physical traits. Whites that didn’t evince the superiority of their race—well, they couldn’t be white.

Hurston also reinforces the liminality of poor whites in her 1943 essay, “The Pet Negro System.” Just as whites favor certain blacks, Hurston suggests, blacks also attach themselves to middle to upper class whites in order to reap the benefits of association. Exempt from this association, however, are poor whites. Because of their lower socioeconomic standing, blacks don’t consider poor whites as deserving of the label “white.” Upper-class whites disdained their poor counterparts and considered them on par with, if not beneath, blacks. According to Hurston, however, blacks disdained proximity to poor whites as well, which places poor whites as a race apart.

The novel further emphasizes Earl’s social status by implicitly likening him to black men; he is the “more racialized son,” as Watson puts it (95). Earl’s proximity to blackness is most evident when he assaults Lucy Correggio. The Correggios live on the Meserve land and the Correggio father works for Jim. Before the assault, Jim warns Arvay: “Something about one or
the other of those girls has woke up something in the boy. They didn’t put it there, though. It’s been there all along” (125). Earl possesses some innate, animalistic quality that has been awoken by the beautiful Correggio girls. The night of Lucy’s assault, Arvay hears “a short howl kind of a sound and yelps mixed in with the screams,” which portrays Earl as animalistic and inhuman (142).

The Meserves and Correggios rush outside to find Lucy with her skirt pushed up and a wound on her thigh. Other neighborhood men arrive and call for a “posse to run the so-and-so down and string him up” (144). The men then call Lucy Ann a “clean-living, pretty white girl,” which echoes the stereotype of the black male rapist assaulting the virginal white woman (ibid). Emphasizing Lucy’s whiteness implicitly likens Earl to black men and underscores his outsider status among other whites. The lynch mob continues as the men use Bloodhounds to track Earl into the nearby swamp. After a lengthy standoff, the men finally shoot Earl, which destroys one of the physical manifestations of Arvay’s poor white origins. As Watson suggests, Earl’s death “erases the only ‘evidence’ in the text that Meserve whiteness is learned and performed rather than biological” (96). Arvay’s only living children now are like Jim: the right kind of white.

Even with Earl’s death, however, Arvay’s transformation into the right kind of white woman remains incomplete. One evening at home, Arvay hears Jim call her from outside. She finds him holding a live rattlesnake in his hand, attempting to impress Arvay with his bravery. “Just like a little boy turning cartwheels in front of the house where his girl lived,” Arvay thinks to herself (254). The snake soon begins to overpower Jim and wraps around his torso, slowly strangling him. Rather than help, Arvay stands paralyzed watching Jim suffocate. The sudden appearance of Jeff Kelsey, Joe’s son, saves Jim. After Jeff wrests the snake from Jim’s body, Arvay attempts to approach, but Jeff’s glare stops her. His look “called her unworthy of such an
honor and pleasure and privilege by reason of cowardice and treason and trashiness” (256). We can see how Jeff might think Arvay a cowardly traitor; she was too paralyzed by fear to aid Jim and would’ve let him die had Jeff not arrived. Yet calling Arvay’s inaction “trashy” is unexpected. Jeff associates Jim with privilege and honor and Arvay with unworthiness and trash. Jeff’s reaction recalls an earlier moment when Jim and Joe discuss how to make Arvay “knuckle under,” an unusual conversation given that Joe, a black man, discusses a white woman’s sexuality with her white husband. Similarly, Jeff’s blatant disgust towards Arvay is unexpected in that black men were expected to defer to white women. Yet Arvay is “trashy” and therefore does not merit the same respect as a wealthier, more ladylike white woman.

