Modernism from the Margins: Unruly Women and the Politics of Representation

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MODERNISM FROM THE MARGINS:
UNRULY WOMEN AND THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

by

LINDSAY BYRON

Under the Direction of Elizabeth West and Barbara Ladd

ABSTRACT

Nella Larsen, Anzia Yezierska, and Evelyn Scott were New York neighbors and literary contemporaries in the 1920s, yet they moved in very different social circles. From Larsen, the award-winning psychological novelist of the Harlem Renaissance; to Yezierska, the Jewish immigrant composing in Yiddish-English a boot-straps story of Americanization; to Evelyn Scott, the genteel-born Southern woman penning high modernist tales of scandal, these very different women nonetheless shared a common quality: they were all rule-breakers, pariahs in their hometowns, interlopers wherever they dare tread, who all
pened controversial autobiographical works documenting their experiences as cultural outsiders in modern America. Finding no community, race, or class with which to align these authors and their life stories, contemporary critics defaulted into accusation of falsehood, immorality, and insanity. Their works could not possibly be true or sane, I argue, because they could not be classified.

INDEX WORDS: Women writers, Modernism, Americanization, Immigrant literature, Harlem Renaissance, Autobiography, Identity politics, Feminism
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Dedicated to us—the Byron Family.
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INTRODUCTION: CHANGING SUBJECTS

Nella Larsen, Anzia Yezierska, and Evelyn Scott were New York neighbors and literary contemporaries in the 1920s, yet they moved in very different social circles. From Larsen, the award-winning psychological novelist of the Harlem Renaissance; to Yezierska, the Jewish immigrant composing in Yiddish-English a boot-straps story of Americanization; to Evelyn Scott, the genteel-born Southern woman penning high modernist tales of scandal, these very different women nonetheless shared a common quality: they were all rule-breakers, pariahs in their hometowns, interlopers wherever else they dare tread, who all penned controversial autobiographical works documenting their experiences as cultural outsiders in modern America.

Each of these writers, in works classified to some degree as autobiographical, construct textual selves that, while all self-consciously subversive, enact this subversion in ways unique to the diverse (and complexly interrelated) cultures of their origins and subsequent exile/flight. Thus, while each unruly women in their own right, Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott conceive of and depict unruliness in quite different ways. Examination of the contours of these differing depictions provide insight into the ways that ethnically-, geographically-, and class-specific hegemonies intersect and circumscribe the discursive realms of possibility for a variety of culturally-marginal modern American unruly women. Importantly, these depictions proceed from the perspectives of the women themselves.

Tellingly, these authors’ autobiographical texts have been met with accusations of inauthenticity and/or immorality from both literary critics and their wider audience. Though these three writers lived and wrote in a common timeframe and published in contemporary literary markets, each emerged from different cultural experiences of modern
America, and had very different things to say, in very different ways. Accordingly, the accusations of inauthenticity and immorality that critics and the wider public have brought against these works attach themselves to different kinds of perceived wrongs—for example, Larsen’s claims of Danish family, Yezierska’s dedication to art over motherhood, and Scott’s pride in her adulterous affair represent a few of the transgressions that people writing about these women and their works take to task. Doubting readers of Larsen, Yezierska, and Scott’s texts find such self-depictions at best factually-ambiguous and at worst immoral. The uniqueness of these sites of contestation in reference to the specific authors’ historical and cultural contexts reveals much about the specific rules governing expectations of—respectively—the Black bourgeois award-winning novelist-of-manners of the Harlem Renaissance, the Jewish immigrant composing in Yiddish-English a boot-straps story of Americanization, and the genteel-born Southern woman penning experimental Modernist works.

Suffice to say, each of these women defies expectations, and I contend that the textual sites of authentic and moral contestation reflect these breaches in conduct.

Despite their contemporary popularity and influence, each of these women’s works were dismissed for much of the twentieth century, forgotten only to be rediscovered during the rise in feminism and multiculturalism of the 1970s and beyond. However, signs have different meanings at different times, and many of the very textual elements that supposedly signaled these women’s falsehood and/or immortality—those traits perceived as unacceptable by their contemporaries—have since been read by feminists and multiculturalists of the 1970s and beyond as signs of proto-feminism, valuable voices demanding a space within a sexist literary canon. Uncovering and disseminating forgotten texts was a high priority of the feminist and multiculturalist movements, and it was this project of recovery
and dissemination, occurring largely in the 1970s and ’80s, that brought each of these writer's work back into the public eye.

Certain interpretations themselves become canonical, masquerading as the final and correct way to think about things, the hidden truth we've long been missing. However, the ways we read these women and their texts depend on what we need them to be—and allow them to be—at the time of our reading. There is no key that we can find that will unlock a secret that these women’s texts supposedly mask; there is no authentic self at the core of these ambiguous texts waiting only to be recovered by the proper reading. Instead, the selves articulated in these autobiographical texts are always in flux, perpetually in a state of rearticulation. And not only as these subjects in flux within the author’s own self-perceptions and lived experiences, but their articulation within the longer memory of cultural record is also always changing—the way we read others’ lives continues to morph, and we make the past today based upon our current discourses for understanding the world. The script alters for these women across the decades, and the pegs into which we can fit these women continue to change shape, as each generation reinvents/re-reads these works within that generation’s own lens. So not only did these authors, in their textual self-representations, portray subjects always changing, never static, never singular, but always complex—but furthermore the cultural scripts that order our interpretation of these unruly lives are in perpetual rearticulation.

Of Nella Larsen, famously dubbed “Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance” (in Mary Helen Washington's seminal 1980 article of the same name), biographer Thadious Davis writes, “Perhaps the greatest tension in [Larsen’s] life was between truth and meaning” (xviii). Textual moments of such tension, present in the works and scholarship about
Yezierska and Scott as well as Larsen, are the subject of my analysis. In short, I’m not interested in determining “what really happened” in these women’s contested life stories and (semi-) autobiographical work. Instead I analyze these women’s accounts as sites in which they discursively construct identity, with careful attention to the historical and cultural contexts that shape these writers’ texts. In this way, I employ a Foucauldian discourse analysis similar to that which Leslie Bow utilizes in her recent (2010) examination of Asian American women’s literature, as “following Foucault’s concept of the enabling, yet disciplining power of discourse to construct out notions of truth, of the material,” Bow analyzes “the language and tropes in Asian American literature that construct as well as reflect [...] specific political realities” (23). Similarly, I engage not the “facts” of these women’s lives, but rather the widely-contested discourses of self in Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott’s texts in comparison with the discourses of truth and righteousness that motivate and inform reader’s contestations of the authenticity and/or morality of these texts (and moreover, of the women themselves). Thus, while I am not concerned with validating the “truth” or “righteousness” of these women’s accounts, I am however interested in the ruptures between their own self-authored life stories and critical/biographical accounts of these women’s lives. In that my intention is to examine the creatively crafted, counter-hegemonic, and expressly self-authored nature of these writer’s textual subjectivities and outward gazes, the notion that some portions of these writer’s supposedly autobiographical works represent fact and some portions ‘mere’ fiction (or delusion, or exaggeration) invigorates rather than hinders my analysis.

This study purports to be neither fully representative nor holistic—that is to say, I don’t suggest that Anzia Yezierska’s texts exemplify the Jewish immigrant experience, or
even more specifically ‘the’ experience of the Jewish woman fighting her way out of turn-of-the-century New York ghetto. Instead, as Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott’s works center the subjectivities of eccentric figures within diverse-yet-contemporary modern American cultural frameworks, I approach these texts as sites of self-authorship of a subject always in process, sites in which the authors negotiate and subvert dominant disciplining discourses of their own potentiality. Moreover, within a framework of postmodern subjectivity, I analyze these fictional/autobiographical depictions as sites of discursive-self-creation—regardless of their factual (or fictional) occurrence. I pair this examination with a feminist framework that combines tenets of global feminism, as represented by Chandra Mohanty, and Black feminism, as represented by Patricia Hill Collins and bell hooks, to first stress the necessity of close attention to the intersecting hegemonies that circumscribe women’s lives within analysis of these autobiographical texts; and secondly posit that such nuanced attention to the experiences of multiply-marginalized women can provide unique insight into the ways in which dominant discourses intersect to discipline culturally complex and diverse subjects. Together these complementary race- and class-critical feminist frameworks suggest that these marginal women’s lives and discursive selves may be best expressed and understood within the context of their own self-authorship.

The Rise of Identity Politics

The feminist literary criticism of the 1970s that was largely responsible for the reemergence of these writers into the literary scene has not been treated altogether kindly by history. “The numerous theoretical positions that became current in the academy during the 1980s and beyond often looked back on 70s feminism as ‘untheoretical,’ ‘naïve,’ hope-
lessly tied to empiricism or unsophisticated notions of identity,” writes Mary Eagleton (111), as these second wavers are often remembered as glossing “women’s experience” beneath an inherently white, middle-class framework. This was also the time in which what we now call “identity politics” entered the critical landscape, and minority women started seeking feminism(s) that more accurately represented their lived experiences. “As commonly used, ‘identity politics’ connotes a form of politics based upon certain characteristics of the individual shared with others,” writes Lloyd; “This might be an essential nature of a set of experiences which, regardless of the various differences between members, based on race, age, or sexual orientation, for instance, that they all have in common” (36). As women of many colors and ethnicities began to seek—and find—commonalities among other racially- or ethnically-similar women, feminism began to faction, and common cultural experiences were corralled in the name of political coalition and social justice.

While “identity politics” as we now know it came to full fruition in the 1970s, the feminist movement has been troubled by issues of cultural specificity ever since Sojourner Truth asked “Ain’t I A Woman?” in 1851. Yet in the 1970s, women who had been ignored or elided by American feminism began to identify themselves and speak their experience in increasing numbers. “The early 1970s were marked by an intensification of group consciousness in the United States, what sociologists misleadingly termed ‘the new ethnicity,’ modeled on the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the preceding decade,” Thomas Ferraro explains, and “scholars industriously began reclaiming ethnic literary histories group by group (most often, their own)” (4). During this era, women of color began critiquing the inherently white, middle-class, yet supposedly universal woman of twentieth century feminism. Arguing, rightly, that this feminism did not speak for their experiences, minor-
ity women, lead perhaps most strongly by Black Feminism, began to construct an ethos that better reflected their complex experience in terms of race, class, and gender.

After this turn to multiculturalism, previously “shameful” identities became increasingly open for celebration. In his anthropological study of the concept of authenticity, Charles Lindholm explains how this phenomenon occurred among the Melungeon people, a “race” of “backwoods people” in Appalachia thought to be part black, white, Indian. For generations, one’s Melungeon identity was something to hide, a source of shame that invited ridicule. However, after a tourism board developed a play about the Melungeon that portrayed a nobly romantic people of suffering and endurance, “people in the area began to take pride on their ancestry and to identify themselves publicly as Melungeon for the first time,” Lindholm writes. “This re-evaluation occurred during the civil rights movement and coincided with the explosion of rights language and multiculturalism in the United States. In this revisionist context, it now became both interesting and potentially advantageous to discover membership in a deprived minority” (Lindholm 127). It is worth noting that this 1970s interest in ethnic American cultures in many ways echoed the Progressive-Era celebration of “Buried American Cultures” drove these women’s initial rise to fame—a relationship I discuss in more depth in the conclusion.

A major element of this interest in marginal identities that characterized both periods was the premium placed upon “authenticity,” Lindholm argues. The authentic has always been in demand, whether that means authentic music, food, dance, products, or people. Lindholm defines the term thusly: “Authentic objects, persons, and collectives are original, real, and pure; they are what they purport to be, their roots are known and verified, their essence and appearance are one. [...] Authenticity “stand[s] in contrast to whatever is
fake, unreal, or false” (Lindholm 2). However, people find “authenticity” in different places, and disagree on what type of representation, experience, and lifestyle was in fact the more “authentic” one. What type of life, what kind of person, most “truly” represents a culture proves an issue of great import to the creation of community group identity, as well as informs individual members’ ideas of their own potentiality—that is, what kind of lives they can legitimately live.

Lindholm describes how communal narratives inform the individual identities of group members:

> We invent the world as we go along, and as we do so, we collectively construct cultural frameworks of meaning that are external to us, existing as objective realities over time, and that are internalized through socialization, so that they become engrained in our hearts, minds, and souls. Without these frameworks, we are lost. [...] Despite vast differences, every culture has as its basic concern the manufacture of a convincing definition of the identity of its members and an explanation of why they are who they are, what they belong to, and why they do what they do—that is, every culture must construct a convincing collective framework for belief and action. At the same time, the stability of these cultural frameworks is fragile and incomplete. The imaginations of people within any social world are never exhausted by the possibilities offered. (144)

People depend upon—and indeed, in a symbiotic cycle, construct—cultural frameworks by which to organize their lives and understand themselves and others. These “regulative narratives”—Gayatri Spivak’s term (qtd in Lloyd 40)—establish what is and is not acceptable for people to be and do. Thus the identities that individuals take on (and/or are
coerced into accepting)—both whom individuals feel themselves to be, as well as whom they are perceived to be—these identities, infinitely multiple and ever-changing, are always “saturated with power relations” (Nicholson 40). One could conceptualize these “regulative narratives” as a list, a menu, offering only the illusion of self-creation through the ability to choose from a limited number of lives you can live without censure; one’s choices, if made within the options available on the menu, enable one’s belonging within the group. One’s choices, if made off the menu, however, result in an identity unintelligible within the existing framework—thus resulting in a self that is largely read as incorrect, false, immoral, and/or insane, as was the case with each of these authors. Moreover, one does not simply belong to a single community within which she or he can claim or deny membership—indeed, “culture is never wholly unified or hegemonic and that there are many different crosscutting factors” (Lindholm 143), and a single individual must contend with a number of often-conflicting cultural frameworks.

Indeed, identities are always in flux, in a state of rearticulation, with no eternal authentic self residing at center. This concept is not a new one, however, and has been articulated in a number of metaphorical ways throughout feminist theory, from mestizas to cyborgs to nomads to tricksters. Although each unique in their articulation of the nature of identity, Lloyd argues that each of these images share

the view that the subject is a coalitional subject wherein various axes of identity (such as gender, race, age, and psyche) are perceived as always connected while vying for dominance. All subjects are, that is, produced across, and positioned within, several (sometimes reinforcing, sometimes conflictual) axes. The subject is, thus, in a continual state of flux. (Lloyd 50)
These marginal, never complete figures work as a metaphor for hybrid subjectivity, Lloyd concludes, because they capture “both the desire for identity and the impossibility of it” (50). Offering the notion of the “subject-in-process” as a way in which to productively conceptualize identity in the wake of postmodernism, Lloyd suggests that “selves are never fixed,” Lloyd writes, “rather, [...] identity is permanently open to rearticulation, as discursive lines shift along different vectors [...] Moreover, peeling away the layers reveals no essential self” (15 – 16). The subject is always in process—and identity is not only dependent on who the individual wants to be or thinks they are, but on the regulative narratives of the time in which these identities are being read. It is within this framework of post-modern, ever-shifting subjectivity, that I undertake this study.

**Postmodern “Autobiography”: Fictions of Self**

Foremost feminist autobiography scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, in their recent *Reading Autobiography: A Guide for Interpreting Life Narratives* (2010), characterize the term “autobiography” as critically passé and politically unjust, largely choosing to use the term “life-writing” in its stead. As the term “autobiography” historically “privileges the autonomous individual and the universalizing life story as the definitive achievement of life writing,” and suggests a “master narrative of ‘the sovereign self’ as an institution of literature and culture,” accordingly instituting a canonization of representative works implying that “many other kinds of life writings produced at the same time have lesser value and were not ‘true’ autobiography” (Smith and Watson 3), postmodern and postcolonial critiques of the unified Enlightenment subject insist upon a reassessment of the nature, goals, and generic classifications generated by autobiography studies. While in accord with Smith
and Watson’s paradigm for analyzing “autobiography”—that is, within a framework critical of notions of a linear, unified, progressive subject—I nonetheless choose to self-consciously utilize this much-maligned term, as critical and popular perceptions of Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott’s works as “autobiographical” prove integral to my analysis.

I ground my study within a postmodern conception of autobiography as a site of discursive identity construction, a framework most explicitly outlined by Leigh Gilmore in her introduction to *Autobiography and Postmodernism* (1994), entitled “The Mark of Autobiography: Postmodernism, Autobiography, and Genre.” Gilmore suggests that “an emphasis on the subject as an agent in discourse, where the subject itself is understood as necessarily discursive” represents “the critical potential of postmodernism” in autobiography studies (3), as she situates “autobiography and other forms of self-representation” as “site[s] of identity production; as texts that both resist and produce cultural identities” (4). Paul John Eakin, a particularly prolific autobiography scholar, takes this notion of discursive identity construction a step further in his 1999 book *How Our Lives Become Stories*, to suggest that such identity-construction within narratives of self proves not “merely a literary form but a mode of phenomenological and cognitive self-experience,” finally arguing that “self—the self of autobiographical discourse—does not necessarily precede its constitution in narrative” (100). Using this postmodern approach to autobiography, I situate the autobiographical texts of Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott as sites of discursive self-construction that negotiate the disciplining discourses of gender, race, and class unique to their historical and cultural contexts. Furthermore, I utilize this framework to validate these factually- and morally-contested texts as appropriate foci in which to examine these
multiply-marginal subjectivities, regardless of the “truthfulness” or “morality” of their accounts.