Jim confirms this interpretation when he and Arvay are finally alone. He proceeds to lambast Arvay’s reaction to the snake, saying that by grabbing the rattler, he “saw a chance to do something big and brave and full of manhood” that would garner Arvay’s admiration (261). He acknowledges Arvay might not have been able to loose the snake, but insists she should’ve tried. Instead, Jim believes, Arvay failed to acknowledge his manly bravery and “hated my guts and then pitched in and helped the rattlesnake out” (262). In a dramatic turn, Jim declares he is leaving Arvay: “[…] I’m through and done with filling in where you choose to be insufficient. I eat high on the hog or nothing” (267). Though Jim claims to have never cared about Arvay’s class origins, his conclusion posits their relationship as hierarchical. “High on the hog” implies financial well-being whereas Arvay is lacking and insufficient like her poor relations. Arvay fails to embody the mythologized Southern belle Jim desires, exposing the tenuous construction of whiteness. Jim gives Arvay one year to decide if she can be the woman he married her for. If not, their relationship will be forever severed.
Shortly after Jim leaves, Arvay receives a telegram from her sister, Larraine, informing her their mother is sick. Still hurt over Jim’s departure, Arvay reasons that Sawley is where she truly belongs, as she is a “Cracker bred and a Cracker born, and when she was dead there’d be a Cracker gone” (272). Feeling defensive after Jim’s verbal attacks, Arvay embraces her lower class origins to distance herself from his snobbery. Arvay develops a fond nostalgia for Sawley: “The corroding poverty of her childhood became a glowing virtue, and a state to be desired […] Even Larraine and her family stood glorified in this distant light” (272). Once Arvay actually arrives in Sawley, however, it becomes clear that her time away has made her uncomfortable with poverty. Pulling up to her mother’s house, Arvay expresses disdain at Larraine taking snuff and thinks Larraine’s daughters are “mule-faced and ugly enough” (276). After her mother dies, Arvay and Larraine argue over the funeral expenses and Arvay snaps, “I got a husband! He covers the ground he stands on. He ain’t never let me know what a hard day means” (284). Arvay lords her economic advantages over her sister, denigrating working women. Arvay’s description of her nieces, furthermore, echoes the eugenicist language that represented poor whites as mules and inferior breeds. Though Arvay initially expresses nostalgia over a simpler, more authentic life she associated with Sawley, once there she looks down on the residents and demonstrates her preference for the right kind of whites.

Larraine and her husband ultimately ransack their mother’s house and make off with whatever items of value they can plunder. Feeling that she has nothing left for her in Sawley, Arvay burns her mother’s house down and rids herself of the last evidence of her poor origins. Once the house has turned to ashes, Arvay is “in harmony with her life. The physical sign of her disturbance was consuming down in flames” (308). The Sawley house represents her “Cracker” beginnings and once it’s gone, Arvay can embody an idealized model of white femininity.
Observing the fire, Arvay’s thoughts turn to her husband and her need to repair her marriage. She reflects on the pain she caused Jim, but finds hope in that “she knew her way now and could see things as they were” (308). The loss of Earl, and now Sawley, removes any evidence of Arvay’s poor origins and she can be the kind of wife Jim puts on a pedestal.

Determined to regain Jim’s affection, Arvay visits him on his boat, where he now works as a fisherman. Arvay joins Jim and his crew on an overnight fishing expedition, during which she makes a conscious effort to embody the feminine ideal Jim upholds. She strokes Jim’s ego by praising his fleet of boats and repeatedly emphasizing how proud of him she is. On the voyage out to sea, the boat hits a rough patch of water and Jim persists in sailing on. As the waves toss the boat about, one of the crewmen attempts to remove Jim from the ship’s wheel. Recognizing the moment as a recreation of the snake scenario, Arvay flings herself upon the crewman, grabbing his hair and pummeling his face like a “she-bear in her rage” (329). Despite Jim’s reckless captaining, Arvay demonstrates unquestioning loyalty to Jim, proving herself in his eyes. After the day’s expedition, Arvay offers to cook for all the men aboard after which they start calling her “Mrs. Captain.” Observing the men while she prepares dinner, “Arvay looked on and noted how like little boys they acted […] It made her feel good and like taking care of them” (341). Arvay occupies a fiercely maternal role in relation to Jim and his men, cooking and looking after them and humoring their poor judgment.

As it turns out, this is just what Jim wanted. Finally alone together, Arvay asks Jim to forgive how foolish she’d been before, stating that now she understands his ways and that all his actions had been for her benefit. Aroused by Arvay’s self-flagellation, Jim stalks towards Arvay: “‘Don’t you holler!’ Jim growled. ‘Putting me on the linger like you did! I ought to take my belt to you and run your backside crazy’” (347). Jim’s words recall his initial rape of Arvay when he
heeds Joe Kelsey’s advice to “make ‘em knuckle under” and tells Arvay not to waste her breath protesting. Jim flings himself on the bed with Arvay, reiterating that she not “get cute and resist” (348). He grabs her ears and shakes her head, demanding that she kiss him. Though Arvay appears to submit willingly to Jim’s advances, one can’t help but read their reconciliation within the context of marital rape.