A number of scholars, both within and outside the field of autobiography studies, suggest that truth-contested autobiographical moments provide interesting sites of investigation into subjectivity. Eakin, in fact, finds the notion of a fictionalized sense of self so compelling that he makes it a primary focus of his 1988 book, *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention*. In *Fictions*, Eakin argues that fiction within autobiography functions not as deception but rather as a means of self-invention that captures psychological truth. Like Eakin, Timothy Dow Adams makes the fictionalized self the focus of a book: in *Telling Lies in Modern Autobiography* (1990), Adams locates the autobiographical text as both a site and an act of discursive self-creation, finally surmising that “narrative truth and personal myth are more telling than literal fidelity” (x). Like Eakin and Adams, Global feminist Chandra Mohanty characterizes identity as inherently fictional, yet further emphasizes the consequentialness of the created self. Mohanty writes, “We all choose partial, interested stories/histories—[...] consciously or unconsciously, these choices about our past(s) often determine the logic of our present” (129). Most recently (2010), Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson argue that “life narratives cannot be reduced to or understood only as historical record” and that “to reduce autobiographical narration to facticity is to strip it of the densities of rhetorical, literary, ethical, political, and cultural dimensions” (13). Together, these scholars suggest that not only autobiographical writing, but in fact one’s very sense of self, invariably involves fictionalization. Within this framework, all “life-writing” functions as an expression of this “partial, chosen history,” whether that writing faces explicit moral and factual contestations—as do the texts of my study—or not.
Oppositional Feminist Subjectivity through Autobiography

Mohanty’s critical interest in the written expressions of the “‘inside,’ or personally experienced, self” represents just one of many in a long and diverse feminist tradition of critical engagement with women’s life writing. As Tess Cosslett, Celia Lury, and Penny Summerfield, editors of the critical collection *Feminism and Autobiography* (2000), describe in the Introduction: “there has always been a strong feminist interest in the autobiographical, beginning with the attempt to connect the ‘personal’ with the ‘political’, and the concomitant emphasis on women’s experience as a vital resource in the creation of women’s knowledge” (Cosslett et al 2). A short and incomplete list of current notable and theoretically diverse feminist scholars who engage (in) women’s life writing and self-representation includes Gloria Anzaldua, Audre Lorde, Patricia Hill Collins, Minnie Bruce Pratt, Mary Jean Corbett, bell hooks, Lordes Torres, as well as the aforementioned Sidonie Smith, Julia Watson, Chandra Mohanty, and Leigh Gilmore. While these scholars approach different aspects of women’s life writing from a variety of perspectives, nonetheless collectively they suggest that textual self-authorship creates a potential site of counter-hegemonic subjectivity, of action, of coalition. As Mohanty reminds us:

Feminist analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history. This is a process which is significant not merely as corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history, but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity, writing often becomes the context through which new political identities are forged. (34)
Thus, life writing proves not only an inherently fictional act and a site of discursive subjectivity, but furthermore has potential to function as a site of feminist counter-history—something Toni Morrison might refer to as “re-memory”—as well as a site (and act) of subversive self-authorship—what bell hooks might refer to as an “oppositional gaze.”

The framework of postmodern discourse analysis, combined with the idea that life writing functions as a site of narrative self-authorship, situated within the feminist tradition of autobiography criticism provides the broad theoretical basis for my examination of the fictionalized autobiographies/autobiographical fiction of Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott. More specifically, global feminism, as represented here by the scholarship of Chandra Mohanty, paired with the complementary concept of intersectionality, as devised by Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* (2000), provides the theoretical framework necessary for a nuanced consideration of these three writers’ works within the different historical and cultural contexts of their production and critical reception. Although global feminism takes as its subject a broad base of women across the world (with a particular focus on the experiences of “third world” and non-Western women) while Collins explicitly focuses upon the subjectivities of African American women, both global feminism and Collins’ notion of intersectionality have as a common methodology the careful consideration of as many intersecting social constraints as practical in the analysis of the challenges and strengths of women situated differently within historical and cultural circumstance. “[T]he [autobiographical] subject created is at once individual and collective,” Lorde's Torres explains, always “a member of multiple oppressed groups, whose political identity can never be divorced from her conditions” (274). Thus, the close examination of the complex cultur-
al and historical contexts characteristic of Global and Black feminisms proves essential to the culturally-specific and comparative nature of my study.

Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott’s autobiographical texts tell not only the stories of three individual women, but in fact tell stories of divergent (and in many ways antagonistic) “racial” and class cultures in modern America of 1920s and 30s. “People tell stories of their lives through the cultural scripts available to them,” Smith and Watson suggest (237), yet despite the diversity of the cultures that Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott’s texts reflect, these works nonetheless share a common theme: the authors’ largely unapologetic transgressions of their communities’ particular moral scaffolding in favor of the authors’ own textual (counter-) representations of culture and self.

Thus, bell hooks’ reminder that “there is power in looking” (115) guides my exploration of Yezierska, Larsen, and Scott’s texts, as I employ hooks’ conception of the “oppositional gaze” in my analysis of the ways in which these writers’ depictions of their selves and their communities enact contradictory and subversive gazes upon disciplining discourses. In this way, these texts act as “spaces of agency” wherein these writers “can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what [they] see” (hooks 116). As Gilman suggests, “It is important to remember that women of color are producers of culture, not just objects of the racial gaze” (47); accordingly, I endeavor to center the subjective viewpoint of these women, who, while not all women of color in the terms Gilman implies, nonetheless possess a marginalized perspective from which they gaze outward and record what they see—in the face of the wide assessment of their records as apocryphal, immoral, and/or delusional at best.
Chapter Breakdown

In each chapter, I consider these authors and their works within the context of the cultural narratives that most directly shaped their lives and critical reception. Drawing largely upon the contemporary criticism that greeted their work—criticism that emerged from a variety of factions invested, for very different reasons, in their stories—I examine the ways in which these three writers’ autobiographical depictions challenged the regulative narratives that attempted to order their existence, explore how these challenges resulted in the largely unfavorable critical reception at the time of the works’ publications, and consider what the critical ire reveals about larger cultural narratives governing these women’s reasonable potentialities.

Much critical ado has been made about the compellingly mysterious death that marks the climax of Larsen’s second novel, *Passing*. “Larsen is a master of ambiguity and intrigue, and the enigmatic finale of her novella has generated heated debates and countless interpretations,” writes Catherine Rottenberg (490). The critical concern for discovering “what really happened” in Larsen’s second semi-autobiographical novel, I contend, represents in microcosm trends of authentication that characterize the larger critical exploration of this author and her work. In Chapter two, entitled “Unfinished Endings: The Meaningful Ambiguity of Nella Larsen’s Novels,” I examine the controversial elements of Larsen’s two novels, *Quicksand* and *Passing*—with the “unbelievable” downward spiral of *Quicksand* protagonist Helga Crane, and the “too easy” mysterious death of *Passing’s* Clare Kendry as my primary subjects—in order to argue that Larsen’s ambiguous novels and their controversial endings, while not autobiographical in the strictest sense, nonetheless function as sites of textual self-authorship, as these novels, in ways at once crafted yet earnest, depict
from Larsen’s standpoint the social forces that work to encourage, but finally render impossible, the protagonists’ (and her own) search for a place of belonging.

In the early 1920s, Anzia Yezierska’s stories about immigrant life on the Lower East Side gained her entry into the literary and Hollywood elite. Her success did not last long, however, and after a brief stint in the spotlight, her work fell out of fashion and her stardom extinguished. In Chapter Three, “‘Not a Jewess and not a Gentile’: Categorizing Anzia Yezierska,” I argue that in *Bread Givers*, as in her other works, Yezierska presents a complex and often ambivalent oppositional gaze upon Progressive discourse of bootstraps success and upwardly-mobile assimilation that shakes the foundations of the “Sweatshop Cinderella” fairy tale that marked so many contemporary media characterizations of the author. Examining how the aspects of her identity that were criticized or ignored in the first flower of her fame—her devotion to her art, her critique of traditional Jewish gender paradigms, her attacks on the myth of the American Dream—emerge as the very qualities celebrated in the second wave of literary attention to this rediscovered author, I suggest that the ambivalence and ambiguity of Yezierska’s works makes these contradictory readings possible.

Evelyn Scott incited scandal with her actions, offended readers with her frank depictions, yet whether impugned or lauded, she certainly held a prominent place in the American literary world of the 20s and 30s. Nonetheless, Scott has since fallen into obscurity—indeed, even ignominy, as by the end of her career she was considered a mad woman and a failure. An unconventional narration of a controversial life, the tale of a young woman run away to the jungle with an adulterer twice her age, an unromantic detailing of childbirth, motherhood, the female body, and perhaps most distasteful to her critics, an unapologetic exploration of one exceptional woman’s own subjectivity, Scott’s experimental autobiog-
raphy *Escapade* embodies the problematic issues that incited her expulsion from the canon and her home. In Chapter Four, “Evelyn Scott’s *Escapade*: An Unconventional Narration of a Controversial Life,” I argue that this popular estimation of Scott as a insane failure can be explained by the following equation: Evelyn Scott’s transgressions against (first) white Southern aristocratic womanhood, paired with her transgressions against (second) the masculinist conventions of the high modernists, resulted in the enduring characterization of the author as a potentially-ingenious, yet unwell and finally unimportant writer—a characterization that only in recent years have critics begun to interrogate.

In the conclusion, “Malleable Identities,” I examine how changing theoretical understandings of identity, combined with the particularly ambiguous nature of these women’s lives and texts, have fueled the contradictory ways in which these authors have been represented and understood across two major periods of critical attention to their work, the 1920s and the 1970s.

Throughout this dissertation, I ask: what about these particular accounts continues to disturb and confound readers with doubts to their authenticity, moral quality, and literary merit? What, exactly, represents “real” and “fantastical” for these women writers in the minds of their critics, and what can these circumscriptions reveal about the wider culture’s perceptions of these women’s “reasonable” possibilities? In their study of women’s autobiography, Smith and Watson ask, “Given constraints, how do people change the narratives or write back to the cultural stories that have scripted them as particular kinds of subjects?” (237). It is in this act of “writing back” that Nella Larsen, Anzia Yezierska, and Evelyn Scott author oppositional gazes, creating portraits of themselves and their worlds from the margins.
CHAPTER 1.
UNFINISHED ENDINGS: THE MEANINGFUL AMBIGUITY OF NELLA LARSEN’S NOVELS

With the second wave feminist recovery of forgotten women authors in full swing, in 1980 Mary Helen Washington’s “Mystery Woman of the Harlem Renaissance” appeared in Ms. Magazine to re-introduce Nella Larsen to fame. “Fifty years after the heyday of her very brief literary career,” wrote Washington, “Larsen is for the most part unknown, unread, and dismissed” (351), as this forgotten author, once lauded as a leading novelist of the Harlem Renaissance, had somehow come up missing in the era’s history, emerging only as a minor player when mentioned at all.

While the characterization of Larsen as “mysterious” has proven a popular framework for interpretations of the author following her rediscovery in the 1970s, a sense of mystique has marked portrayals of Larsen from the beginning of her career. In 1928, at the height of Larsen’s popularity, New Amsterdam New York News interviewer Thelma Berlack provocatively referred to the author as ”Madame X,” a “modern woman” who “smokes, wears her dresses short, does not believe in religion” (335). This characterization has had considerable critical staying power as well offered fertile soil for speculation, as both during Larsen’s own time as well as in more recent scholarship, critics and biographers have cast Larsen’s life and work not only as objects of mystery and intrigue, but moreover as implausible, if not outright mendacious, misrepresentations of Larsen’s own creation—misrepresentations that critics make their business to decode.

While critics have rightly considered her novels semi-autobiographical (with her first novel, Quicksand, being the work most closely correlated with events in the author’s life), nonetheless key elements of both her books have been singled out as false, unbelievable,
and/or impossible—and considerable critical muscle has been expended in verifying or debunking the factuality of these controversial textual moments. Yet even during the heyday of her career—a career marked by popular interest in her unusual background, disdain for her rebellious intermingling with controversial whites, and finally a plagiarism scandal—Larsen and her works experienced their fair share of interrogation, both in the press and among friends. Moreover, many regarded her novels as potential gateways of insight to the Truth (or lies) behind the author.

The protagonists of Larsen’s novels, mixed-race women of refinement who function in many ways as autobiographical analogues to the author herself, perpetually and unsuccessfully seek places of belonging that remain ever elusive. Readers seek resolutions, and often feel unfulfilled when a text presents conundrums instead. Larsen’s texts do just that: depict problems without solutions. The unfinished business and unclear meanings characteristic of Larsen’s life and work have kept critics busy in the attempt to determine what, exactly, “really happened” in this mysterious life and these ambiguous texts.

These debates, I contend, reflect a trend within Larsen scholarship, one which seeks to eliminate the ambiguity surrounding the author and her works, endeavoring to replace this ambiguity with a final Truth that the author’s mystery obscures. While Larsen’s latest biographer, George Hutchinson, does much to correct the critical ensconcing of Larsen as a mendacious mystery woman, his acts of verification nonetheless participate in the effort to uncover the “real” Larsen beneath the rumors, lies, and omissions. While such clarifying critical examinations prove foundational to my own, I do not wish to enter into the search for the final facts about Larsen, a search that has been pursued quite thoroughly by a number of dedicated scholars, perhaps most profoundly by her three primary biographers.
Charles Larson, Thadious Davis, and Hutchinson, who have collectively invested decades of archival research, interviews, and textual analysis to the “unveiling” of the author.

Instead, I contend that the ambiguity surrounding Larsen’s life and work, an ambiguity that she herself infused in her novels and her autobiographical accounts, should itself be read as meaningful, rather than an obstruction of meaning. While scholars generally agree on the semi-autobiographical nature of Larsen’s two novels *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), in turn attempting to correlate the fictionalized depictions with facts, I am not interested in furthering this already-advanced investigation for the verifiable hidden within Larsen’s fiction. I am however interested in the ruptures between Larsen’s own self-depictions and the critical attempts to disprove (or validate) her accounts, particularly as they manifest themselves within the controversy surrounding her novel endings. What, exactly, about these confounding conclusions make readers uneasy with doubt, and what can these sites of doubt reveal about the wider culture’s perceptions of Larsen’s potentiality and “reasonable” possibilities?

The critical dissatisfaction with the seemingly unrealistic ending of *Quicksand*, as well as the effort to discover “what really happened” in the ambiguous final scene of *Passing*, represents in microcosm trends of authentication and verification that characterize the scholarly treatment of Larsen’s life and work. When Larsen’s ambivalent perspectives fail to fit familiar rubrics of race, gender, class, and community, critics have embarked upon a search for the “real” answer beneath the ambiguity, an answer that will fit, some clue that will at last place Larsen and her characters on one or the other side of the tracks.
Broadly, I argue that Larsen’s ambiguous novels and their controversial endings, while not autobiographical in the strictest sense, nonetheless function as sites of textual self-authorship: these novels, in ways at once crafted yet earnest, depict from Larsen’s standpoint the social forces that work to encourage, but finally render impossible, the protagonists’ (and her own) search for a place of belonging. While “the personal, social, and vocational fulfillment that Larsen attempts to imagine for her volatile heroines—their self-creation—is constantly impeded by their function as an iconic fetish in both black and white elite circles” (Sherrard-Johnson 22), Larsen’s protagonists challenge the stereotypical social roles presented as their only options. In racially-divisive 1920s America determined to preserve strict racial and class boundaries, Larsen’s protagonists (like herself) possess multiple social identifications—and thus, they have no home at all. These women’s refusal (or inability) to commit to one already-existing category of selfhood (are these mysterious protagonists white? Black? Bourgeois? Low-class?) results in their perpetual exclusion from any bounded community, their hybridity translating as imperfect membership criteria within any social context they traverse. Even when Larsen’s protagonists attempt to conform, they always feel themselves painfully bent, while the communities for which they bend nonetheless never fail to sense the difference these women seek to repress. Identity, Larsen’s protagonist learn, must be discrete, cohesive, and never contradictory, based in identification with the standards and characteristics of an established and exclusive social group. When her protagonists fail to fit this bill, they disappear from their own stories, their existence fading from a world that has no language to speak their names.
Nella Larsen’s texts, centering such difficult-to-place, border-straddling subjectivities, testify to an existence that contemporary cultural narratives of race sought to extinguish, to hide, to negate. “Despite the continuing practice of mis-recognition, the body of literary works by mixed race writers stands as a testimony to their existence, and as a repudiation of false racial narratives,” writes Jonathan Brennan (17), and while much intellectual labor has been expended in the search for the Truth beneath Larsen’s supposed misrepresentations, I instead take Larsen’s depictions at their word, reading them not as distortions of fact, but rather sites of creatively-crafted subjectivity offering readers an opportunity to envision modern America from the viewpoint of this marginal woman, so often subject to incisive examination, as she gazes back, depicting what she sees from where she stands.

**Uncovering the Truth about Nella Larsen**

1920s black intellectuals of great social influence—thinkers such as Alain Locke, W.E.B. Du Bois, and James Weldon Johnson—regarded Nella Larsen as a major figure in the development of modern black art. In fact, in a 1928 review for *Quicksand*, W. E. B. Du Bois famously lauded Larsen as the author of “the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt” (187). Yet within a decade, the well-esteemed Larsen would sink into literary obscurity—one caused not only by controversy in her own career, but moreover by a growing critical discontent within the New Negro movement as a whole. Beginning in the 1930s and continuing for decades to come, a new generation of black intellectuals judged the New Negro artists of the 1920s to be little more than “‘prim and decorous ambassadors who went a-begging to white America,’” in the 1937 words of
Richard Wright, a member of the front guard of this critical new generation (qtd in Hutchinson, *Biography* 450). Perhaps literary critic Martha Gruening’s 1932 estimation of the New Negro writers of the previous decade may best summarize the critical turn; she writes:

> the long frustrated, ambitious, struggling Negroes of the upper and middle classes still accept and jealously cherish the values of capitalistic civilization. They accept these values very much as they move into white neighborhoods as white people abandon them. [...] One may concede that the struggle was noble and the achievement praiseworthy, and still feel that new day of the Negro Renaissance, if it comes, will not be made by those unable to detach their emotions from this mirage (87).

While the characterization of New Negro artists as misguided imitators of whiteness found ample voice throughout the 1920s, the early thirties saw the critical tide turn more decisively toward disdain toward New Negro artists. Consequently, after this decade, “Larsen’s fiction could no longer be taken seriously,” notes Hutchinson— and for the next half century it would be “all but dismissed as irrelevant to black people, to American culture, and to literary history” (*Biography* 451). Larsen, once a jewel in the crown of Black art, would spend most of the second half of the twentieth century in obscurity, widely regarded as a minor member of a naively misdirected moment in African American literature.

Not until the 1970s was Nella Larsen rediscovered, due in large part to the work of both the Black Arts and feminist movements. “In the 1960s, Afrocentric literary studies, growing out of the civil rights struggle and the attendant Black Arts and Black Aesthetics movements, explored African-American cultural traditions with a renewed awareness of
the importance of heritage,” writes Thadious Davis (xv), and as the modern predecessor of the Black arts movement, the New Negro Movement (by this point called the Harlem Renaissance) attracted a renewed (and more sympathetic) interest in the cultural past. Scholars turned their attention not only to the individual artistic achievements of these Renaissance authors, but moreover sought to place the meaning of these achievements within the larger creation of African American culture. Yet this renewed interest in the Harlem Renaissance alone did not secure this once-leading novelist a position in the late twentieth-century rankings of top African American writers: “Larsen herself, when her novels were remembered at all, was regarded as a member of the ‘rear guard’ of the renaissance,” writes Hutchinson,

an author concerned (allegedly like Jessie Fauset, with whom she would be perennially paired) with proving to rich white folks that some Negroes were just like them, with refined European manners and nice belongings, who ought to be allowed in white people’s churches and homes. Such was the critical consensus when Larsen’s novels were first reissued and began to be discussed in university classrooms in the early 70s. (Hutchinson, Biography 485)

In fact, in the introduction to the 1971 Collier Books paperback edition of Passing—the first reprinting of Larsen’s novel since the thirties, and the edition that would serve as the classroom standard for the next fifteen years—editor Hoyt Fuller describes Larsen as a woman who “‘had gone off to Europe for a try at rejecting her Blackness, only to return in the end to wrap it around her again,’” finally concluding, in terms that conjure the all-too pervasive dismissal of women writers into the ranks of Hawthorne’s “scribbling women,”
that "'[w]ithout the element of intrigue and suspense injected by race, Miss Larsen’s novel might have been relegated to the lost ranks of that massive body of fiction designed to titillate middle-class housewives on a long and lonely afternoon’" (qtd in Hutchinson Biography 485). Fuller’s introduction of Nella Larsen to a new generation of readers, his “withering dismissal,” to borrow Hutchinson’s apt characterization (Biography 487), would remain the popular critical consensus on Larsen and her works—that is, until feminists took on Larsen’s novels in the 1970s, and over the next few decades, reframed her novels as explorations of black female subjectivity.