After they have sex, Jim holds Arvay like “a little boy who had fled in out of the dark to the comfort of his mother” (349). He snuggles against Arvay’s breast while she feels the desire to protect and comfort him. Reflecting on Earl’s birth, Arvay believes she was purged. She had paid off her debt “so that the rest of the pages could be clean” (350). Now that she has completely transitioned from poor white to pure white, cleansed of her tainted origins, Arvay feels her only job now is mothering. “What more could any woman want and need?” she thinks to herself (351). Arvay is now both a maternal figure for Jim and a sexually submissive object. For better or worse, Adrienne Akins argues, “Arvay ultimately chooses to ascend to the throne with her husband in a New Southern aristocracy” (42). Though Arvay certainly gains both economic and racial privilege by rejoining Jim, their reunion is not without consequences for Arvay. As Watson suggests, Seraph on the Suwanee “foregrounds the costs that white women often pay to conform to narrow ideas of femininity” (68). Arvay fulfills both a maternal and sexual role for Jim, but in order to embody these dual roles, she must relinquish any connections that might taint her position as a Southern white lady.

Even with Arvay’s transition into economic security and racial privilege, one can’t help but wonder if her lower class origins will cease to be a factor in her marriage. Throughout Seraph on the Suwanee, Hurston portrays whiteness as continually constructed. Particularly for those who exist on the margins, claiming a white identity requires a constant performance of
white norms. The iterative nature of racial identity, however, allows for moments that destabilize the image of a coherent racial self. For example, Arvay continually fails, in Jim’s eyes, to embody the Southern belle ideal premised on an upwardly mobile white femininity. Regardless, Arvay still places value in embodying ideal whiteness. She is unlike the white characters in previous chapters in that her trajectory is one from racelessness into race. Other characters, such as Eliot Bliss’s Em Hibbert or Esther Chapman’s Lloyd Bremerton, refuse their whiteness in favor of a raceless identity.

Yet both Em and Lloyd have far more financial security than Arvay does, particularly before her marriage, and Em and Lloyd retain their source of income even after eschewing white norms. Arvay’s financial security entirely depends on her ability to embody a certain model of whiteness. For some white characters, racelessness can be freeing, but for others racelessness can exacerbate social marginalization. At the same time, however, Arvay’s transformation into an upwardly mobile white wife comes at a cost. Arvay can only embody normative whiteness after a lynching and arson, acts that destroy evidence of her impoverished origins. The implication is that Arvay, like Earl and the Hensons, will cease to exist unless she conforms to an upwardly mobile, Southern belle ideal. Hurston’s exploration of poor whites reveals the violence of white racial ideology and eugenicist thinking that posited erasure as the only alternative to normative whiteness.

“Ladylike, genteel, and raceless”: Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *Bronze*

Writing under the pseudonym Heba Jannath, Josephine Cogdell Schuyler reviewed Georgia Douglas Johnson’s *An Autumn Love Cycle* (1928) for the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Cogdell Schuyler praises Johnson’s poems as “delicate and sincere” and urges readers to buy the
collection, as no “library of love will be complete without this little volume of modest and mature confession.” Though Cogdell Schuyler applauds Johnson’s writing, her use of “little,” “modest,” and “delicate” infantilizes Johnson who was in her forties at the time. We might attribute Cogdell Schuyler’s descriptors to the fact that An Autumn Love Cycle consists of sentimental love poems. Yet even Johnson’s more politicized collections, such as Bronze, received similar treatment. The Pittsburgh Courier describes Bronze as giving “voice to the deep feelings of a highly sensitive colored woman.” The “little book” is “very charming” and provides “whimsical and stimulating satisfaction.” Despite Bronze addressing racial oppression and even calling for an end to racial classification, the review misses the political import of Bronze by ascribing charm and whimsy to the poems.

Though these reviews may read as backhanded compliments, they are useful in demonstrating the particular racial and gendered norms that led to Johnson’s status as a raceless poet. While racelessness is not a term often used in literary criticism, it does surface in reference to Johnson. Maureen Honey, for example, notes that Johnson was among the “genteel school of raceless literature” (294). Similarly, Judith Stephens observes that Johnson’s poems are often deemed “ladylike, genteel, and raceless” (88). Critics define this version of raceless literature as “African-American authors of novels with white main characters” (Bernard 89) or black authors’ “mimesis of white aesthetics and domestic values” (Barnes 990). Though Johnson’s work does not feature white protagonists, she does seem to emulate white cultural norms and eschew the explicit race consciousness of her contemporaries.

However, it’s important to note that Johnson’s work likely would not be deemed “ladylike, genteel, and raceless” if she were white. Had a white woman written sentimental love poems, her work might be classified as “genteel,” but not as “raceless” because whiteness
operates as the unmarked norm of racial ideology. In other words, whiteness often positions itself as unraced, as a blank slate. White racial ideology locates race in people of color, establishing whiteness as the norm from which non-whites deviate. Johnson’s status as a raceless poet, in one sense, is specific to her position as a black woman who appeals to white aesthetic and cultural values.

We might attribute Johnson’s ostensibly conventional poetry to the gendered and racial expectations black women writers faced. Black feminist scholars of the Harlem Renaissance often highlight how a politics of respectability circumscribed black women’s lives. In *Women of the Harlem Renaissance* (1995), Cheryl Wall describes the “obsession with propriety […] experienced by many New Negro women (128). For the New Negro woman, propriety was “virtually a racial obligation” (Wall 80). E. Frances White notes that black women were expected to “represent the race by fighting for racial equality” while at the same time eschewing their sexuality and any behavior that could be deemed lazy (36). Black women were supposed to be modest, industrious, feminine but not hypersexual, and espouse the politics of racial uplift.

As one might expect, these demands often took a toll on black women and their writing. The New Negro ideology endorsed “restrained representations of black women as icons of respectability and domesticity” (Sherrard-Johnson 123). Black female writers often elicited praise for adhering to conservative representations of black life and received criticism if they did otherwise. The stakes were high for these authors, as many black women sought to undo the racist and sexist stereotypes that depicted them as Jezebels or less feminine than their white counterparts. Refusing to present a respectable model of black femininity, and black life in general, risked reifying white stereotypes. Yet these parameters “restricted artistic expression and agency for black women” (Sherrard-Johnson 11). Black women writers often faced a choice
between adhering to models of femininity and having their work recognized or defying racial and gender norms and risking their literary success. Johnson, I argue, chose the former.

It’s critical to differentiate Bernard and Barnes’s versions of racelessness from my own. Those that describe Johnson’s work as genteel and raceless do so because she does not ostensibly address race. This version of racelessness relies on the absence of race as a topic. In contrast, my definition of racelessness relies on evading all racial categories, not just blackness. I argue Johnson uses both versions of racelessness. Her poetry conforms to gendered and racial conventions and seems not to address race, aligning with Barnes’s version of racelessness. Yet Johnson strategically writes ladylike, raceless poetry in order to advance another version of racelessness: the erasure of racial categories. In other words, Johnson couches her critique of racial classification in unassuming, ladylike poetry, employing a politics of respectability in order to subvert racial ideology.

***

Georgia Douglas Camp was born on September 10, 1877 to two biracial parents. Barring a yearlong hiatus to attend the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, Johnson lived in Georgia until 1910 where she taught school and worked as an assistant principal. She left Georgia for Washington D.C. in 1910 with her new husband, Henry Lincoln Johnson, a prominent attorney. Though Henry expected her to play the part of dutiful wife, she persisted in developing a literary career. She published her first collection of poems, The Heart of a Woman, in 1918 and in 1920, began hosting a literary salon at her home, the “Saturday Nighters Club.” Prominent black intellectuals such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Jean Toomer, and Jessie Fauset all met at one point or another at these salons. These meetings seemed to have spurred Johnson’s
own creative output: in 1922 she published *Bronze*, widely considered her most racialized poetry (Tate).