From the earliest stages of Larsen’s rediscovery until today’s most recent scholarship, feminist scholars have reclaimed Larsen’s texts from the rear guard, celebrating them instead for their complex explorations of the psychological interiority of women of color, unapologetic challenges to bourgeois domesticity, and incisive interrogations issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality—all qualities achieved through Larsen’s subjective centering of black and mixed-race women. This durable critical lens gained traction in the 1980s and 90s: from Cheryl Wall’s 1986 assertion that “Larsen’s most striking insights are into psychic dilemmas confronting certain black women” (357); to Deborah McDowell’s 1986 reading of Passing “through the prism of black female sexuality” (366); to Hazel Carby’s 1987 characterization of Helga Crane from Quicksand as ‘the first truly sexual black female protagonist in Afro-American fiction’ (qtd in Barnett 598); to Jennifer Devere Brody’s 1992 class- and race-critical contribution “to debates within Black feminist criticism about […] the production of black female subjectivity” (393), these notable (though certainly not exhaustive list of) black feminist approaches to Larsen’s work exemplify some of the diverse ways readers have sought from her novels insight into the lives and minds of the
women of color. Even as recently as 2007, in the introduction of the Norton critical edition of *Passing*, editor Carla Kaplan names Larsen’s “portrayal of black, female subjectivity” as the foremost quality prized critically in Larsen’s work (ix).

This critical lens proves not only popular, but enduring—yet a notable chink in this critical armor, of course, remains the pat classification of Larsen as a “black woman author” writing about “black women.” Larsen considered herself many things, Negro included, yet the exclusive relegation of her work within the realm of African American literature troublingly echoes the very “one drop” rule that Larsen critiques throughout her novels. Despite this simplified racial classification of her work, many notable biographers and critics nonetheless agree: Larsen’s novels explore not merely the minds of fictional people—these novels, in fact, explore aspects of Larsen’s own subjectivity.

Thus the regard for Larsen’s novels as autobiographical is not a new one—and the idea remains a nearly uncontested, even primary, way of thinking about Larsen’s works. Larsen, however, never explicitly claimed either of her novels to be autobiographical. Those interviewers and reviewers documenting the life of the rising author relied upon excerpts from the autobiographical blurb provided by Larsen to her publishers at Knopf to suggest the author’s similarity to her characters—a particularly useful publicity tool, especially for *Quicksand*, whose narrative trajectory lines up provocatively with Larsen’s own short autobiographical account. “Authors do not supply imaginations. They expect their readers to have their own, and to use them,” Larsen once remarked in 1926 letter to *Opportunity* (Critics 162).—and two years later, she would trust her readers’ imaginations to make connections between her life and that of *Quicksand* protagonist Helga Crane with her suggestive autobiographical blurb written for promotional use. “Nella Larsen is a mulatto,
the daughter of a Danish lady and a Negro from the Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies,” writes Larsen:

> When she was two years old her father died and shortly afterward her mother married a man of her own race and nationality. [...] When she was sixteen she went alone to Denmark to visit relatives of her mothers [sic] in Copenhagen where she remained for three years. On her return to America, she entered a training school for nurses [...] and after graduating accepted a position as head nurse at the hospital of Tuskegee Institute—the school founded by Booker T. Washington—, but her dislike of conditions there, and the school authorities dislike of her appearance and manner were both so intense that after a year they parted with mutual disgust and relief. (Larsen qtd in Hutchinson, *Biography* 222)

Reviewers of *Quicksand* needed only note these intriguing biographical elements to suggest that autobiography ran through this exciting new novel, a novel that—in its depiction of the journey of a refined mixed-race woman from an all-Black technical college, to the upper echelons of Harlem’s Black bourgeoisie, to the drawing rooms of Denmark—shared striking similarities with the few personal details that the author’s promotional autobiography divulged. As an unnamed reviewer for the *Chicago Defender* wrote in 1928, “Unusual interest centers around the book because of the fact that so little has been and is known of the author. Many persons are of the opinion that much of her life is reflected in *Quicksands* [sic], her first novel” (Hutchinson, *Biography* 279).

During a period in which the subjective experience of marginal people—especially “Negroes” and immigrants—occupied the interest of those Americans privileged enough to
patronize and publicize these excitingly underground perspectives, any earnest biographical connection between this half-Dutch, half-Negro author and her work promised generous public interest, a certain authorial credibility, as well as respect from diverse camps of the New Negro movement.

While critics argued the merit of “primitivist” works (such as Quicksand’s contemporary, Claude McKay’s 1928 Home to Harlem) by invoking the text’s “authenticity” and/or “sincerity,” from the more conservative corners of New Negro criticism a similar injunction for authentic stories rang out, a call for more stories from the “majority” of “dignified” Black people—a position described quite succinctly by Benjamin Brawley, an influential Black critic of the early twentieth century: “We are simply asking that those writers of fiction who deal with the Negro shall be thoroughly honest with themselves, and not remain forever content to embalm old types and work over outworn ideas,” Brawley writes, concluding that “The day of Uncle Remus as well as of Uncle Tom is over” (31). Truthful depictions of previously ignored perspectives garnered the respect of a variety of intellectuals—and sold books, as well. An autobiographical connection provided a book with an air of authenticity that appealed to even the most diverse schools of thought, as well as a sense of public intrigue that promised success at the bookstore.

Reading Larsen’s texts for their autobiographical qualities continues to be a popular way of introducing, as well as interpreting, her novels. The similarities between her works and her life never fail to garner at least a mention in critical introductions: the 1997 Norton Anthology of African American Literature entry for Nella Larsen, for example, notes that Helga Crane “bears a remarkable similarity to Larsen herself, especially in the fact that both women grew up as the only black member of a white family” (1065). The scholars respon-
sible for the critical introductions to major editions of her work—Deborah McDowell in her introduction to the 1986 *American Women Writers* edition of *Quicksand* and *Passing*, Charles Larson in his 1992 introduction to *Intimation of Things Distant*, and most recently Carla Kaplan in her 2007 introduction to the Norton critical edition of *Passing*—all suggest that Larsen’s works demonstrate some degree of correlation with the author’s own life, whether through factual or emotional parallels. Larsen’s most critically acclaimed biographers, Thadious Davis and George Hutchinson—notably, the two biographers with the most contradictory interpretations of her life—agree on the classification of Larsen’s novels as “autobiographically based fiction” (Hutchinson, *Biography* 346). Unlike Hutchinson, who endeavors to prove Larsen’s self-accounts as factual, Davis, in her authoritative, hefty, and well-received biography of the author, perhaps holds the greatest responsibility for the recent relegation of Larsen’s autobiographical accounts into the realm of fictional self-crafting, as she characterizes “Nella Larsen” (born “Nellie” Larsen) as “not only an invented name, a public and private pseudonym, but also a self-created persona, willed and perpetuated from adolescence through old age by a woman who, for a short time at least, attained the meaning of her own daring self-invention” (xix).

While Larsen does seem to have gone to particular pains to create a public persona of her own authorship, I agree with autobiographical theorist Peggy Whitman Prenshaw’s contention that “any composition of a life in written words in a task of self-invention” (292). Therefore I interpret Larsen’s semi-autobiographical novels as sites in which Larsen crafts narratives of self that, whether accurately correlating with the verifiable facts of her life or not, nonetheless work as arenas in which the author depicts herself and her world from her own subjective viewpoint. Within this framework, the relative truth of these de-
pictions does not invalidate their value as sites of investigation into the author’s subjectivity. “All autobiographers are unreliable narrators, all humans are liars,” argues Timothy Dow Adams, and “what we choose to misrepresent is as telling as what really happened” (ix). I might add that that the nature of what certain authors are accused of misrepresenting reveals much not only about the author, but moreover about cultural expectations of this author’s reasonable potentialities. With this in mind, I do not wish to join in the effort to validate Larsen’s truthfulness; instead I examine the textual spaces that spurn suspicions and disbelief, using the critically-contested endings of her novels as distilled examples of depictions widely accused as unbelievable or unrealistic for women in Larsen’s protagonists’ (and, by extension, Larsen’s own) position.

Across generations, critics have taken issue with the endings of both of Larsen’s novels, seeing them as unconvincing, unbelievable, and, in the case of *Passing*, problematically inconclusive. Despite the overall laudatory reception of both *Quicksand* and *Passing* in 1928 and ’29, most of these otherwise admiring reviews nonetheless treated the endings of both novels with disapproval and disbelief, calling *Quicksand*’s conclusion “ridiculous” (Bowser 95) and “elusively incomplete” (Hayden 345), and the final scene of *Passing* a “sudden and utterly unconvincing close” (Anonymous, “Beyond the Color Line,” 86). This critical disdain continues nearly one hundred years later: most recently, in her introduction to what promises to be the classroom standard edition of *Passing* for many years to come, McDowell notes the long critical tradition of regarding Larsen’s conclusions as unconvincing failures (xi), and moreover suggests that “these abrupt and contradictory endings” (xii) in which Larsen “sacrifices” her protagonists to “to the most conventional fates of narrative history: marriage and death” (xi) have “rightly perplexed” the critics (xii).
As Helga Crane, the educated and cosmopolitan mixed-race protagonist of *Quicksand*, journeys through some of the most upstanding communities on either side of the Atlantic looking for a home only to end up trapped a country preacher’s wife, locked in an un-ending and debilitating cycle of childbirth, living among a rural community in the deep South to which—as always—Helga finds she does not belong, contemporary reviewers perceived Helga’s fate to be well beneath a woman of her refinement and intellect. These reviewers objected to what they felt was an unjust and unbelievable surrender of the elegant Helga to a base life beneath her potential, a narrative turn which caused one reviewer to voice the common complaint that the “motivation of this character is not always convincingly explained” (Parsons 126). “What dismays many readers of *Quicksand* is Helga Crane’s sudden break from one mode of life to a completely different one at the end of the novel,” writes Hutchinson (*Biography* 224), and indeed, contemporary critics found within *Quicksand* a “failure to hold up to the end” (Bradford 22) that resulted from Helga’s apparent lack of “continuity of development” and wholeness” (Walton 192). Hutchinson finds this critical consensus “only a more intense expression of the sense that at any point in her life, if not for a perverse flaw in her personality, Helga might have steeled into one of the social niches offered her” (*Biography* 224), as without a doubt, frustrated reviewers faulted Helga for her stubborn refusal to conform. A woman with Helga’s refinement, it seems, would not (or should not) descend to repeated childbirth in a dusty Alabama cabin. This disbelief continues to inform assessments of the novel’s conclusion—a “deliberately constructed failure,” in the 1995 words of Pamela Barnett (599)—as critics continue to regard Helga’s ending as tragic, unsatisfying, and most definitely a failure.
As Clare Kendry of *Passing*, a woman “passing” among white society who nonetheless enjoys clandestine visits to the Negro community of her longed-for origins, meets sudden death—or is it murder?—as a result of her racial transgressions, reviewers decreed that such quick disposal of Clare too easily solves the novel’s complex conflicts. These conflicts, in the estimation of critics, seem inevitably to lead back to the novel’s central “problem,” Clare: “The most serious fault with the book is its sudden and utterly unconvincing close,” one *New York Times* reviewer wrote, “a close that solves most of the problems that Miss Larsen has posed for herself by simply sweeping them out of existence through the engineered death of Clare Kendry” (Anonymous, “Beyond the Color Line” 86). Critics roundly identified Clare’s forays into the world of the Harlem elite to be the “problem” around which the novel spins, and on the whole they aligned the author’s sympathies with Irene, the childhood friend and “race woman” who acts as Clare’s unenthusiastic contact to the Negro world (an alignment which several scholars of more recent years decry). Furthermore, the ambiguous cause of death—did Clare fall from the window, or was she pushed?—mystified readers: for example, Alice Dunbar Nelson, in one of the most positive reviews of the novel’s widely-disliked conclusion, tells readers of *Passing* to “ask about ten of your friends for their version of the ending, and get the ten different versions you are bound to get” (91). The novel’s inconclusiveness confounded not only contemporary readers, but has continued to provide one of the most productive arenas of critical debate about the novel. “Larsen is a master of ambiguity and intrigue, and the enigmatic finale of her novella has generated heated debates and countless interpretations,” writes Catherine Rottenberg (490), and indeed, critics such as Bernard Bell, Deborah McDowell, Mary
Sisney, Jonathan Little, and Claudia Tate have wrestled with this provocative death scene (Sullivan 385).

The discontent and disbelief that mark those first influential interpretations of Larsen’s novels, I contend, results from the failure of their conclusions to deliver representations of cultured Negro women in line with those contemporarily in demand from nearly all corners of those interested in black writing. The novel’s conclusions defy the expectations and (often unstated) political aims of a wildly diverse collection of critics, from the contrasting “genteel” and “decadent” factions of New Negro thought, to the white patrons and audience that, in ways often problematic, found black art valuable and intriguing.

The diverse and often conflicting expectations set for someone like Larsen—that is, a mixed-race “Negro” female author of refinement, education, and, at the time of her literary success, social prestige—result from the intersection of a number of social contexts working together to keep Larsen’s protagonists (and arguably, herself) perpetual interlopers, women who “can go anywhere and stay nowhere, save in defeat” (Douglass 83). The cultural fabric that hemmed in—or rather, hemmed out—Quicksand’s Helga, Passing’s “complex doubles” (Hutchinson, Biography 294) Irene and Clare, and even Nella Larsen herself, prove complex beyond enumeration. I can offer only a partial, though hopefully illuminating, insight into the boundaries that these ideological intersections drew (and continue to draw) around Larsen, boundaries that inform the critical assessments of her protagonists’ (and her own) reasonable potentialities, boundaries tied up in issues of American identity, truth and authenticity, and the politics of representation.

In an era in which American distinctiveness, particularly America’s cultural independence from Europe, occupied the minds of a diverse array of American thinkers and art-
ists, a new interest in the Negro’s place within American culture arose, an interest fueled in part by an odd dance between the white nativist attempt to own American identity (a race fueled in part by the unprecedented influx of immigrants that marked the early twentieth century) and the lingering Progressive liberalism of the previous decades that valued, in Waldo Frank’s words, “Buried American Cultures” (Douglass 331) as sites of the uniquely American. This new interest in the American Negro also found fodder in the growing conviction that black America housed the only native-born authentic American culture wholly separate from Europe (Douglass 4-5), and this conviction, paired with the modernist premium on Truth over illusions, paired doubly with the eager expectations of a diverse audience of white Americans hungry for the ‘authentic’ and New Negroes concerned with the politics of their own self-representations, created an atmosphere that demanded the Truth from Negro writers, however conflicted these versions of Truth may be. Further, the New Negroes as a whole were convinced that artistic achievement rather than political action held the greatest potential for affecting positive change in the Negro’s social position, yet the standards of achievement were determined by conflicting factions of the New Negro movement and predictably resulted in conflicting prescriptions of just what types of black characters were, in fact, socially responsible representations.

These are some of the major ideological intersections, I contend, to inform the criticism of Larsen’s texts—particularly their conclusions—as unbelievable, unrealistic, and unresolved. The tenor of doubt and disapproval that greeted the novels’ conclusions arose, I suggest, because these endings failed to fulfill the diverse and often contradictory expectations determined by these complex sites of ideological intersection. As a New Negro writer, Larsen was expected to deliver a true and authentic American story (although the na-
ture of this authenticity depended upon whom one asked), a story that represented her subjects in socially-responsible ways (although the nature of ‘socially-responsible,’ again, depended upon whom one asked), a story that provided answers to some of the oldest and most pressing injustices in American history—and on all counts, from all perspectives, Larsen’s conclusions failed to deliver. Instead, she forced readers to find ambiguity and unfinished business in the place of the solutions they sought. Since her narrative trajectories hit unhappy dead ends devoid of any comforting lessons, Larsen’s critics determined her conclusions impossible to believe—as indeed, for many, they were.

Larsen’s semi-autobiographical texts depict the world from the perspective of the perpetual interloper upon whom great expectations were laid. This marginal perspective, not surprisingly, generates no clear-cut answers, but ambiguity instead. “What some critics saw as a lack of realism or psychological unity seems, in the context of Larsen’s own life story, very close to self-revelation,” writes Hutchinson (Biography 285), and these self-revelatory depictions prove particularly valuable in that they spotlight a view from the margins—a view that does not fit the familiar patterns nor answer the pressing questions, but offers instead a counter-history that problematizes the expectations of the very communities the texts were expected to unite. “The impossibility of resolution is the impetus behind the book,” writes Pamela Barnett of Quicksand (599), but this lack of neat resolution represents not the author’s creative deficiency, as some critics have assumed. Rather, these unresolved endings provide insight into the inescapable irresolvability that Larsen understood to be the condition of her own life. While critics have often looked for the meaning of Larsen’s novels hidden within the mysteries, performing, in Peter Toth’s estimation, “the type of ‘paranoid’ reading [...] associated with a critical desire to ‘decode’ the true meaning
of Larsen’s text *finally* (57-8), Larsen’s ambiguity in fact carries its own meaning, and makes a statement rather than hides a secret. There is no country for Helga Crane, Clare Kendry, or Nella Larsen, these conclusions suggest—no country, it seems, even within these women’s own (forever conflicted) hearts.

The New Negro Movement and the Politics of Representation

Although no evidence suggests that Larsen composed her novels with socially-transformative goals in mind—in fact, several personal correspondences of Larsen’s suggest that, to the contrary, she operated under a frankly amoral sensibility—the New Negro milieu in which Larsen lived and worked invested its artists with great social responsibility, although the nature of this socially-responsibility was an object of heated debate. While never a philosophically unified movement, many prominent New Negro intellectuals of the 1920s believed that great works of black art held the key to cultural revolution, one that would result in the long-withheld recognition of the Negro’s equal (if not greater) ownership and authorship of American culture. The New Negro movement was “caught up in a struggle over the meaning and possession of ‘America,’” Hutchinson argues (*Harlem Renaissance* 15), as thinkers such as W.E.B. Du Bois and Alain Locke insisted that Negroes were not interlopers among “real” Americans, but instead had participated in the construction of America since the nation’s inception, all along crafting American culture in ways indelible yet uncredited. The growing national interest in black artistry seemed to offer the greatest potential for transforming the nation yet presented to black Americans: as the influential black poet and critic Benjamin Griffin Brawley wrote in 1916, “The Negro in his
problems and strivings offers to American writers the greatest opportunity that could possibly be given to them to-day" (24).