In 1925, Johnson’s husband died of a stroke leaving her solely responsible for their two college-aged sons. Johnson worked a variety of nine-to-five jobs to support herself and her sons. Though she was certainly more time strapped as a working woman, she continued to write, winning awards for two one-act plays: *Blue Blood* (1926) and *Plumes* (1927). Johnson then published a third volume of poetry, *An Autumn Love Cycle*, in 1928. The stock market crash in 1929 saw patronage for black writers dissolve and many artists could no longer afford the trip to Johnson’s D.C. home. The Saturday Nighters Club disbanded in the thirties and Johnson faced increasing difficulty getting her work published. Always persistent, Johnson continued to publish poems here and there and applied for funding through various agencies such as the Guggenheim Foundation and the Rosenwald Fund. Though she never regained the prominence she held during the 1920s, Johnson still recognized the value of her work. Before her death in 1966, she handed her papers over to Atlanta University, seeming to anticipate her literary recovery (Tate).

Though Johnson wrote in a variety of genres, including poetry, plays, and syndicated columns, she is most remembered for her poems. As Claudia Tate asserts, Johnson was the “most anthologized female poet of the Harlem Renaissance” (xviii). Reception of her poetry, however, has often been one-sided: “Johnson has generally been understood as a traditionalist and an advocate of genteel culture, who adhered to the Romantic conventions of the nineteenth century Anglo-literary establishment” (ibid). With the exception of *Bronze*, many viewed Johnson’s poems as insufficiently politicized and lacking the overt race consciousness of her contemporaries. However, some still viewed *Bronze* as too feminine. In his forward to *Bronze*, W.E.B. Du Bois describes the poetry as “simple, sometimes trite,” though he does acknowledge
the collection is a “revelation of the soul struggle of the women of a race” (7). Johnson’s poems frequently address love, nostalgia for youth, and the inevitability of death. Though she gained wide appeal for her poetry, many considered her work sentimental and conventional.

While readers in the 1920s may have viewed Johnson’s work as raceless, more recent criticism argues Johnson’s poems do address race, albeit in indirect ways. Tate, for example, contends that Johnson intentionally adopted a “compensatory conservatism” (xviii). Both black and white Americans expected black women writers to demonstrate that they did not fit the Jezebel stereotype, a goal often accomplished by adhering to chaste literary conventions (Tate xlii). In other words, Johnson faced a choice between conventionality and social acceptance or overt politicization and potential ostracism. She seems to have chosen the former. Yet Tate also indicates that Johnson strategically posed as a “lady poet” in order to veil her criticisms of racial and gendered oppression (xviii). Maureen Honey makes a similar argument by describing Johnson’s ladylike poetry as “subversive allusion to an oppressive social framework” (296). Johnson’s poems do address race, and even race refusal, but in indirect and allusive ways.

It’s also worth considering how the Saturday Nighters Club would’ve influenced Johnson’s work. As noted, Jean Toomer was often in attendance. Toomer led several sessions on his idea of the “American race” and read parts of what would become his best-known work, Cane (1923). Toomer’s concept of the “American race” was in fact a gesture towards no race, which he attempted to embody as well. Though Toomer was raised African-American, his appearance was racially ambiguous and he was able to pass as white. He often vacillated between listing himself as black or white on government documents. In a 1922 letter to the editor of the Liberator, Toomer writes: “Racially, I seem to have (who knows for sure) seven blood mixtures: French, Dutch, Welsh, Negro, German, Jewish, and Indian […] From my own point of
view I am naturally and inevitably an American” (154-56). While Toomer lists his specific ethnic makeup, he also notes how he has sought to fuse these elements. Elsewhere, as Robert P. Byrd and Henry Louis Gates Jr. note, Toomer defined himself as neither white nor black, defying the dominant racial binary of the time.

As George Hutchinson suggests in “Jean Toomer and the ‘New Negroes’ of Washington” (1991), Toomer’s ideas strongly influenced Johnson’s poems during this time, particularly her collection *Bronze*. Johnson’s poem “Cosmopolite” is one such instance. The poem begins: “Not wholly this or that, / But wrought / Of alien bloods am I” (1-3). “Cosmopolite” follows poems such as “The Octoroon” and “Alien,” both of which detail the logic of the one-drop rule that defines black and white mixed race individuals as black. Given this context, we might read the beginning of “Cosmopolite” as also addressing the plight of biracial people; the speaker is neither this nor that, neither white nor black. Yet the speaker also refers to her origins as “alien bloods,” which questions whether her origins fit a neat black/white binary. The speaker echoes this sentiment at the close of the poem: “Nor this nor that / contains me” (12-13). She not only is neither this nor that, but cannot be contained by this nor that as well. Both “The Octoroon” and “Alien” refer more directly to specific races using descriptors such as “drop of midnight” and “sable strain.” Yet the vague referents in “Cosmopolite” prohibit the reader from drawing an easy connection to blackness or whiteness. Much like Hurston’s “How it Feels to be Colored Me,” Johnson destabilizes the process of racial signification and refuses to present race as a cohesive entity. All races, even “pure” white or blackness, are unstable.

Bracketed between the repetition of neither this nor that, the speaker describes herself as “Estranged, yet not estranged, I stand / All comprehending,” (6-7). The speaker simultaneously is and is not of this world, a tension that mirrors the racialized and raceless nature of the poem.
“Cosmopolite” is both raced and raceless, acknowledging existing racial logics and the speaker’s inability to conform to them. Yet the speaker presents this estrangement as a strength; her isolation from race affords her a perspective that is unobtainable for those mired in racial logic. She reiterates this idea towards the end of the poem: “Scion of fused strength am I, / All understanding” (10-11). The disparate parts, the “alien” components, create a stronger aggregate, revealing the power of racial mixture.

In *Race and Mixed Race* (1993), Naomi Zack argues that mixed race identities have a “view from nowhere,” since they exist outside of racial structures; there is a degree of racelessness in being mixed race within a black/white binary (163-164). I don’t entirely agree that mixed race individuals can obtain a neutral, omniscient view of racial logic. Though my version of racelessness is invested in evading racial identity, refusing race to an extent still relies on the categories of race. Zack’s assertion is still useful in highlighting the forms of negation that accompany racelessness. If raceless individuals have a view from “nowhere,” where in fact is “nowhere”? Just as we are unable to situate racelessness in terms of racial identity, we are also unable to position racelessness in terms of geographic location, revealing multiple layers of subversiveness in Johnson’s poem. Additionally, Zack’s association of mixed race identity with racelessness helps differentiate Johnson’s “Cosmopolite” from her other poems such as “The Octoroon.” While “The Octoroon” is about the plight of mixed race individuals confronted with the one-drop rule, “Cosmopolite” harnesses the hybridity of multiracialism to advocate for racelessness.

The title of “Cosmopolite” is also significant, as it points to Toomer’s influence. According to Byrd and Gates, Toomer himself “was also attempting to move toward […] a cosmopolitan world more broadly defined than traditional, received categories of ‘race’ would
allow” (xiii). Toomer’s Cane espouses fluid national and racial boundaries, concepts which many critics link to cosmopolitanism. For example, Paul Gilroy connects cosmopolitanism to the “eventual erasure of ‘race’” (Against Race, 282) and Sheldon Pollock et al suggest that cosmopolitanism “catches something of our need to ground our sense of mutuality in conditions of mutability” (4). Johnson’s title, “Cosmopolite,” might represent a conscious effort to move beyond racial or national boundaries in favor of more fluid, mutable forms of identity that may in fact refuse race altogether.

Johnson follows “Cosmopolite” with a poem titled “Fusion.” Throughout the poem, the speaker uses multiple metaphors for mixture:

    How deftly does the gardener blend
    This rose and that
    To bud a new creation,
    More gorgeous and more beautiful
    Than any parent portion (1-5).

Similar to “Cosmopolite,” the speaker of “Fusion” finds strength in mixture, as the product exceeds its origins; the new creation is better than its parents. The speaker repeats the use of “this” and “that” which appear in “Cosmopolite,” reiterating the non-referential nature of mixture, the component parts themselves difficult to place. The rosebud is also a “new” creation, indicating that mixture results in an entirely different product. Following the rose imagery, the speaker then asserts:

    I trace within my warring blood
    The tributary sources
    They potently commingle
    And sweep
    With new-born forces! (6-11).

The speaker’s reflection on her blood carries similar themes as the gardener blending roses: the combination of disparate parts creates a person that is unlike its “tributary sources.” Unlike the
gardening metaphor, however, the topic of blood has more militant connotations. The use of “warring,” “potently,” “sweep,” and “forces” produces more active, potentially violent, consequences. Her blood itself is at war due to the potent sources from different tributaries. We can connect this to the violence of the black/white binary, which doesn’t officially recognize mixed race individuals. Yet these forces commingle to produce “new-born forces,” suggesting that mixture produces an entirely new entity. Hutchinson points to Toomer’s influence on “Fusion” as well, noting that Toomer often uses rivers to “suggest the current that would dissolve past racial and cultural identities into a new one” (“American Racial Discourse,” 383). Reading “Fusion” in light of Toomer’s influence, we can understand the warring tributaries in “Fusion” not only as commingling, but also as washing away past distinctions and creating a hybrid, raceless force.