Many New Negro intellectuals believed that the key to achieving American enfranchisement lie in the dissemination of socially-responsible art that challenged stereotypes of black beast rapists, sexually voracious jezebels, happy Mammies, and loyal Uncles populating much of American popular culture. Part of the Negro artist’s social responsibility was to represent “authentic” black life—that is, the art should show America the “truth” about Negroes in order to counteract the debilitating stereotypes. Much as black woman authors in the late nineteenth century utilized the popular vehicle of the ex-slave narrative to depict demure black female protagonists in order to undercut the jezebel stereotype, in the 1920s many black artists saw the current popularity for black art as an opportunity to prove to a racist America that Negroes were in fact worthy and productive members of society. It was time to tell the Truth about Negroes to a nation drunk on lies, many New Negro intellectuals believed. Therefore, a major part of creating socially-responsible Negro art was that the art be authentic, truthful, an accurate representation of the Negro in America. The only problem was—nobody agreed on exactly what such a picture would look like.

Different intellectual sects had different ideas of what responsible representation would entail. One solution, posited most famously by Du Bois, was to encourage artists to produce portraits of the respectable black bourgeoisie in order to legitimize black culture as civilized within racist America. Others, such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neal Hurston, found such bourgeois depictions to be self-hating whiteness-worship, and instead encouraged authentic portraits of uniquely black culture that expressly rejected white imitation. Often these expressly non-bourgeois portraits centered on folksy and/or gritty scenes in
impoverished settings, both urban and rural. Between these two disparate schools of thought and everywhere in between, the politics of black representation were at stake. And although no one could agree on which type of depiction was in fact the more socially-responsible choice, all agreed that black artistic portrayal of black people at this racially tumultuous point in history was a matter of grave consequence. It was on the shoulders of the Negro artists—now in the national spotlight—to portray blacks in politically responsible ways, although the guidelines for achieving this were contradictory at best, and depended upon one’s philosophical alignment.

The politics of black representation—that is, the on-going argument over how Negroes should be portrayed—proved such a controversial and salient one that in 1926, just two years before Quicksand was published, The Crisis ran a multi-issue symposium asking writers, critics, and publishers its title question: “The Negro in Art: How Shall He Be Portrayed?” In this issue, Crisis editor Du Bois asked a variety of prominent writers, critics, and publishers such (leading) questions as: “Does not the situation of the educated Negro in America with its pathos, humiliation and tragedy call for artistic treatment at least as sincere and sympathetic as ‘Porgy’ [a “primitivist” play] received?” and “Is not the continual portrayal of the sordid, foolish and criminal among Negroes convincing the world that this and this alone is really and essentially Negroid [...]?” (349). This survey ran for four months, and received diverse responses from such prominent figures as Jessie Fauset, Countee Cullen, Julia Peterkin, Carl Van Vechten, Alfred Knopf, and Charles Chesnutt. Clearly, the politics of representation were on the minds of many, and the many did not agree. While Larsen often aligned herself with writers accused of “primitivism”—for example, she used a Langston Hughes poem excerpt for the epigraph for Quicksand and a Countee Cullen
poem excerpt as epigraph for *Passing*; furthermore she dedicated *Passing* to controversial white writer and Harlem patron Carl Van Vechten, the notorious author of the “primitive” work *Nigger Heaven*—unlike her friends, Larsen did not depict uneducated and impoverished black folk in celebratory, nostalgic, or romantic ways. Despite her connections, critics absolutely did not consider Larsen a primitivist, although some found (and continue to find) vexing her close friendship with Van Vechten—a man whom prominent African American social anthropologist Allison Davis named responsible for bringing the primitive movement “to its complete fruition, [...] giving] it the distinction of his patronage” (70). If Larsen’s critics were vexed by this friendship, it seems she intended as much. Ending her promotional biography by listing her hobbies as “bridge and collecting Van Vechteniana” (qtd in Hutchinson *Biography* 222), Larsen knew well the nature of heated debate; her “Van Vechteniana” hobby could only pluck the nerves of the conservative set. Yet while no champion of the uneducated and impoverished, Larsen neither aimed to please the bourgeois, behaving antagonistically at times to the uplift-oriented crowd.

Certainly, a number of authors and critics found folkways a preferable choice to imitating white people; while the dignified bourgeoisie was in demand by some, others clamored for tapping “the proletarian” (Calverton 117). Black authors in the 1920s walked a fine line between these schools of representational politics: censure would greet the author who seemed to tap into base primitivism in characterizing black folk, but one must neither appear too eager to copy white ways if choosing to portray the middle class. Under this rubric, art-for-art’s-sake proved insufficient if not downright irresponsible—artistic activism stopping short of a distasteful “propaganda” became the charge of the day. While never one for moralizing, Larsen nonetheless professed faith in the artist’s socially-
transformative potential, according to a 1928 interview: “Madame X,” as this interviewer provocatively dubbed the author, “feels that people of the artistic type have a definite chance to help solve the race problem” (Berlack 335). Without a doubt, exciting opportunities but hubristic demands greeted Larsen and her fellow Negro artists of the 1920s.

As one of the leading novelists of the New Negro Renaissance, Larsen was considered one of the front guard of this artistically-driven fight for enfranchisement, a position she occupied with great ambivalence, never a proponent of crusading. Further, the complexities of her life have often been boiled down to the simplified contours most convenient to social criticism, with the effect of casting Larsen in the role of representative bourgeois mulatto (a role to which Jessie Fauset has often been relegated, as well). The “chief interest” of Quicksand “lies in the fact that its principal character is a person of a quite unusual mixture of blood rather than in what she does or says of what happens to her,” wrote an unnamed reviewer for the Saturday Review of Literature (896), and Larsen’s work was valued in large part due to the “quite unusual” mixed-race subjects around which her texts spin. Positioned thusly, Larsen’s work has tantalized many readers with the promise of offering that rare dual insight into the consciousnesses of supposedly distinct, monolithic, “black-” and “white cultures.”

A mixed-race individual possessed the potential for unwinding cross-racial misunderstandings through her interracial mediation, many scholars and critics suggested—especially if that person demonstrated the intellectualism and sophistication that were the primary marks of the New Negro movement. As one reviewer of Passing wrote in 1929, “Nella Larsen’s mixture of blood has given her a double perception which few purely Negro or purely white authors can hope to attain” (Griffin 96). “The life of the cultured mulatto
provides a far richer field for artistic literary development than the Nordic,” another critic, reviewing Walter White’s Flight, suggested (Waring 161), as in the minds of many thinkers of the 1920s, the mulatto possessed a uniquely insightful and complex social position; moreover the refined and artistically-talented mixed race individual possessed the capabilities to wield this insight in the battle for social transformation. As another reviewer of Passing wrote in 1929, “I wish with all my heart that instead of bringing forth another novel next year, Mrs. Imes would, after a decade of brooding, give the world its needed epic of racial integration between thinking members of the American social order belonging to both African and European stocks” (Larabee 100). The hope of racial integration through Larsen’s pen was not an unusual one; as yet another reviewer suggested of Passing, “Perhaps such studies as Miss Larsen’s will help erase racial prejudice” (Griffin 97). A sophisticated woman possessing insight into the highest societies of the black and white worlds, Larsen was expected to deliver through her art solutions to some of the nation’s oldest and most systemic injustices. A tall order, indeed.

Yet while many thinkers of the era imagined that the mulatto possessed dual membership in white and black communities, Larsen’s texts insist upon a much different reality. As her protagonists travel from community to community never enjoying full entry, existing at best as a beautiful ornament, or at worst as dangerous evidence of racial mixing, these protagonists’ journeys suggest a cultural reality that disallows these mixed-race women any sense of solid identity. As we shall see, Larsen’s refined and educated mulattoes undergo radical changes of identity that parallel both the culture’s discomfort with them, as well as the segregationist insistence on “either/or” racial logic. Through these protagonists’ many, varied, and inevitability-doomed attempts at finding a home, Larsen suggests
that the power to determine personal identity exists not in the domain of the individual, but rather within the powers of the community.

Each community that Larsen’s protagonists encounter has already established menus of potential legitimate existences that its members may take on. In this way, communities manufacture identities. If a person is hybrid, she/he must either fit into an already-established mold of personhood that doesn’t quite fit, or her/his reality will not be respected as real and authentic. Identities are based upon expectations and already-existing rubrics, Larsen’s texts suggest, and the border figure can morph this way or that to fit her current setting, but once the community detects the border figure’s difference, her inability to truly fit the mold, she is destroyed at worst or displayed as an oddity at best. In this way, Larsen’s texts suggest that identity is fluid, not fixed, and changes with one’s setting. Each community offers its members a number of options of what they can become, and while these options give the illusion of freedom—the options themselves are always already written out; freedom occurs only in the space of limited choice. If someone attempts to live a life that is not sanctioned by the community’s rubric, then that person’s existence is delegitimized; she cannot rightfully exist, and must be a failure, a liar, sick, or disturbed. This cultural insistence on classifying the unclassifiable manifests itself in the popular rejection of Larsen’s deliberately ambiguous works, particularly their solution-less conclusions.

The critical dissatisfaction caused by Larsen’s unresolved conclusions may perhaps be best understood within the larger context of misinterpretation that marked the critical reception of her novels. The critics were essential in the formation of the New Negro movement, argues Cary Wintz, and while “the writers produced the literature, the critics helped define the movement and give it direction” (xvii). Yet while both Quicksand and
Passing received overall positive reviews, nonetheless the reviewers attempted to "fit [Larsen's novels] into patterns to which they were accustomed and, not always satisfied with the fit, found the novel[s] wanting" (Hutchinson, Biography 283). On the whole, critics saw only the "interesting cultured Negro wom[e]n" at the center of Larsen's narratives (Bennet qtd in Hutchinson Bio 277), but failed to notice the incisive critiques at the heart of her depictions, an interpretive tunnel vision “based on a class bias and an ethos of uplift that were ironically at odds with Larsen’s whole point of view” (Hutchinson Biography 293).

While Larsen's novels feature a number of genteel ladies and gentlemen, her novels in fact indict this bourgeois sect, depicting them as at once antipathetic towards white America and yet imitative. While such indictments manifest in many ways throughout her work, perhaps the most distilled exemplary instance can be found in Larsen's depiction of Quicksand's Anne Grey, a prim and proper Negro woman who hates white people yet “aped their clothes, their manners, their gracious ways of living” while holding in contempt all things “Negroid” (Quicksand 48). Indeed, Larsen harbored an “outright hostility toward genteel black womanhood, the very ideal that Passing [and Quicksand] is generally held to value,” argues Kathleen Pfeiffer (130). Yet despite the “biting critique of Black bourgeoisie ideologies” present throughout her novels (Brody 408)—novels that, again, insist upon the hypocrisy inherent in the whiteness-hating yet whiteness-imitating bourgeois set—the incisive social critiques present throughout Larsen's works remained largely unnoticed beneath the critical praise for her treatment of the upper-class Negro.

“It seems a possessing desire with NL to show the white world […] that the Negro man or woman is, in all vital essentials, no different from the white," wrote one reviewer of
Passing (Griffin 97); the author had gone to “particular pains” to prove to her readers that “the social life of the upper middle class Negro contains all the refined detail of luxurious living of the corresponding white strata,” claimed another (“M.L.H.” 102)—and both critics missed altogether the biting critique of the black bourgeois Larsen offers in these depictions. In the years to come, critics would continue to regard Larsen’s novels largely as vehicles of assimilation, attempts at proving the similarity between sophisticated blacks and whites. Many read only the surface of Larsen’s focus on the bourgeois, noting with pleasure the author’s choice of refined Negro characters and settings: in the 1934 literary review “The Growth of Negro Literature,” for example, renowned New Negro critic V. F. Calverton ranked Nella Larsen’s Quicksand among Walter White’s Fire in the Flint, Jessie Fauset’s There is Confusion, and W.E. B. Du Bois’s The Dark Princess as works that “centre their attention upon the more enlightened and prosperous members of the race” (117).

Not only did critics tend to interpret Larsen’s novels as assimilationist alignments of the black and white gentry. Furthermore, they often distilled Larsen’s complex depictions of her mixed-race protagonists into familiar re-workings of literary mulatto stereotypes, a rubric that, according to Thadious Davis, “subsequently became the primary way of approaching Larsen and her work” until black feminist interventions of the 1970s (xv). This tragedy of the mulatto boiled down to a battle of eternally-incompatible bloods, according to contemporary reviewers: the heroine of Quicksand, “dragged one way by her Negro blood and another by her white,” in the words of one reviewer, remains torn between the “‘comforts of civilized culture’” and “the rumbling of old Africa” (Roark Bradford qtd in Hutchinson, Biography 282). These mulatto protagonists must finally succumb to the “powerful call of the negro blood,” most critics agreed (Anonymous, “The Dilemma” 89),
with one reviewer going so far as to characterize *Passing* as “an excellent novel which suggests that the ‘near whites’ always return to their own race for genuine happiness, comfort and understanding” (Anonymous, “Do They Always Return?” 101). Indeed, reviewers joined in a collective critical elision of Larsen’s critiques of the very racially-essentialist notions to which they claimed her works gave voice. Perhaps the most egregious misinterpretation of Larsen’s work, however, comes from Aubrey Bowser in her *New York Amsterdam News* review of *Passing*: Larsen “succumbs to the grudge that most Negroes have against a Negro who goes over the race line and cannot stay there,” wrote Bowser, a grudge Bowser finds “justifiable, for a person should either be one thing or the other” (95). This reading of Larsen—as a Negro bound to bourgeois pretentions of racial loyalty and full of contempt for those who cross the color line—could not more directly counter Larsen’s denunciation of such oppositional racial conceptions; yet perhaps no other reading exemplifies quite so succinctly the critical attempt to place her work within existing oppositional racial paradigms.

Only Alain Locke, in one of the most astute contemporary estimations of Larsen’s work, regarded her first novel as transcendent of the time-worn stereotype of eternally-incompatible blood. Identifying the “problem” of mixed-race people as one “which was once handled exclusively as a grim tragedy of blood and fateful heredity,” Locke argues that Larsen takes the subject of mixed race “to another plane of discussion,” depicting instead “the problem of divided social loyalties and the issues of the conflict of cultures” (249).

Along with assumptions of tragic mulatto stereotypes at work in Larsen’s novels, equally off-base within contemporary criticism was the often-lauded, supposedly racially-transcendent “universalism” of Larsen’s work, a conception that Knopf, Larsen’s publishing
house, encouraged. On the dust jacket of the first edition of *Quicksand*, Knopf characterized Helga Crane as a woman beset by the “problems of the individual and not of a class or a race” as she struggles through “a human, not a sociological, tragedy” (qtd in Hutchinson Biography 274). Significantly, Knopf also decided to omit the biographical statement Larsen provided for promotional purposes, a statement that reveals the racially-loaded parallels between the author’s life and her fiction. In light of the contemporary push for “American” literary depictions transcendent of race and class, it is not surprising that this “universal” marketing strategy apparently convinced critics, as revealed by their assessments: “The essential tragedy has little to do with Helga’s being a Negro—no more, at least, than if she were Asiatic or Jewish” wrote one *New York Times* book reviewer (Anonymous, *New York Times* 16). Similarly, Alice Dunbar Nelson, in an otherwise astute assessment of the controversial ending of *Passing*, characterized the interpersonal conflict of Larsen’s second novel as “a situation so universal, that race, color, country, time, place have nothing to do with it,” and finally judges Larsen’s engagement of the “color complex” to be a mere marketing ploy: “Of course, the author was wise in hanging the situation onto a color complex,” wrote Dunbar Nelson; “the public must have that now” (90). The aforementioned Aubrey Bowser claimed that “the best thing about *Passing* is that it tells a story for the sake of the story and not for the sake of the race problem” (96); likewise, W. E. Seabrook, in his review of *Passing*, concluded that the author “has produced a work so fine, sensitive, and distinguished that it rises above race categories and becomes that rare object, a good novel” (92-3). Perhaps the contradictory demands placed upon modern black writers—demands that, on one hand, insisted that these writers “rise above” racial themes and prove their ability to pen potentially classic novels transcendent of time and place; demands that, on the other hand,
insisted that black writers provide true and authentically “black” depictions of life—
created an environment in which critics were able to regard Larsen’s novels, so loaded with
incisive interrogations and bold critiques of racial hegemonies, as at once racially-void as
well as racially-true.

Larsen’s critics, it seems, were unable to conceive of Larsen’s work outside of exist-
ing oppositional racial paradigms, and in turn they cast her work largely within familiar
classifications. When certain depictions proved too unruly to fit within these molds—as
was the case with Larsen’s finales—critics lambasted them as unbelievable and incomplete
authorial missteps. Some things, it seems, simply cannot be true of Larsen’s protagonists,
nor, by implication, true of Larsen herself, and this disbelief manifests itself in high relief
throughout the critical reaction to the unresolved and ambiguous endings Larsen’s protag-
onists meet.

Disappearing in Quicksand

Critics may have disliked the ending of Larsen’s first novel, Quicksand, but they
praised the work as a whole, noting the sophistication and complexity of the subject matter
and style. Quicksand told “the story of a cultivated and sensitive [...] mulatto beset by he-
reditary, social and racial forces over which she has little control and into which she cannot
fit,” as one Opportunity reviewer wrote, a character “so complex that any analysis [...] takes
a mature imagination” (Walton 191). W. E. B. DuBois proved the novel’s greatest champi-
on, calling Quicksand “a fine, thoughtful and courageous piece of work” as well as “the best
piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chesnutt” (187).
However roundly the critics disapproved of the novel’s ending, most reviewers agreed: “In spite of its failure to hold up to the end, the book is good” (Bradford 22).

As *Quicksand* opens, readers are introduced to a beautiful young woman of sophistication and intellectual complexity, a woman whose resemblance to the author was not lost on readers. A physically lovely woman, Helga bears a striking resemblance to Larsen:

Black, very broad brows over soft, yet penetrating, dark eyes, and a pretty mouth, whose sensitive and sensuous lips had a slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop, were the features on which the observer’s attention would fasten; though her nose was good, her ears delicately chiseled, and her curly blue-black hair plentiful and always straying in a wayward, delightful way. (2)

Through the vehicle of this protagonist she so strikingly resembled, “Nella Larsen had enveloped her own life story in *Quicksand,*” writes Davis, a contention with which Larsen’s two other biographers, Larson and Hutchinson, agree. Generically a novel, *Quicksand* nonetheless contains traces of the author herself, as Larsen, “converting the raw materials of her life into an often spellbinding psychological portrait of her heroine” (Larson xiv), depicted all corners of American life from a narrative viewpoint with which the author herself implicitly identified, both in promotional material as well as interviews. Through her semi-autobiographical protagonist Helga Crane, “Larsen emerges from the shadows and, finding her voice, provides an unprecedented vision of her world” (Hutchinson *Biography* 224).