Johnson follows “Fusion” with a third poem, “Perspective”:

Some day
I shall be glad that it was mine to be
A dark fore-runner of a race burgeoning;
I then shall know
The secret of life’s Calvary,
And bless the thorns
That wound me! (1-7)

On a first read, we might assume the speaker refers to the black race; she describes herself as dark and notes the wounds she has suffered because of her race. Yet the poem also emphasizes newness; the speaker is a “fore-runner” and the race is “burgeoning.” The newness suggests she might not be referring to the black race, but to an entirely new race. Hutchinson also argues that “Perspective” “refers not to the great Negro race whose forerunners date back many centuries, but to a new ‘race’” (“New Negroes’ of Washington,” 689). Given that “Perspective” follows __________

55 The intermediary category “mulatto” ceased to be an option on the U.S. census in 1920, leaving black and white as the only options for race.
“Cosmopolite” and “Fusion,” both of which explore the idea of a new race, we can draw the same conclusion about “Perspective”: the poem foretells a new race that might be of no race at all.

Johnson’s trio of raceless poems, which Hutchinson describes as “the poems of the ‘new race,’” appears in a section of Bronze titled “Exaltation” (“‘New Negroes’ of Washington,” 687). Only two other poems make up this section, “When I Rise” and “Faith,” both of which explore themes of overcoming adversity and religiosity. It would be easy to miss the import of these three poems, especially given that the word “exaltation” carries religious connotations.

“Exaltation” follows a section called “Motherhood,” which contains poems such as “The Mother,” “Maternity,” and “Little Son.” These poems detail a black mother’s anxiety on raising children in a racist society. The section following “Exaltation,” titled “Martial,” includes poems such as “Soldier,” “Taps,” and “Peace.” While “Martial” might seem less feminine than “Motherhood,” the two sections contain similar themes. In “The Soldier,” for example, the speaker worries about a son gone off to war and in “Taps” the speaker laments that no mother’s voice can stir the dead bodies on a battlefield. Bracketing “Exaltation” are more conventional, feminine poems, which downplay the subversiveness of “Exaltation.”

It’s also worth noting the title of the “Exaltation” section itself and its affective connotations. Both the “Motherhood” and “Martial” sections are rife with anxiety about racial oppression and violence. The raceless poems, however, are exultant; the speaker finds transcendence and hope when she imagines racial categories dissolving. Envisioning a raceless society seems to quell some of the anxiety expressed in other sections of Bronze. As Hutchinson indicates, Johnson’s celebration of racial mixture is unusual for her time. Langston Hughes, for example, portrayed the mulatto as a “self-divided, disinherited, homeless soul” (Hutchinson
“‘New Negroes of Washington,’” 688). Johnson, however, “offer[s] rare retorts to conventional encodings of the ‘mulatto’” (ibid). While many of her contemporaries employ the tragic mulatto trope, Johnson provides a rare glimpse at racial mixture that results in holistic integration.

Johnson’s poetry is not the only place in which she addresses racial politics. Her plays, for example, depict similar themes of racial hybridity and condemn racial violence. According to C.C. O’Brien, Johnson’s 1926 play, Paupaulekejo, “imagines the cosmopolite of mixed race heritage as an ideal metaphor for pluralism and cultural syncretism” (572). O’Brien connects Paupaulekejo to the poems in Bronze, specifically “Octoroon,” for its attention to racial fluidity. O’Brien and others also attend to six of Johnson’s plays collectively known as the “lynching plays.” As Judith L. Stephens puts it, lynching plays such as Sunday Morning in the South (1925) and A Bill to be Passed (1938) reveal Johnson to be a “dedicated, assertive, and activist playwright” (89). Furthermore, Stephens argues, Johnson is the “most prolific playwright of the lynching drama tradition,” but has not been recognized as such (87).

I agree that Johnson’s plays are ostensibly more political than her poetry and have also received less attention than her poetry. Yet I disagree with the critical tendency to position Johnson’s poems and plays in opposition to each other. Rather than view Johnson’s poetry as feminized and apolitical and her plays as the opposite, I view their differences as a matter of degree, not kind. In other words, Johnson’s poems in Bronze do espouse the racial politics found in her plays, just not as blatantly. Though my attention to Johnson’s poems might seem to reinforce her status as a poet at the expense of her varied writings, I attend to her poems in order to highlight the political undercurrent at work. Recent criticism on Johnson frequently highlights her plays in order to position her as an activist; however, we don’t have to turn away from Johnson’s poetry in order to cast her as a racially aware political agent.
While my attention to Johnson’s poetry complicates the dominant image of her as a “lady poet,” I do not wish to remove this descriptor from Johnson’s literary reputation. Her poems do employ sentimentality and are more conventional than many of her overtly political contemporaries. Yet eschewing Johnson’s feminized reputation also perpetuates the idea that the feminine is lesser and to be scorned in favor of more masculine forms. Johnson’s poetry, particularly in *Bronze*, is both feminine and political; she utilizes seemingly benign tropes such as nature imagery and religious references to advocate for a radical shift away from racial identity. Furthermore, Johnson’s repeated use of vague referents unsettles the process of signification and critiques the seemingly static definitions of racial identity. Johnson ostensibly writes raceless poems in one sense, in that she does not overtly address racial politics. Yet this genteel, ladylike racelessness reveals an undercurrent of a more subversive racelessness that refuses the very idea of race. Johnson’s conventionality is self-aware in that she intentionally exploits her position as a genteel lady poet in order to advocate for subversive identity politics.

**The Cost of Racelessness**

Hurston and Johnson approached a politics of respectability quite differently: Hurston defied social conventions whereas Johnson seemed to obey them. The authors’ relationships to racial and gendered norms appear in their work as well. Hurston’s corpus largely centers on rural, black folk life, a subject matter that deviates from much other Harlem Renaissance writing. Furthermore, *Seraph on the Suwanee* focuses almost exclusively on white characters, positioning Hurston at odds with many of her contemporaries. Johnson, however, embraced her middle class femininity by writing sentimental, ostensibly apolitical poetry.
Yet *Seraph on the Suwanee* and *Bronze* both demonstrate how class status can induce racelessness. Hurston’s poor white protagonist incurs racelessness because her impoverishment deviates from upwardly mobile, normative whiteness. The novel follows Arvay’s transformation into the right kind of white woman. Johnson, however, adhered to middle class expectations and had her work deemed raceless, in that she didn’t seem to address race. However, she employed conventional, feminine writing to veil her critiques of racial classification as a whole. Johnson appeared not to address race when she was in fact advocating for *no race*. The intersecting influence of race, gender, and socioeconomic status means racelessness looks different for poor white women than it does for middle class black women.

Racelessness is also more or less liberating depending on financial means. Economic security enables characters to eschew social norms more easily whereas impoverishment not only makes racelessness more difficult, but also less appealing. Refusing racial identity can potentially exacerbate the social stigma incurred by poverty. For poor whites in particular, racelessness isn’t necessarily a choice, but a state imposed by dominant racial ideologies. Within the context of the *Seraph on the Suwanee*, Arvay must either assimilate to normative whiteness or cease to exist. Johnson faced a different problem with *Bronze*. Writing ostensibly “ladylike” and “genteel” poetry allowed her to leverage more radical critiques against racial classification, but also resulted in many of her contemporaries misreading her poetry and missing the political import of her work.

Attending to class status reveals racelessness is less liberating than we might think. Rather than a utopic realm free of racial hierarchies, racelessness instead often relies on the very categories it seeks to escape and remains influenced by economic privilege. For both the fictional Arvay Henson and Georgia Douglas Johnson, racelessness produces illegibility, which could
allow them to destabilize racial ideologies. Yet for the Hensons, illegibility exacerbates the marginalization and social stigma poor whites endured. At the same time, however, becoming legible by assimilating to white norms is a violent, traumatic experience for Arvay. For Johnson, the illegibility incurred from racelessness skewed her literary reputation and resulted in her being largely remembered as a lady poet. Racelessness does hold subversive potential and challenges racial ideology, but like racial identity itself, racelessness is continually reproduced and determined by intersecting axes of power.
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