While the last twenty-odd years of biographical research has enabled Larsen scholars to more thoroughly identify the autobiographical elements contained in *Quicksand,* at the time of the novel’s publication, critics could only allude to correlations between the
mysterious writer and her protagonist. Throughout her short career, interviewers invariably remarked upon Larsen’s mixed-race parentage in a seeming attempt to entice readers with suggestions of autobiographical correlation. In an interview for the *New Amsterdam New York News* entitled “New Author Unearthed Right Here in Harlem,” interviewer Thelma Berlack noted that “Madame X” has a “Danish West Indian” father, a white mother, and family in Denmark—biographical tidbits not only in accord with Larsen’s promotional biography, but also provocatively similar to the background of Helga Crane. In this same interview, Berlack describes the author’s living room in terms that echo Larsen’s description of Helga Crane’s room at Naxos: with its “vari-colored pillows, paintings, books and more books, flowers, large and small vases,” Larsen’s living quarters have “the air of a Greenwich Village studio” (335). Even Larsen’s “educational career”—“A high school education in Chicago, one year at Fisk University in Nashville, and three years at the University of Copenhagen in Denmark”—places Larsen in three of the five settings through which her protagonist travels (her current residence in Harlem, of course, brought that count up to four). Under Berlack’s pen, Larsen emerges an elegant, bohemian, and irreverent “modern woman” in many ways resembling her protagonist. As this interview appeared in direct response to the recent publication of *Quicksand*—in a time when writers were stars, and interesting new books (especially by Negro authors) generated public excitement and intrigue—readers familiar with the major plot points of Larsen’s first novel could not miss the autobiographical insinuations present throughout Berlack’s characterization. This “New Author Unearthed” looked and acted a lot like her own Helga Crane. This resemblance, without a doubt, did (and does) encourage readers to look within Helga’s perspective for insight into Larsen’s own viewpoint upon the common communities of their experience.
“Helga is typical of the new, honest, young fighting Negro woman” Du Bois claimed in his celebratory review of *Quicksand* (187), yet Helga’s trajectory did not match anyone’s script for this New Negro woman. Her decision to leave the hypocritical Harlem elite for a “primitive flock” (120) of rural folk in Alabama failed to deliver the positive depictions of the Negro middle class or folk called upon by any of the diverse camps of the New Negro generation. Helga’s final destination among this uneducated and unsophisticated Southern “flock” not only fails to conform to the script for the upwardly-bound New Negro woman—in fact, Helga seems to follow the script backwards. The changes that take place within Helga prove too extreme for many: as one reviewer remarked, “If she was at all the young woman of the first of the book, she cannot be the older woman of the latter half” (Walton 192). At the beginning of the novel, Helga sits in her room at Naxos, clad in gorgeous green silks, surrounded by books, patterned pillows, and oriental rugs: a distinctly bohemian elegance of her own making. The path that leads from this introductory scene, did not, could not possibly, end up in a cabin in rural Alabama.

While the seeming backwardness of Helga’s narrative trajectory confounded the uplift-minded bourgeois set, to the younger set of New Negroes interested in more decadent, folk-oriented depictions of black life, Helga’s dismal experience and disillusionment with the rural Southern community of her final landing certainly fails to celebrate folkways as liberatory or fun. To the liberal Progressive-types hoping for a glimpse into authentic American life through the vision of that true American, the Negro, Helga’s perpetually conflicted and unanswered search for her ‘people’ fails to enable any such uncomplicated understanding of her racial identification or representational status. And for those hoping for an epic of “racial integration” from a mulatto supposedly in possession of some unique insight,
Helga’s experience of objectification and rejection throughout a dizzyingly diverse collection of communities shattered any hopes that “interracial mediation” would prove an effective strategy for breaking boundaries built on absolutes.

“She could neither conform, nor be happy in her unconformity,” Larsen writes of her protagonist (7), and as Helga, belabored by a “sorry, unchildlike childhood” (46) of racist rejection much like Larsen’s own, travels from community to community in search of an ever-elusive sense of belonging, her sojourns among a vast variety of black and white societies convince her only of the perpetual impossibility of her belonging to any of them.

When the death of Helga’s Dutch mother, the only member of Helga’s “hostile” white family sympathetic to the “unloved little Negro girl” (23), results in her placement at a training school for colored children, Helga’s initial sense of belonging among other the dark-skinned children deteriorates under her realization the other girls have families that Helga does not. This discovery leaves the young protagonist “horribly lonely” (24). When Helga gets a job teaching at the Tuskegee-inspired Naxos, she learns that “Negro society [...] was as complicated and as rigid in its ramifications as the highest strata of white society” (8), with standards demanding, among other things, respectable ancestral lineage for membership. Helga, lacking this pedigree, resentfully resigns her position and begins in earnest her search for “[s]ome place where at last she would be permanently satisfied [...], where she would be appreciated, understood” (57).

Her search takes her to the upper echelons of Harlem society, where initially Helga finds comfort and community among her tasteful and politically-minded friends. Yet, soon fed up with what she perceives as a hypocritical and essentially self-hating uplift ethos, “in fierce rebellion” Helga decides that she does not, “in spite of her racial markings, belong to
these dark segregated people” (55). Continuing her search for that elusive “something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (55), she takes a ship to Copenhagen in hopes of finding acceptance among her Dutch family. In a pattern that by this point has become quite familiar to the reader, Helga feels initially satisfied in Copenhagen, thinking it “her proper setting” where she can at last heal “the spiritual wounds of the past” (67); yet as her enjoyment of the attention lavished upon her “exotic” appearance turns into resentment for her status as a curio, Helga realizes that, while “attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, […] she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count” (70).

Feeling “homesick […] for Negroes” (92), Helga makes a disastrous return to Harlem, one which results in a humiliating romantic spurn that sends Helga wondering drunk into the rainy streets until she falls into a gutter. From here, at her lowest and most desperate yet, Helga drags herself into a nearby church—a scene which Larsen depicts in unabashedly primitive descriptions: “crazed creature(s)” participate in a “weird orgy” as “women [drag] themselves upon their knees or [crawl] over the floor like reptiles, sobbing and pulling their hair and tearing off their clothing” (114). Here, Helga first accepts God, and second, seduces the unkempt Reverend Pleasant Green. Driven by “a supreme aspiration toward the regaining of simple happiness, a happiness unburdened by the complexities of the lives she had known” (114), Helga marries the minister; “done with soul searching” (121), she joins his “primitive flock” in Alabama (120).

Here, in a tumble-down cabin, she has four children and nearly drowns in disillusionment and despair—until finally, after the life-threatening birth of her fourth child, Helga resolves that “in some way she was determined to get out of this bog into which she has strayed,”
Or—she would have to die. She couldn’t endure it. Her suffocation and shrinking loathing were too great. Not to be borne. Again. For she had to admit that this wasn’t new, this feeling of dissatisfaction, of asphyxiation. Something like it she had experienced before. In Naxos. In New York. In Copenhagen. They differed only in degree. (142)

Yet, when just one page later Larsen provides her final report of Helga Crane, the reader learns that such escape cannot occur for Helga: within months, she has become pregnant yet again, and the cycle of pregnancy, birth, pain, and children that has entrapped Helga in Alabama continues. It seems that, no matter where she goes or who she becomes, Helga Crane will never escape her quicksand of dissatisfaction, rejection, and longing.

Rural Alabama represents the absolute lowest point in Helga’s descent, the place from which, despite her most desperate attempts to find happiness, Helga will never escape. While the state of Helga’s final residency proved offensively backwards to those calling for depictions of upwardly-mobile middle-class respectability, neither did Larsen’s portrait of the rural folk honor them as viable wellsprings of authentic black culture, as some of the younger New Negro writers, such as Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, and Zora Neale Hurston, aimed to accomplish in their own works.

Helga’s fate, then, did not sit well with critics from either pole of the New Negro movement, and it seems Larsen had no intention of pleasing either the conservative or liberal schools of thought. Even tragedies often offer some silver lining, an uplifting lesson, an answer to hard questions. The tragedy of Helga Crane, however, offers only perpetual inconclusiveness, a lingering desire to belong that will not be fulfilled. At each juncture in which a woman such as Helga—or, by implication, Larsen—could conceivably find com-
munity, at each site in which her wide variety of readers might imagine a mixed-race woman of refinement could find a comfortable home, only partial membership materializes. The impossibility of full membership among any one of the diverse peoples Helga encounters—communities that, outside of the final Alabama setting, bear remarkable similarities to the societies of Larsen’s own intermingling—represents not Larsen’s authorial inability to draw a neat conclusion, as most critics insisted. Instead, I contend, Helga’s unending occupation of the border, her inescapable place between the (color- and class-) lines, speaks meaningfully of the ambiguity that Larsen perceived as her own experience. In short, Larsen’s “answer” was that there was none. Whatever the conclusions critics hoped to find for this refined mulatto protagonist so much like the author herself, the unresolved problems they found instead proved difficult to accept.

“White folk will not like this book,” Du Bois predicted; “It is not near nasty enough for New York columnists. It is too sincere for the South and middle West” (187). Yet while the majority of reviewers found the ending of *Quicksand* to be the novel’s downfall, Du Bois—one of Larsen’s most powerful literary champions—read the novel’s finale positively, finding in Larsen’s protagonist an undying dignity. “There is no ‘happy ending’ and yet the theme is not defeatist,” wrote Du Bois; “Helga Crane sinks at last still master of her whimsical, unsatisfied soul. In the end she will be beaten down even to death but she will never utterly surrender to hypocrisy and convention” (187). Interestingly, however, the quality that Du Bois perceived as dignity, Helga herself interprets as a personality flaw. Helga’s ability to see through the false conventions of others—the incisive gaze Du Bois found so appealing in this character—Helga internalizes as a masochistic perversity of her personality, a self-inflicted alienation, a consequence of her own making, as Helga comes to
regard herself as the source of her unhappiness. “There was something else, some other more ruthless force, a quality within herself, which was frustrating her, had always frustrated her, kept her from getting the things she had wanted,” she muses (11, emphasis mine), and as she points the finger towards her own heart, she suffers perhaps the ugliest consequence of the community borders that have shut her out.

Helga does not utterly surrender—in that point Du Bois is correct: trapped ever irreparably by her children at the novel’s end, she nonetheless continues to dream of escape. Yet, the cost of her undying fight proves high. Helga’s perceptiveness, her insight into the realities of her partial memberships, her refusal to play the demeaning roles expected from her, finally gain her nothing among societies in which she “didn’t at all count” (70)—societies in which, inevitably, she doesn’t care to count.

What does it mean that the world can offer no home to Helga Crane? In the midst of the New Negro movement so determined to lay claim to a space in America for black people, in the midst of an unprecedented white interest in the uniquely American Truth that only a black person could tell, readers didn’t want to believe that, for some people of color, no such place existed for them in America—much less abroad. However, Helga—like Larsen—knows this homelessness well, having learned it in her “sorry, unchildlike childhood” so similar to Larsen’s own, and again during each unsatisfying stint among new people. “She saw herself as an obscene sore in all their lives, at all costs to be hidden,” Helga thinks; “She understood, even while she resented. It would have been easier if she had not” (29). Perhaps the most tragic aspect of the novel proves Helga’s ability to identify with the motives of her own rejection, and the turning of this rejection into blame upon herself.
In *Quicksand*, Helga represents too many things to too many people. The complexity of her identity—her hybridity—prohibits her admission into social circles that demand at least the appearance of cultural purity. While Helga’s “assertion of multiple identities does not entail a destruction of all identities, but an insistence on the right to claim one’s true self” (Brennan 3), no community of Helga’s dalliance allows such multiplicity from its members. Indeed, it is that very multiplicity that results in Helga’s inability to fully belong anywhere. A “meaningful personal identity depends on a strong connection with a sympathetic community,” argues Pfeiffer (109), and as Helga finds that her hybridity prohibits her acceptance into any of the communities in which she sojourns, she ultimately feels identity-less, lost, alone, and indeed, guilty for her inability to fully conform. Helga understands herself to be many things—Negro, white, Dutch, American. Yet, in a culture saturated with narratives of racial essentialism claiming racial incompatibility to a biological level, Helga’s self-blame suggests her own internalization of these essentialist narratives, as even she find herself to be an aberration, flawed in the face of a natural order she cannot fit. Helga cannot exist as she really is, for she is made up of too many things—there are no words to name her, no space for her existence, and so she disappears into the narrative through a slow and inevitable suffocation, as the evocative title suggests.

At a time when representations of blacks as Americans with a claim to American identity was at a premium, Helga Crane’s story instead reveals the insidious contingencies of a diverse collection of American identities, uncovering at once the illusion of a single coherent American character, as well as the myth that America offers a place for all of its citizens. Larsen targets a dazzlingly wide array of potential communities, and at each turn she burns their idols. When she finally ends her novel with her protagonist on the verge of
spiritual and literal death in an old Alabama cabin, Larsen pleases no school of thought. This mixed race protagonist and her mixed race author, women of sophistication and education upon whom great charges of responsible representation and interracial mediation was placed, finally offer no solutions.

The Problem of Passing

While not as closely correlated with the facts of Larsen’s life as her first novel, “Larsen wrote much of her psychological life” into Passing (Davis 296), imbuing elements of herself both into Irene Redfield and Clare Kendry, the “complex doubles” (Hutchinson Biography 294) around which the novel spins. Narrated from Irene’s perspective, Passing explores the fraught encounters between “the race-conscious Puritan” Irene Redfield, a member of the Harlem elite who “enjoys social prominence and material comforts, all within the boundaries of racially designated spaces for African Americans” (Davis 308), and her now-‘passing’ friend from childhood and “lonesome hedonist” Clare Kendry (Du Bois “Passing” 98), the daughter of a no-good drunk Negro janitor who, when “brutally kicked into the white world” (Du Bois 98), marries a (racist) white man clueless to her true racial origins, and spends her adult life passing within wealthy white society.

When an unexpected encounter between the two women ignites in Clare a persistent yearning for black people, she begins an increasingly avid pursuit of colored society through the mediation of her friend and reluctant black contact, Irene. Her complicity with Clare’s racial trespasses causes increasing discomfort for Irene, beginning first as an conflicted sense of racial loyalty: “It’s a funny thing about ‘passing,’” Irene muses and then adds, “We disapprove of it and at the same time condone it. It excites our contempt and yet
we rather admire it. We shy away from it with an odd kind of revulsion, but we protect it” (39). Yet as Clare’s trips to Harlem grow more frequent, Irene’s unease turns towards the safety of her own social position and marriage, as she fears that the reckless Clare Kendry holds the power to shatter her carefully-made world. Irene places a premium on propriety and the security it promises. Clare, on the other hand, courts danger in order to pursue her desires—“I’m used to risks,” she tells Irene (48)—and this reckless nature, Irene begins to suspect, makes Clare “capable of heights and depths of feeling that she, Irene Redfield, had never known. Indeed, never cared to know” (47). Just as Irene begins to fear that Clare’s intense feelings have found their mark upon her husband, her distress ratchets yet higher when Clare admits that “to get the things I want badly enough, I’d do anything, hurt anybody, throw anything away” (58). Now realizing the “dark truth” about Clare: “that she got the things she wanted because she met the great condition of conquest, sacrifice” (Larsen 77), Irene resolves to rid herself of Clare one way or another, although she knows not how.

Irene’s tortured and ever-unresolved deliberations reach their pinnacle at an ill-fated high-rise Harlem cocktail party. Clare, having once again begged inclusion into another Negro soiree, smokes a cigarette next to the window as she enjoys herself yet again at a Harlem party. Just then, her enraged white husband barges in, having somehow made the discovery of his wife’s secret excursions. “So you’re a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!” he bellows—yet Clare, in all her characteristic gallantry, remains “as composed as if […] her life were not lying in fragments before her […] unaware of any danger […] even a faint smile upon her full, red lips, and in her shining eyes.” This smile “madden[s]” Irene. She runs toward Clare, and with “terror tinged with ferocity,” lays her hand on Clare’s arm. “What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself to remember. Never
clearly,” Larsen writes (79); neither will the reader be privy to an explicit narration of the fatal events. Clare’s fall from the heights of a Harlem apartment to her death in the white snow below occurs so quickly, so unexpectedly, that for the reader as well as Irene it seems that “One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone” (79). “Quickest thing I ever saw in my life,” one party guest tells the police afterwards (81). As a shaken Irene tries to convince herself of her own innocence—“It was a terrible accident” she muttered fiercely, “It was” (80)—Larsen closes the novel by suggesting that no one, outside of perhaps the too-daring Clare, will be blamed: “‘Death by misadventure,’” the investigator determines. Within Irene’s psyche, everything goes dark (82).

This abrupt and unexpected ending vexed critics, marring an otherwise positive reception of what Du Bois termed “one of the finest novels of the year” (97). In much the same fashion that Quicksand’s challenging finale had prevented unadulterated critical praise of Larsen’s first novel, reception of her second novel was marked by a backlash against the novel’s apparently unbelievable conclusion—“a last act artfully led up to,” one reviewer conceded, although “We are not sure that, as piece of action, it is altogether credible” (Rennels 89). Most disapproving critics saw within Passing’s conclusion a too-neat disposal of the novel’s “problem,” Clare Kendry. This “sudden and utterly unconvincing close,” as one New York Times book reviewer wrote, “solves most of the problems that Miss Larsen has posed for herself by simply sweeping them out of existence through the engineered death of Clare Kendry” (Anonymous, “Beyond the Color Line” 87).

Such a reading, of course, depended upon the situation of Clare Kendry as “the problem,” the bringer of conflict and disruptor of Irene’s world. Accordingly, most contempo-
rary readers took for granted the author’s sympathy and subjective alignment with Irene. Such assumptions proved popular in 1929: “When the faker fell out of the seventh-story window,” as one reviewer wrote, “the problem was solved for Miss Larsen” (Rennels 86). Through the lens that situates Clare as “the problem,” the novel’s “dramatic climax lacks conviction” (Hyman 93)—the conflict that is Clare Kendry disappears too easily, too quickly, for readers to accept.

Indeed, contemporary critics tended to align Irene’s perspective with Larsen’s own, accepting tacitly the author’s sympathy with the novel’s narrative center. While readers found the autobiographical correlations in *Quicksand* hard to miss, lining up as they did with the few known facts of Larsen’s history, the autobiographical aspects of *Passing* proved more difficult to positively identify, the novel instead imbued with what biographer Thadious Davis would later characterize as a “psychological” truth (296). Not only did Larsen’s own occupation of the Harlem bourgeois of Irene’s company incite readers to align Irene’s perspective with Larsen’s own; moreover, the personal turmoil that surrounded Larsen’s composition of the novel caused more pointed correlations. During the composition of her second novel, Larsen became aware that her husband, renowned physicist and professor Elmer Imes, was engaging in an extramarital affair with his white colleague Ethel Gilbert. This affair soon became public knowledge, with Imes doing little to keep his activities secret. “This personal situation of a wife secretly fearful of the disintegration of her marriage and obsessively jealous of the ‘white’ beauty displacing her husband’s affections pervades the novel,” argues Davis (324), and once this affair became fully public during the Imes’ sensationalized divorce in 1933 (just four years after the publication of *Passing*), the public quickly seized upon Larsen’s second novel for potential traces of the scandal.
Wild rumors circulated regarding Larsen’s reaction to her husband’s infidelity. Some of these rumors enacted a retrograde refashioning of Larsen’s previously published novel with the current events of her life—for example, when Larsen broke her leg during a fall, a prominent African American newspaper (the Afro-American) ran the headline “Recall ‘Jump’ From Window” reporting that Larsen had “jumped or fallen out of a window and done herself bodily harm” (qtd. in Davis 407), a fate provocatively similar to that of her recent novel’s tragic star. Readers had always sought in Larsen’s fictions injections of her own life. Now, in a bizarre twist, the public now applied to her life the plotlines of her fictions. After the 1934 career-ending plagiarism scandal resulted in her (self-?) removal from Harlem, old acquaintances speculated that, like Clare Kendry, Larsen had ‘passed’ the color line (Davis 425, Hutchinson 462).

Yet while these later and more scandalous events of Larsen’s life resulted in a public association of the author with her reckless protagonist Clare, the initial reaction to Larsen’s second novel was marked by assumptions of Larsen’s identification with Irene, positioning Clare as “the problem” which Larsen holds in contempt. Some reviewers found fault with this supposed identification: the author shows a “lack of sympathy with a very real problem,” argues one reviewer, demanding that “Clare’s case is as real, and infinitely more deserving of compassion” (Hyman 94). Others fully endorse Irene’s contempt for Clare, and read this contempt as Larsen’s own: in a review acidly entitled “The Cat Came Back,” Aubrey Bowser first calls Clare a “serpent,” and next accuses the author of “succumb[ing] to the grudge that most Negroes have against a Negro who goes over the race line and cannot stay there. The grudge is justifiable,” writes Bowser, “for a person should either be one thing or the other, but it hampers the story teller” (95). Interestingly, however, critics also
resented being locked within Irene’s perspective, wanting instead a fuller view of the novel’s beautiful and tragic heroine; as one reviewer quipped, “we are impatient with Irene’s tortures because they cut off our view of Clare” (92). Suffice to say, at the time of the novel’s publication, most reviewers assumed that the author aligned herself with Irene—whether they approved of or enjoyed this alignment or not—and accordingly framed Clare as the novel’s “problem.”

The characterization of Clare-as-conflict proves unsurprising given the panic-stricken racial climate contemporary to the reception of Larsen’s novel. “By the early 1920s, about half the nation’s population was first- or second-generation immigrant, and in the big cities the proportion was still higher,” writes Ann Douglass (304), and this unprecedented influx of unfamiliar populations, paired with the New Negro effort to claim a stake in American culture, caused whites to fear the loss of their power in the face of immigrant or black takeover—or perhaps even worse, the dissolution of the “white race” as a whole through racial mixing. In the twenties, then, frantic measures were taken to preserve the color line. In 1920, the census dropped the category of “mulatto,” thus forcing respondents to “be one thing or another;” in the years to follow, the organization of so-called “Americanization” committees determined to restrict movement across racial lines, an unprecedented rise in lynchings (51 in 1922 alone), the sensational 1925 Rhinelander case implicating a ‘passing’ woman in the deceitful seduction of her supposedly hapless white husband, as well as the general media proliferation of articles about race detection and crimes of ‘passing’ (Kaplan xvi-xvi), bear witness to the rising panic that marked 1920s engagements with racial mixing. Perhaps, however, the following newspaper headlines most succinctly capture the nation’s mounting anxiety over racial trespassing: a July 1928 Philadel-
phia Tribune headline reads, “3,000 Negroes Cross the Line Each Year” (Anon 111); one year later, in July 1929, New York World announces that “Social and Economic Ambitions Lead Negroes to ‘Pass’ at Rate of 5,000 a Year” (Hahn 117); in August 1931, Outlook and Independent estimated that “nearly 10,000 persons of fractional Negro ancestry each year ‘cross the color line’” (Johnson 121); by December of that same year, The Afro-American took these numbers to their greatest heights yet, claiming that “75,000 Pass in Philadelphia Every Day” (Anon 123). ‘Passing’ was increasing at unbelievably exponential rates, these numbers suggested. Clearly, the anxiety was reaching a fever pitch in the minds of Americans, both black and white.

Viewed within this context, readerly perception of Clare Kendry as Passing’s “problem” comes as no surprise. Moreover, as the hysteria surrounding this supposedly out-of-control phenomenon suggested that passing was perceived as one of the most intractable problems in the United States, the readerly dissatisfaction with the quick and easy disposal of Clare lines up with the culture’s larger fears. Not only did Clare represent one of the most pressing problems in the nation—a problem feared by both whites and blacks alike, though certainly on different terms (as both of Larsen’s novels suggest)—furthermore, she was a problem that could not be eliminated so easily, readers insisted. The fact that Larsen may not have actually viewed Clare as “the problem”—that, perhaps, Larsen regarded Clare as a victim of much larger problems than herself, hemmed in (or rather, out) by the same fraught boundaries that plagued Helga Crane—seems to have not crossed the minds of most of her contemporary critics.

As an acclaimed mulatto artist of the New Negro movement, Larsen was expected to deliver more satisfying solutions to the racial problems plaguing the nation. Much in the
same way critics forced *Quicksand* into familiar patterns of understanding, when they did
find solutions within Larsen’s second novel, they found them only through interpretations
quite at odds with Larsen’s indictments of the color line. “Here is an excellent novel which
suggests that the ‘near whites’ always return to their own race for genuine happiness, com-
fort and understanding,” wrote one reviewer (Anonymous, “Do They Always Return?” 101),
as *Passing* functioned for many as a reification of racial essentialisms—if not, much like her
first novel, largely an assimilative effort to prove likenesses between whites and blacks.

Yet the quick disposal of Clare Kendry, her sudden and violent removal from the
narrative, fails to offer the answers expected from this talented mulatto New Negro novel-
ist. As one reviewer astutely surmised, “The sad fact is that the status of the half-caste is not
a problem but a dilemma. The writer has no solution to suggest, though she passionately
resents the injustice of this fact” (Anonymous, “The Dilemma of Mixed Race” 88). However,
unlike this insightful reviewer, most contemporary critics found Larsen’s presentation of
this endless dilemma an artistic deficiency rather than a deliberate statement. For Larsen,
it seems, the dilemma which many hoped she and her generation could unwind proved im-
possible to solve—hence, her novel’s persistently unsolvable conclusion.

While the too-easy removal of Clare Kendry proved the prime critical complaint
among Larsen’s contemporaries, the emphatically-inconclusive death scene at the end of
*Passing* has occupied significant critical attention in more recent years. “The contemporary
scholarly archive on *Passing* is virtually unified in its belief that her [Irene’s] paranoid ap-
prehensions can be submitted to a proper reading that will furnish the positive knowledge
Irene systematically misses” writes Brian Carr in 2004 (282), and indeed Bernard Bell
(110), Deborah McDowell (xxix), Cheryl Wall (131), and Jonathan Little (174) have en-
gaged in the quest to determine “what really happens” at the end of Larsen’s second novel (all finally agree on Irene’s culpability in Clare’s demise)—a quest that mimics in micro-
cosm the larger critical investment in unwinding the mysteries of Larsen’s own life. Like the details of her own hotly debated biography, the “real” circumstances of Clare Kendry’s death, it seems to many critics, lurk just beneath the surface, waiting only to be unveiled by the proper decoding. Yet while most of the critical work on *Passing*, according to Brian Carr, borders on “paranoia” in its persistent search for the supposed facts beneath the mystery, the circumstances of Clare’s death finally prove impossible to ascertain—*Passing* “confounds something with nothing, truth with what at best can be only half told” (282). As Claudia Tate powerfully surmises:

> *Passing*’s conclusion defies simple solution. I cannot resolve this problem by accepting a single explanation, since Larsen [...] deliberately withheld crucial information that would enable me to arrive at a conclusion [...]. Although I am unable to determine Irene’s complicity in Clare’s death, this dilemma is neither a deterrent to appreciating Larsen’s meticulous narrative control nor an evasion of my critical responsibility. [...] In fact, my inability to arrive at a conclusion in and of itself attests to Larsen’s consummate skill in dramatizing psychological ambiguity. I realize that this critical posture is not a popular one. Of course, I could insist, as many critics have done, that Irene pushed Clare out of that window. [...] But to do so would be forcing the work to fit the demands of critical expectations rather than allowing the work to engender meaningful critical response. (Tate 349)
Without a doubt, critics across generations have long sought from Larsen difficult answers, and when these answers have not materialized, have either forced her works into incompatible rubrics, or simply found her works lacking in artistry and vision. Just as Helga’s perpetual lack of fulfillment evinces not an authorial mistake or character personality flaw but instead exposes from the perspective of the perpetual interloper an discomforting response to the optimistic myths of American belonging, so the ambiguous ending of *Passing* makes meaning rather than obscures it—the meaning made, however, continues to prove difficult to swallow for many. “The question in this mystery is not ‘Who killed Clare Kendry?’ but why did Larsen decline to represent the act itself? Why did she keep the ‘truth’ sequestered?” asks Hutchinson (*Biography* 301); yet in Larsen’s refusal to assign blame, in her insistence upon implicating all parties involved in the “conspiracy of silence and blindness” towards the circumstances of Clare’s death, in her revelation that her death will be judged merely a “misadventure” implicating only Clare’s own recklessness in her demise, Larsen does not sequester the truth but rather insists that upon a rather ugly one: that when “the woman on the boundary is done away with, thereby securing the boundary, no one will be at fault” (Hutchinson *Biography* 311)—except, of course, the border-woman herself.

*Passing’s* title, referring not only to the process of racial passing but also to its colloquial meaning of “death,” much like the title of Larsen’s earlier *Quicksand* suggests the subject’s disappearance in the narrative. As Clare’s death signifies the impossibility of the existence of a person who cannot fit on one or the other side of a segregationist society, everyone is potentially guilty, yet all go unpunished, her death attributed only to a fateful “misadventure.” By implicating Irene (representative of the black bourgeois), Bellew, (the
white racist), and Clare herself (the suicidal interloper) as potentially-guilty but finally-blameless parties in the demise of Clare Kendry, Larsen suggest the complicity of these disparate communities in the suppression of the mixed-race woman for whom no quarter is offered. Despite passing as white, the secret of her blackness keeps Clare from ever fully belonging to white society; despite the myth that her one drop of “black blood” makes her a Negro, Clare never belongs among black society, either. Her existence confounds essentialist conceptions of race, as “biologically” black, she cannot be black; seemingly white, she cannot be white; so she is quietly and blamelessly eliminated, her death judged a mere twist of fate.

**Conclusion**

In both eras of her literary flower—that is to say, the time of her contemporary fame in the late 1920s and her revival in the 1970s—the nature of Larsen’s identity has been wrestled with, misunderstood, and claimed under contradictory allegiances. In what would prove to be a tenacious framework for understanding the author, New Negroes called her a bourgeois exemplar—despite her critiques of the black bourgeois. In the 1970s and beyond, most characterized her as a “black” author writing a “black” woman’s experience—despite Larsen’s emphasis on her own and her protagonists’ racial hybridity. The nature of this mysterious author has changed along with the needs of the discourse community dissecting her life and work.

Much like the 1920s of Larsen’s initial fame, the era that ushered in Larsen’s reemergence onto the literary scene was one deeply invested in identity politics. As feminist and multicultural scholars undertook the work of recovering silenced voices, Larsen,
the one-time star of the New Negro Movement, was classified as a "black writer" and her work published and disseminated in this interest in recovery. Within this cultural climate, as feminists of color challenged traditions of silence and shame by celebrating the perspectives of their foremothers, Larsen's racial and cultural ambiguity mattered less than her embodiment of a black female experience.

More recently, in the wake of postmodernism, Larsen has come to be viewed as a border figure, shifting in and out of social spaces without ever really belonging, a testament to the constructedness of seemingly natural social categories. Within this framework, Larsen's texts illustrate how communities construct a limited number of reasonable identities which members may perform—and those that fail to perform within these paradigms are named sick, insane, wrong, liars. When an individual does not fit into already-established categories of legitimate identity, we don't know how to speak of them, where to place them in discourse or in culture. The mixed-race protagonists in Larsen's novels cannot be named as they are, but are instead offered models of being which never really fit. And yet, even when Larsen's protagonists attempt to conform, they never truly belong. The stain of their repressed difference prohibits full membership into communities built on exclusiveness. When politically useful, marginal identities such as Larsen's own can be deployed to any number of diverse ends, their public persona configured in the shape of the person that will best further the cause.
CHAPTER 2.

“NOT A JEWESS AND NOT A GENTILE”: CATEGORIZING ANZIA YEZIERSKA

Although classified as fiction, Anzia Yezierska’s novels and short stories gained an immediate reputation as autobiographical, her tortured tales of upward struggle and assimilation offering an insider’s glimpse into life in the Jewish tenements of Hester Street. Named the “mouthpiece of New York’s Jewish East Side” by influential literary critic and Yale professor William Lyon Phelps (qtd in Ferraro 53), Yezierska “dipped her pen in her heart and wrote” the stories of her immigrant people (Frank Crane qtd in Henriksen 149). From her earliest writings throughout the brief flower of her literary career, critics found in her nitty-gritty depictions an unadorned truth passionately detailed. Throughout the 1920s, the publicity that accompanied Yezierska’s works—in the form of interviews, articles, and reviews—implied, if not outright asserted, that her stories and novels contained not merely fictional depictions but rather barely-disguised events of Yezierska’s own experience. Critics expounded upon her lack of restraint, her defiance of literary conventions, her “over-emotionalism” (Roberts 358), her untrained honesty. In short, finding no artistry in Yezierska’s tales, critics found instead an apparently contrasting authenticity, her works valued most highly for the insight they offered into the mysterious and exotic world of the Jewish immigrant.

Aware that notions of autobiographic authenticity might increase the marketability of her long-rejected manuscripts, Yezierska herself participated in the promotion of this autobiographical authorial image. Overburdened mothers shouting curses at unwanted children; Old World fathers muttering condemnations against their rebellious American daughters; conflicted immigrant girls sacrificing the traditions of their forbears in ex-
change for nicer clothes, cleaner rooms, if not clearer heads—these characters, so emphatically depicted throughout Yezierska’s tales, appealed to a largely-WASP readership eager for a glimpse into the strange worlds of marginal American peoples.

In contrast to (relatively) recent feminist scholarship that prizes Yezierska’s work for (among other things) its subversive undercutting of the very myths of upward mobility her contemporary readers found her works to promote, on the whole her contemporary audience found celebration rather than defamation of the American Dream within her short stories and novels. Called “The Sweatshop Cinderella” in newspapers and popular magazines, this up-from-the-ghetto author seemed to embody the American Dream her heroines continuously pursue, her successes and those of her protagonists testifying to the promise of class transcendence and middle-class cultural acceptance through hard work and education. When combined with the perceived authenticity of her texts, Yezierska’s depictions of scrappy young women winning middle-class respectability reinforced for many the belief that the American Dream did indeed come true: this immigrant, just like the first pilgrims, sought on American shores freedom from European tyranny, and America provided. “Yezierska’s American career originally flourished because what she had to say about the colorful aspects of East European Jewish immigrant life on the Lower East Side fit—or seemed to fit—the need of the dominant, native-born, idealistic Anglo-Saxon class to see its own benevolence mirrored in the aspirations and achievements of newcomers,” Laura Wexler writes (qtd in Jirousek 35), as for many, Yezierska’s stories seemed to suggest that, with the right attitude, even the most greenhorn immigrant could become an American.
The price of assimilation, a process that Yezierska often calls “making myself for a person,” included a willingness to work difficult and dangerous low-level jobs, resist playful diversions, and acquire an education in the meantime. The responsibility of class ascension resided with the immigrant, who must only supply the will. Yet “[t]he road to becoming a person lay through the dangerous territory of Americanization,” reminds Alice Kessler-Harris (“Introduction” xxxi), and the complexly conflicted nature of this process—the ever-backward-glancing, burdened, eternally-alienated homelessness and self-doubt that characterizes Yezierska’s heroines march towards Americanization—failed to receive the publicity or celebration that the rags-to-riches elements of her stories garnered. Despite the dark mixture of anger, regret, and desire churning beneath her characters’ upward struggles, an idealistic WASP readership found it difficult to see beyond the promotional persona: “A struggling young immigrant woman writer breaks away from the filth and grime of the ghetto, turns her back on the backwards ways of her domineering old world father who refuses to recognize her personal aspirations, dips her pen into her heart, and writes stories about Lower East Side tenement life that lift her from sweatshop to stardom” (Zierler 415)—what could be more American?

As a bona-fide immigrant success story, an actual “Girl Come Up from Despair” (as the Literary Digest called her in 1923), Yezierska emerged in the public eye as an emblem of untutored earnestness whose initial outsider status and lack of American pedigree made her supposed celebrations of Americanization all the more believable. As reviewers variously characterized her work as “sentimental, illogical, hysterical, and naïve” (New York Tribune qtd in Henriksen 180), they nonetheless praised the voyeuristic glimpses her unrestrained, over-emotional, and thus apparently authentic “no style”-style provided. As Wil-
liam Lyon Phelps wrote in response to her most enduringly-popular novel, the 1925 *Bread Givers*,

She writes about life, not as a reporter, observer, social student, slummer, or reformer, but as one who has lived it before describing it. [...] She has, in one sense of the word, no literary style; you do not see her people through curiously stained glass, or through a magnifying lens. [...] One does not seem to read; one is too completely inside. (719)

In short, most critics valued Yezierska’s texts not for their literary merit, but instead as sociological documents offering insight into the exotic realm of Eastern European Jews in America. As one *New York Times* book reviewer most succinctly surmised in 1923, “her gift is not creative; she is reporter and an autobiographer rather than a fiction writer” (qtd in Henriksen 200). While a few notable exceptions did regard her writing as literary—Phelps, for example, asserted that “in point of literary workmanship [...] the superior of Miss Yezierska has not appeared”—nonetheless, the admiration for the insight her works provided into her foreign culture—what Phelps termed the “laying bare the very souls of her characters” (qtd in Henriksen 144)—was the popular critical opinion of the 1920s.

Following years of massive immigration, the 1920s was a decade fraught with issues of American identity and cultural ownership, a period characterized by unprecedented racial and ethnic tensions manifesting in the form of xenophobic immigration restrictions, racial segregation, and mounting Anglo-centric nativism. Yet, somewhat perversely, this same decade of xenophobic fear also produced a voyeuristic urge to catch a glimpse inside the lives of these fearsome yet intriguing foreigners, an act of sociological gazing-for-entertainment-and-edification Lori Jirousek calls “spectacle ethnography.” “The reader of
immigrant texts desires ‘realistic’ facts and ‘true’ stories,” writes Magdalena Zaborowska (56), and Yezierska’s insider accounts seemed to provide just such insight into the very hearts and minds of these mysterious ghetto folk.

This critical lens—the dismissal of Yezierska’s work as actual “literature” and the contrasting celebration of her work as ethnographically-insightful—has demonstrated a long shelf-life. Not only did her contemporaries regard her work as less-than-artistic documentation, but much of the relatively recent scholarship following her 1970s revival continued the trend. As recently as 2002, Delia Konzett names Joyce Carol Oates, Alice Kessler-Harris, Louise Levitas Henriksen (Yezierska’s daughter/biographer), and Alice Dearborn as prominent recent scholars that, to some degree, “continue to regard her as a patriotic assimilationist who wrote sincere but technically deficient short stories and novels in a poor and broken English” (20).

In the 1990s, however, critics began to interrogate this popular interpretation. In his influential 1993 study of Yezierska’s works, Thomas Ferraro describes the tenacity of this popular characterization of the author:

The reception, both laudatory and skeptical, of Y’s prose has been almost entirely a function of the cult of Lower East Side authenticity that enveloped her in the 1920s and continues to frame our portrait of her. [...] It was not the immigrant fiction that commanded attention, then, but the immigrant writer herself: Y as the unassimilated ‘Russian Jewess,’ fairy-godmothered into professional authorship as if she had not left the Lower East Side at all. (54)

“[R]ecent scholarship often approaches immigrant women’s texts as basically documents registering the ethnic history of America,” Zaborowska noted in 1995 (22)—
Yezierska’s work, it seemed, had fallen victim to a larger phenomenon of selective literary discrediting. Critics certainly found it hard to read Yezierska’s texts outside of this framework of ethnography, and they found it even more vexing to consider her work art. Ferraro describes the persistence of this ethnography-versus-art dynamic in the scholarship of the post-1970s revival:

Both in print and off-the-record conversation, scholars have continued to testify to Yezierska’s unparalleled capacity to speak for Russian Jewish women, especially the generation of immigrants, only to qualify their enthusiasm by affirming some version of the long-standing judgment on her fiction: it may be important history, but it’s not really literature. (59)

While Konzett recognizes Ferraro, Zaborowska, Gay Wilentz, and Katherine Stubbs as scholars “now challenging the traditional view of Yezierska as an untutored writer documenting the life of her immigrant community” (21), in both Yezierska’s own time as well as in recent years, the ethnographic insight her works provided, not their artistic merit, has justified literary consideration of these otherwise apparently inconsiderable books. Indeed, it was not Yezierska’s work, but rather Yezierska herself—the American Cinderella, the immigrant made “person”—that drove public interest in the new author. “Tied into this sense that she was writing without ‘style,’ was the illusion she created that she was just describing what was going on in her own life,” writes Bettina Berch (location 2287), and intertwined with the popular respect for Yezierska’s authenticity was the general consensus that her “fictions” in fact spoke the truth. The publicity that marked Yezierska’s entry into fame began slowly at first with accolades for her 1919 Best Short Story Award-winner, “The Fat of the Land,” and skyrocketed a few years later when Hollywood reversed her
hard luck into instant wealth. The tenor of this publicity remained, throughout her decade of fame, concerned more with the author’s personal history than with the stories she became famous for crafting. Most frequently her introduction-writers, interviewers, and reviewers remarked upon the elements of her life that best reflected a marketable tale of hard-scrabble upward mobility and American Dreams delivered.

One of Yezierska’s earliest publicity pieces, an essay entitled “The Immigrant Speaks,” published in the June 1920 edition of *Good Housekeeping* and written by Yezierska herself, is one such example of the media’s tendency to emphasize and encourage a certain marketable narrative of the author’s life. The brief introduction to “The Immigrant Speaks,” most likely written by an anonymous *Good Housekeeping* copywriter, steers the reader’s understanding of this new Jewish author away from any potentially troubling aspects of the featured essay, and toward an interpretation more in line with the American success story being promoted. What could better prove the viability of the American Dream than the immigrant’s own heartfelt expression of the tale, after all?

The anonymous staff writer’s introduction of the new author to the readership of *Good Housekeeping* painted a familiar portrait of Yezierska: the hard-scrabble immigrant reaps the fruits of American opportunity abundantly offered to those willing to earn their share. Her dedication and bravery evince her American spirit; her successes are *American* successes. After first recounting the keen poverty, cruel sweatshops, and Old World oppression that stalked Yezierska’s childhood, the staff writer proclaims, “It is to her credit and the credit of American opportunity that she nursed her longing, got her education, and finally won an enviable distinction as a writer” (Anon, Intro to “The Immigrant” 20). Yezierska’s triumphs are America’s triumphs, this author suggests; they prove not only her
own determination, but moreover of America’s righteous square-dealing with foreigners. “GOOD HOUSEKEEPING is glad to give this recognition to *an American of foreign birth*”, the staff writer concludes (Anon, Intro to “The Immigrant” 20, emphasis mine), as in this one final phrase, the author claims for America the spirit of the courageous immigrant.

“When the editor told me that he would give me the chance to speak to the Americans out of my heart and say freely, not what I ought to feel—not what the Americans want me to feel—but what I actually do feel—something broke loose in me,” Yezierska begins, making the (solicited) truthfulness of the essay the first line of authorial disclosure. As she testifies to the editorial injunction to tell the truth—or, as she describes it, the “chance to speak to the Americans […] what I actually do feel” (emphasis mine)—Yezierska’s introductory assurance of her emotional honesty, and, most notably, the direct editorial request for just such emotional honesty, rather succinctly reflects the contemporary taste for and marketability of these authentic tales from exotic people—especially when those tales reflected well upon an audience of “older lineage” (Anon, Intro to “The Immigrant” 20). However, what Yezierska “really did feel”—what would “break loose” in the pages to follow—did not always line up with the public persona promoted in the introduction above. As she laments in her conclusion, “the immigrant you see before you—starved, stunted, resentful, and the verge of hysteria from repression” will not become a productive citizen, “loving, serving, upholding” America, until the myth of the “Golden Land” actually reflects the realities beneath the veneer (Yezierska, “The Immigrant” 21).

“The Immigrant Speaks” paints a much darker picture of America than its rather saccharine staff introduction anticipates. “Wonderful tales had come from remote America to the Jews in Eastern Europe, even to the most far-flung towns and villages where no rail-
ways ran,” writes Harry Golden (10), and expectations of a Golden Land where Freedom and Equality reigned supreme animated the hopes of many desperate Jews fleeing the pogroms of Eastern Europe. Yezierska was no exception; she arrived on America's shores, like most, with high expectations. “The Immigrant Speaks” narrates the process of her disillusionment.

In this piece, Yezierska indicts America for rejecting and repressing immigrants, demands that the nation rise up to meet its ideals and international image, and boldly asserts the immigrant’s cultural ownership of the national spirit—all in a time in which tensions over national identity and cultural ownership were nearing a boiling point. As she “rushed forward with hungry eagerness to meet the expected welcome” of America’s open arms, Yezierska instead encountered rejection and dehumanizing exploitation: “I held out my bare hands to America [...] But no hand was held out to meet mine” she writes (21), as hunger drove her into sweatshops “to become a ‘hand’—not a brain—not a soul—not a spirit—but just a ‘hand’” (21). Rather than the Golden Land of opportunity that animated her pre-immigration hopes, Yezierska finds instead a nation “where men make other men poor—create poverty where God has poured out wealth” (21)—an America she “refuse[s] to accept” (21). Calling out instead for “my America” (21, emphasis mine), an America that matches “the beauty that for hundreds of years, in thousands of starved villages in Europe, men have dreamed was America” (21), Yezierska fails to play thankful immigrant recipient of American opportunity; she fails to celebrate or even accept America as it stands; she insists upon molding the nation to fit the dreams of the immigrants rather than molding the immigrant’s dreams to fit the reality of the nation; she claims the nation as her own, and her people’s own.
“I know you will say what right have I to come here and make demands upon America,” she concludes, “[b]ut are not my demands the breath, the very life of America? What, after all, is America, but the response to demands of immigrants like me, seeking new worlds in which their spirits may be free to create beauty?” (21). Here, Yezierska not only details the disparities between American myths and realities, she furthermore makes a bold claim of immigrant ownership of the American spirit in an era ripe with xenophobia and Anglo-centric nationalistic sentiment. “The roots of America, she claims, paradoxically lie in the alienating experience of uprootedness and not in an invented traditional of Anglo-American nationalism,” writes Konzett (23), and the essay, then, tells no easy success story, no celebration of America as an enabler of the immigrant’s triumph, no easy call for assimilation. Under Yezierska’s pen, the U.S. instead emerges as a broken idol in desperate need of repair, a backwards-glancing nation unable to see that its future lies in the immigrants who most deeply embody its founding principles. What to make, then, of the discrepancy between the actual content of her essay and the introduction so apparently oblivious to the indictments held below?

Clearly, “it was the image of an ‘authentic’ ethnicity projecting American ideals of self-determination, hard work, and success that captured the hearts of the public” (Konzett 20), and this image truly gained traction in December 1920, when popular syndicated newspaper columnist Frank Crane wrote an article declaring the author the national authority on immigration in America. “I got a new slant on America from Anzia Yezyierska [sic],” Crane begins,

She walked into my office one day and brought the Old World with her. She had not said three words before I saw farther into the heart of Russia and Po-
land than I had ever been able to do by reading many heavy books. She was Poland. [...] Here was a person. Here was an East Side Jewess that had struggled and suffered in desperate battle for life amid the swarms of New York. [...] From a sweatshop worker to a famous writer! All because she dipped her pen in her heart. (qtd. in Henriksen 149)

Calling Yezierska “God’s stenographer,” charging her with the “passion of a Christian martyr or a Moslem fanatic,” Crane finally concludes, “Let no man or woman dare to speak or write on immigration that has not read ‘Hungry Hearts.’ I have laughed and cried over it, and lay it down a bit awed, as if I had seen an alien people’s naked soul” (qtd. in Henriksen 149). With this seemingly impulsively-penned, quickly-published, and widely-read article—a piece “very much in line with the ghetto cult, which saw the Old World immigrant not merely as an exotic specimen but as being able to bring fresh perspective to native-born Americans” (Botshon 207)—Crane established Yezierska as the voice of American immigration as well as catapulted her into the hands of the true fame-makers of the day, Hollywood.

Shortly after Crane’s article hit the press, Hollywood came calling. After offering an unprecedented $10,000 for the film rights to Hungry Hearts—an offer Yezierska accepted with great joy and surprise, as detailed a number of times throughout her work (most notably in her 1950 autobiography, Red Ribbon on a White Horse)—Samuel Goldwyn initiated a publicity campaign that would firmly establish Yezierska’s public persona as the “Sweatshop Cinderella,” the female embodiment of the immigrant’s American Dream. As always, despite the fact that her fame was earned by her fiction, the stories that celebrated this new author focused not on her work but her life. Headlines that appeared soon after Yezierska’s
arrival in Hollywood included “Immigrant Wins Fortune in Movies,” “Sweatshop Cinderella at the Miramar Hotel,” and “From Hester Street to Hollywood” (Botshon 208). “The young immigrant was an ideal romantic heroine, for she was symbolic of the Hollywood dream, in which a poor factory girl could become a glamorous celebrity,” writes Botshon, and “she also symbolized the American dream, in which a determined individual who started with nothing could work his or her way to economic success” (207). Not simply a pawn of publicists, however, Yezierska herself understood the marketability of this image, finding the proof of its selling-power in the money and attention suddenly surrounding her. While the actual woman—by this time, a forty-something college-educated former teacher, twice-married, a mother, no longer ghetto-bound, and certainly no longer a “girl”—did not match with the persona of naïve ingénue on public display, “the intense intellectual Jewish woman was not a marketable commodity” (Botshon 217). Thus the economic livelihood and popularity of this intense woman now depended upon her self-promotion as the still-green “Sweatshop Cinderella.” As long as her works were selling, Yezierska “was content that her carefully constructed fictions were taken as mere reportage” (Berch, location 2287).

“A Girl Who Came Up From Despair,” an essay appearing in a September 1923 edition of The Literary Digest, testifies to Yezierska’s occasional willingness to promote the image of herself that sold best—that of the hard-working and grateful immigrant that poses no threat to America’s (supposed, Anglo-centric, middle-class) cultural integrity. Like her earlier piece “The Immigrant Speaks,” written before the full publicity storm descended upon the now-famous author, “A Girl Who Came Up” is a largely self-authored exploration of Yezierska’s experience of immigration. However, unlike “The Immigrant Speaks,” this later article impugns not America but rather her Old World roots as the source of her
struggles. In this article, Yezierska describes her immigrant home life as bleak and oppressive, dismisses her desperate childhood American dreams as “unreasoning demands,” realizing finally that that she must “fight for my chance to give what I had to give, with the same life-and-death earnestness with which a man fights for his bread” (“A Girl” 58). And what she has to “give” America—“aching ignorance,” a “burning desire for knowledge,” “the dirt and ugliness of my black life of poverty and my all-consuming passion for beauty” (58)—frames this immigrant author as someone ripe with (modest) cultural contributions, an incubating asset to American culture—a characterization much in line with Frank Crane’s career-making celebration of the author in 1920. “If an outsider wanted to be heard by the center when ethnic texts were fashionable in America [...] during the nativist years of 1880–1920, he or she had to acquire not only American English but also the dominant ideology,” Zaborowska writes, (43), and during a time in which slogans such as “America for Americans” were popular (Zaborowska 3), Yezierska comforts her Anglo-Saxon readership with assurances that Jews were not merely a benign foreign presence, but rather a promising addition to the fabric of American life—even evidence of the viability of the American dream. As Yezierska concludes in “A Girl Come Up From Despair,” “Not where you come from but what is in you and what you are, counts in America” (59).

An outsider such as herself—especially a woman—could not expect to deliver discomfiting stories and gain a public hearing. Hollywood’s production of Hungry Hearts closed with the image of a happily-suburbanized, ex-foreign family smiling from behind the all-American white-picket-fence, an ending which Yezierska deplored, according to her daughter and biographer Henriksen (150), as it represented not only a complete reversal of the actual (unhappy) ending of her work, but moreover undercut the tone of the entire
Hungry Hearts collection—yet Goldwyn insisted upon the picket fence. A shrewd judge of the public’s tastes, Goldwyn knew what Yezierska was learning: the happy ending must be tacked on if one wanted to keep the public’s adoration. Dark glimpses, unsettling indictments might alienate an audience already uneasy about the foreigners in their midst. The majority of the mainstream media that promoted the rising immigrant author would place her within a comforting rags-to-riches narrative of assimilation tailored to fit the immigrant girl, an image acceptable, if not laudable, by diverse camps of thought on immigrant problem/asset.

While for men economic success was the prime marker of successful assimilation, for women, intermarriage and education marked the completed journey (Zaborowska 118). At times, Yezierska’s texts indeed seem to adhere to this female acculturation formula: many of her protagonists in fact pursue both education and union with logical Anglo-Saxon men as an escape route from the ghetto (a trajectory that, from a certain perspective, fit the plotline of Yezierska’s own life). Furthermore, her ever-revisited theme, “the longing of the immigrant to gain acceptance and become a viable productive part of civil society,” both entertained and comforted an increasingly xenophobic American public of the 1920s (Zierler 417). In these ways, the author seemed to promote assimilation into Anglo-Saxon society as the duty of the immigrant seeking happiness in the New World. Yet “an immigrant writer’s persona is as much invented as her texts,” Zaborowska suggests:

The dominant culture constructs such writers according to its expectations of the newcomer and the version of the passage from the Old World into the New that it would like to hear. [...] Although this implies textual oppression,
advertising the dominant ideology in this way is seen as a small price to pay for an opportunity to be heard. (57)

While Yezierska’s access to the public stage came with a price-tag, she nonetheless problematized the very formula she seemed to promote by exposing (among other things) the alienation and perpetual homelessness that characterize the reality of the upward struggle, the conflictedness of an impossible-to-win fight for recognition and acceptance in mutually-exclusive communities of WASP Americans and Orthodox Jews. Although the disruptive aspects of her texts have received growing critical attention in recent years (particularly from such critics as Ferraro, Zaborowska, Julian Levinson, and Kevin Piper), in her own time, such elements were largely ignored or elided, with most articles and reviews publicizing Yezierska as an emblem of the American every(wo)man, ‘one of us,’ living proof of the benevolence and viability of democracy and capitalism ...certainly not the critical voice against xenophobic, classist, and sexist injustice she has since come to embody for many scholars. As late as 1950, this vision of the American Every(wo)man Yezierska still prevailed—as W. H. Auden wrote in his introduction to her last book, the 1950 (highly-truth-contested) autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse*, “Miss Yezierska’s autobiography is literally the story of an early twentieth-century immigrant, but it has deeper and more general significance today when, figuratively, the immigrant is coming more and more to stand as the symbol for Everyman” (19).

Though she certainly functioned as an embodiment of this ideal in the popular press, Yezierska did not invent the image of the Jewish immigrant as American Every(wo)man: in literary production alone, her contemporaries Mary Antin and Abraham Cahan came to represent to some degree a reincarnation of the pioneer spirit upon which
the nation was founded, as well. “Immigrant propaganda” (Ferraro’s term)—that is, the popular portrayal of immigrants as a benign, even beneficial, addition to the American cultural fabric—proved a necessary platform for Jewish writers wishing to gain a public voice in a time of increasingly hostile nativism.

The 1920s were marked by “a growing unease about immigrant entry and assimilation, and a concomitant rise in the commercialization of ethnicity,” Lisa Botshon explains (203), and this simultaneous fear and desire played out in popular representations of Jews. In advertisements, news articles, cartoons, fiction, film, and even sociological studies, “Jews were portrayed as the miserly and manipulative racially inferior dregs of Europe” on one hand, “but they also came to represent the ideal Every Immigrant, holding the promise of American opportunity” on the other (Botshon 203-4).

How does the other half live, Yezierska’s largely white middle-class readership marveled, and in response, the media began to transform the ghetto into a “kind of showcase where the immigrant Jew was on parade for native-born Americans” (Botshon 205). Whether this show starred dangerous “dysgenics” or patriotic new pilgrims depended upon one’s viewpoint.

The vast influx of Jewish immigrants—2,650,000 from Eastern Europe between 1881 and 1925 alone—a total that amounted, at that time, “to a third of the Jewish population of all of Eastern Europe” (Golden 7)—certainly made this new population impossible to ignore. “Political repression, anti-Semitism, and economic distress created a feeling of desperation and hopelessness” in Eastern European Jews, explains Susan Glenn (47); therefore, unlike most other immigrant groups, the majority of Eastern European Jews who fled their homes for refuge in the United States meant to make the New World their permanent residence. Indeed, statistics of return-home immigration in the first two decades of the
twentieth century reveal only 2% of Jewish migration back to Europe, compared with percentages in the 50s and 60s for Italians and Irish (Glenn 47). The vast numbers and apparent permanence of this “Oriental” presence filled some Americans with fear, others with admiration, and nearly all with curiosity.

With the right elements emphasized, and viewed from the proper lens, the Jewish immigrant experience could be made to represent both foreign degeneracy as well as the ultimate American tale. When viewed as an intensely exotic and “backwards” people with a predilection for insularity, the Jews seemed to some an inassimilable and undesirable drain upon American economic and social welfare, their ghetto existence evidence of unwholesomeness. Yet when presented instead as a persecuted people, pious and clean-living, forced from their European homes to the sanctuary of the United States working hard for their share of American opportunity, the Jews seemed to follow the trajectory of the American Dream quite nicely.

Unlike much of Europe, the United States had never officially sanctioned anti-Semitism. Nonetheless, nativism and xenophobia began to grow in the late nineteenth century, finally culminating in the 1920s with severe and long-lasting immigrant restriction legislation. “Associated with foreign dangers, in particular communism and socialism, and seen as socially and/or biologically unfit, new immigrants were often cited as the main source of the country’s social and political ills” Konzett writes (27), and the Immigrant Restriction League (IRL), a powerful lobbying organization founded in 1894 in the thick of the immigration influx, perhaps best represents the voice of anti-immigration sentiment informing public opinion during the early twentieth century.
Declaring these new immigrants to be inassimilable and undesirable, finding these populations to be the cause of the worst economic, social, and political problems plaguing the newly-industrialized nation, the IRL blamed the “crowded tenements, poverty, crime and delinquency, labor unrest, and violence” plaguing the nation’s urban centers upon the foreigners that flooded through the nation’s gates (“Immigrant Restriction League”). As Henry Cabot Lodge, a powerful Republican politician, Harvard Professor, and IRL member surmised, “the effect upon the quality of our citizenship caused by the rapid introduction of this vast and practically unrestricted immigration, and [...] the effect of this immigration upon rates of wages and the standard of living among our working people” proved the two most pressing reasons to pursue selective and strict immigration restriction. Distinguishing between the “old immigrants” of English, Irish, and German stock, Americanized for generations and even credited with the founding of the nation itself, from the “new immigrants” of Italy and Eastern Europe bearing strange stubborn customs and underselling Americans with their cheap labor, the IRL lobbied (successfully) for a number of increasingly-strict immigrant restrictions acts targeted directly at this group of “new” unsavories. Utilizing the popular “science” of eugenics to further support the argument against unchecked immigration, in 1920, Eugenics Record Office employee and IRL member Harry Laughlin appeared before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Immigration and Naturalization to present data proving the undesirability of this new generation of foreigners bombarding U.S. soil. Presenting as evidence information from a U.S. Census Bureau survey of the number of foreign-born persons in jails, prisons and reformatories, Laughlin argued that the “American gene pool was being polluted by a rising tide of intellectually and morally defective immigrants – primarily from eastern and southern Europe” (Lombardo). The Immigra-
tion Restriction Act of 1924, “designed consciously to halt the immigration of supposedly ‘dysgenic’ Italians and eastern European Jews” (Lombardo), proved the culmination of these efforts. Reducing the quota of southern and eastern Europeans from 45% to 15%, the 1924 Act effectively ended the greatest era of immigration in U.S. history. “‘America must remain American,’” President Calvin Coolidge pronounced upon signing the Act—a phrase that would become “the rallying cry of anti-immigration sentiment until after World War II” (Lombardo). The Immigration Restriction Act of 1924 would not be repealed until 1965.

However, not all Americans found immigrants so distasteful. Among their defenders, Liberal Progressives such as John Dewey (with whom Yezierska famously had an affair) and Randolph Bourne lionized a pluralistic vision of America as a patchwork nation comprised of diverse cultural contributions from diverse American peoples. Within this framework, the immigrant symbolized the nation’s founding spirit—or, as Yezierska herself phrased it, “the breath, the very life of America” (“The Immigrant” 21). Operating under this philosophy, a number of organizations formed to help immigrants adjust to life in America, setting up facilities in urban hubs such as Chicago and New York to help enculturate these new residents, with Jane Addams’ Hull House as perhaps the most famous of such cultural halfway houses. While in recent years many critics have charged these organizations and their facilities with assimilationist WASP-making intentions, during their time groups such as the Committee for Immigrants in America, the Immigrants’ Protective League of Chicago, and the National Liberal Immigration League comprised the immigrant’s most vocal and active defenders. A self-supporting, morally-pure, family-oriented, and modestly-ambitious people determined to rise from the bottom to the middle-class and beyond, immigrant Jews seemed, to some, the very picture of American up-
ward mobility in action. As *The Immigrant Jew in America*, a lengthy (500+ pages) sociological study published by the National Liberal Immigration League in 1906, found, beyond such moral perks as “the absence of the drink evil among Jews”, moreover there are other virtues engrafted on the Jews for centuries, all of which tend to the preservation of his self-respect and his self-esteem. Among these are love of home, the inherent desire to preserve the purity of the family, and the remarkable eagerness which he shows for education and self-improvement. Poverty with the Jew does not spell degeneracy. (62)

With the “psychology of their adaptation” shaped by the resolve to remain permanently in the United States (Glenn 64), (ex-) Eastern European Jews found significant impetus to impress those that seemed to guard the gates of American success. For these Jews determined to make America their home, “one of the earliest and continuing processes in ghetto life was the hurry up to be assimilated,” writes Arthur Golden (25). Becoming “American,” of course, meant subscribing to specific parameters of race, class, religion. Yezierska’s heroines “equate achieving that status with breaking into the white, middle- to upper-middle class Christian sphere—the same class, generally, used to define ‘American’ in African-American passing narratives” (Levinson 5). A positive impression upon WASP America seemed a prerequisite to upward mobility and public recognition for many of these politically powerless new residents of a New World clearly dominated by suspicious white Protestants sporting long pedigrees.

However, for many immigrant Jews, their resolve to remain in the United States made strange bedfellows with their equal determination to retain their Old World traditions, as for most, the process of American acculturation proved more complexly conflicted
than a simple embrace of assimilation. It would take more than a transatlantic passage to undo the values and customs nurtured throughout generations in a now-far-away land. Some immigrants, particularly the older folks, held strong to their Old World ways of life; others, particularly the youth, dove head-long into American ways of life. All new residents, young or old, struggled to find a place in a New World built by others, for others, without the interests of Eastern European Jewish immigrants in mind. For many, finding this place would mean creating an entirely new self, a person both Jewish and American. This process of reinvention, detailed frequency in Yezierska’s work, promised both adventure as well as alienation.

Especially for the “transitional generation” of young immigrants—a generation to which Yezierska, who arrived in America in her early teens, felt she very much belonged—the move to America was charged with both adventure and trepidation. Filled with hope for personal freedom impossible to achieve back home (Glenn 46), faced with pressure to maintain the traditions of their forebears, immigration for young people meant a complex dance of Old World roots and New World dreams. The path they took towards Americanization—or, as some saw it, the path of Americanization forced upon them by circumstance—caused concern across the philosophical board: xenophobic nativists, altruistic Progressives, protective Jewish parents, and those in between worried about the effects of these young immigrants’ entry into the spaces of public American life.

While the nativists wrung their hands over the corrupting influence these supposedly eugenically inferior and morally loose youth presented to American society, conversely, immigrant-sympathizers found the threat of degradation not within the impressionable children of a pious and displaced people. Instead, pro-immigrant organizations framed the-
se youth as the victims, not the causes, of corruption, and the crowded dirty streets of America’s cities the source, rather than the unfortunate recipient, of depravity. As the author of the NLIL’s *The Immigrant Jew in America* bemoaned, the poverty of the ghetto created homes too crowded to enable comfortable continuance of traditional, chaperoned, in-home teen socialization with friends or suitors, and encouraged these young people to seek instead entertainment outside of the home. “What is the consequence?” the author asks:

There is the street. Crowded, too, but there is isolation in such a crowd, and the street becomes the common meeting place for man and maid. Needless to say, the ethics and etiquette of the streets are not elevating, and the degenerating effects are not hidden from the eye of the observant. Such young people soon become inoculated with the shallow cynicism of the ignorant. The Jewish faith, as they know it, with its ceremonies and restrictions, is to them ridiculous and contemptible. ‘Pleasure,’ and not ‘duty,’ being their watch-word, all that hampers freedom or self-indulgence is a kill-joy to be avoided. Therefore, the dance hall, the vaudeville theatre, the card game, the prize fight are places of frequent resort. The synagogue, the lecture hall, the concert room, the debating club, are not visited to any extent by this particular portion of Young Israel. (41)

In short, the transitional generation of immigrants to which Yezierska belonged occupied a central position of the immigration debate heating up during the early twentieth century. Yet not merely subjects of debate, these young people struggled in their personal choices to fall on the ‘right’ side of this cultural push-pull—whatever “right” may mean. To
be American, to be Jewish, to be both—but how? Acculturation meant hard choices, allegiances to define.

As a female member of this transitional generation entering the United States—arriving, moreover, during a period of unprecedented changes in gender roles and women’s rights—Yezierska faced multiple levels of cultural contestation as she attempted to figure out her place as a Jewish/American woman. New desires and new guilt characterized the young female immigrant’s entry into American culture, and the costs and gains of this complex dance are constant themes throughout Yezierska’s canon. Jewish women—especially those still in their formative teen years—faced a confusing vat of competing mentalities as they negotiated the gender paradigms of their new home the United States, with the Old World traditions that had long ordered their families and continued to order some local immigrant communities. As the True Woman slowly gave way to the New Woman, American girls enjoyed freedoms undreamt of by their mothers, and these advances did not go unnoticed by Jewish girls thirsty for a similar autonomy.

Choosing sides in *Bread Givers*

While nearly all of Yezierska’s works explore the struggles and triumphs of Jewish American women, her 1925 semi-autobiographical novel *Bread Givers* has proven a feminist favorite. Beginning with Alice Kessler-Harris’s rediscovery of this iconic novel in 1972, *Bread Givers* has emerged in recent criticism as the most published, taught, and critically-engaged of all of Yezierska’s texts. “It was only during the 1970s and 1980s that a renewal of interest in Yezierska occurred, encouraged in large part by the rise of identity politics, the women’s movement, and the newly developing field of ethnic literature,” writes Komy
With the Civil Rights and Black Power movements of the preceding decade serving as templates, 1970s literary scholarship saw a rise in interest in diverse American cultures as “scholars industriously began reclaiming ethnic literary histories group by group (most often, their own)” (Ferraro 4).

Widely assumed autobiographical due to alignments between the author’s and her protagonist’s lives, *Bread Givers* fit the bill for scholars wishing to probe the depths of one ethnic woman’s consciousness. The “truth” readers valued in her novel—in other words, the ethnographic reportage contained therein—provided the rationale for bringing this novel to the forefront of “new ethnicity” investigations. As an immigrant writer with a “proto-feminist orientation,” not only Yezierska’s work but moreover her life proved an appropriate object for consideration from this new ethnic feminist theoretical standpoint. “Her unconventional lifestyle—she abandoned her husband and daughter, insisted on a ‘room of her own,’ zealously pursued an independent career as a writer and teacher of home economics—has created a reputation for Yezierska as a ‘visionary foremother,’” explains Cocklin (137), and while the post-1970s scholarship about *Bread Givers* has not produced an uncontested celebration of Yezierska as an uncomplicated feminist heroine, without a doubt the reappearance of this long-out-of-print novel caused many to recognize this forgotten author as an early feminist and a literary foremother to a regrettably small population of publically acknowledged Jewish women writers. Indeed, until this period of ethnic and feminist revival, “Jewish American literary history was construed and described in overwhelmingly mid-twentieth-century masculine terms” (Zierler “Remaking” 69). The re-entry of Yezierska’s most famous work into critical consideration represented one effort to re-imagine Jewish literary history from the long-silenced perspective of Jewish women.
Narrated from the perspective of a Polish-Jewish immigrant named Sara Smolinsky, *Bread Givers* tells the story of a young woman struggling to “make herself for a person” despite the oppressive traditions of an orthodox father and the alienating insularity of middle-class white American culture. Wishing for personal agency in the course of her own life, hoping to turn herself into someone that Americans will recognize and respect, Sara refuses to live under her father’s thumb. “He was the Old World. I was the New,” Sara muses (207), as she runs away from home to rent a room of her own—a taboo move for an orthodox Jewish girl expected to remain under her parents’ roof until marriage. Once on her own, Sara begins her American education with the final goal of becoming a teacher—her surest shot for membership into the American middle class. Yet despite her efforts to conform, Sara finds that America does not welcome her with open arms.

Having already estranged herself from the Jewish community through her irreverent independence—to the orthodox Jews, the headstrong and autonomous Sara embodies the worst kind of woman: defiant, disobedient, and unwilling to serve—Sara also finds no home within the American culture into which she ambivalently seeks membership. “So this is what it cost, daring to follow the urge in me,” Sara realizes; “No father. No lover. No family. No friend. I must go on and on. And I must go on—alone” (208). Despite her efforts of self-education and refinement, Sara remains perpetually lonely, always on the outside, a forever foreigner, never truly “one of them,” no matter the context. Sara proves just different enough to ensure her estrangement wherever she may tread. She exists to no one. A perpetual interloper, her independence alienates her from her roots; her roots alienate her from white America. Eternally conflicted about cutting ties with her people, filled with re-
sentiment for a smug white America that refuses to respect immigrants, Sara herself cannot
decide where she wants to belong.

Yet when she finally lands a teaching job and finds love with the Americanized Jewish
principal at her school, Sara briefly seems to have found a middle ground between her Jew-
ish immigrant culture and WASP America—a place where she can fit comfortably, a place
where she can be Jewish, a woman, and an American, all at once. However, her sense of ac-
complishment proves short-lived: when she encounters her long-estranged, now-destitute
father shortly after her marriage, the “weight of generations” (297) pulls her back, guilt
forcing her to submit once again to his long-resisted authority.

The novel ends darkly (though the mood of this ending has been thoroughly critically
contested), with Sara unhappily resolving, under her husband’s encouragement, to allow
her old enemy father to come live in her home, effectively destroying the life of work she
had devoted to getting rid of the man. In Bread Givers, there is no space for Sara’s hybridity
or agency; Sara cannot exist as she is. In the end, she must finally return to her original liv-
ing situation, handing over the home she has made for herself to her overbearing father,
who will surely rule all. “If you promise to keep sacred all that is sacred to me,” her father
stipulates, only then will he move in with her (295).

A novel deemed “true” through critical consensus, the autobiographical implications
drove public interest—arguably, the autobiographical aspects of this work continues to
drive scholarly interest in the novel. While Yezierska explicitly labeled Bread Givers fiction,
ever referring to it as an unadulterated life story, the alignments between her life and her
novel were difficult to miss—like Sara, Yezierska left her family home as a teen, rejected
the orthodox Jewish assessment of women as lesser than men, pursued teaching as an ave-
nue of escape from the ghetto, and was generally an assertive non-conformist, much like her protagonist Sara Smolinsky.

However, assigning *Bread Givers* to any one genre—be it fiction, autobiography, or something in-between—proves sticky business. While the parallels between Yezierska’s life and fiction are enough to make categorization difficult, moreover, evolving definitions of autobiography further complicate neat classification. “A notable and blatant instance of the problematics of confining Yezierska’s works to any one genre can be found in the list of women’s autobiographies in Smith and Watson’s *Women, Autobiography, and Theory,*” explains Komy, as interestingly, Smith and Watson include the novel *Bread Givers* rather than Yezierska’s official autobiography *Red Ribbon on a White Horse* in their list of women’s “life writing” (468). Regardless of the actual facts of the novel, the “truth” has always been tangled up in conversations about the work, with the majority believing that *Bread Givers* reveals to some degree the subjectivity and life story of the author herself. Both during her own time as well as ours, the value of Yezierska’s work has resided largely in what insight she could provide about herself, her mysterious people, and their experiences on American soil. Yezierska’s fame and reputation have always hinged on issues of authenticity and truth. Indeed, the perceived truthfulness of the work fueled many readers’ emotional connection with *Bread Givers*—as one *Boston Transcript* reviewer wrote, “Not since Mary Antin’s ‘The Promised Land’ has there been so moving a story as this one of Anzia Yezierska, for ‘Bread Givers’ is autobiographical” (Mann 778).

Given that Yezierska’s “true” fiction reached a large audience and her “authenticity” granted her significant veritas in the eyes of the critics, the nature of her depictions was of some consequence to those with stake in the representation of immigrant Jews. Different
camps desired different things from her portrayals. Her WASP audience wanted pro-
assimilationist stories of exotic immigrants transforming into Americans, and that’s what
they found. Her Jewish (men) critics found fault with her “emotionalism” and incisive de-
pictions of the community, and judged her apostate. While white middle-class Americans
wished to find a flattering reflection of themselves in the mirror of Yezierska’s immigration
narrative, her Jewish critics too wanted an agreeable representation. Immigrant autobiog-
raphy can be seen as “a replica of the entire process of assimilation and acculturation in
which “the past is seen as intellectually and materially inferior, but also as a time of familial
warmth, of meaningful ceremony, and of Jewish togetherness,” writes Rubin, and “[h]ow to
preserve the one without sacrificing the other is a question that has preoccupied American-
Jewish authors for most of the twentieth century” (185). Pleasing both camps would prove
impossible for Yezierska.

During her own time, the critical reception to *Bread Givers*, Yezierska’s fourth and
most highly praised novel, marked the pinnacle of her career. “Her work is tense, emotion-
al, and true, and ‘Bread Givers’ is her best book,” wrote one *New York World* reviewer (Tul-
ly 4). Yezierska’s reputation would never again reach such heights. In this era of ethn-
ographic voyeurism, authentic stories from ethnic insiders were in great demand. However,
the desired nature of such depictions depended upon one’s viewpoint. Just as New Negro
authors faced conflicting prescriptions for how they should represent other Negroes in art,
so immigrant writers such as Yezierska contended with similarly contradictory expecta-
tions. Without a doubt, *Bread Givers* had its naysayers. Yezierska received “praise from pro-
assimilationists” (Konzett 19) but met her “most unsympathetic reception” from Jews
(Konzett 13). While the wider American public, comprised largely of white middle-class
readers, found within *Bread Givers* proof of the benevolence of America and the viability of the American Dream, Yezierska’s Jewish (male) critics found that this celebration of America came at the cost of dignity for the immigrant Jew.

Despite her reputation as an immigrant authority, critical reception proved less-than-celebratory among those with “competing claims to ethnic authority” (Ferraro 53)—namely, Jewish-American men. As a woman, Yezierska was “certainly seen as [a] problematic representative of [her] peer group” (Konzett 13), and while critics in the mainstream media praised Yezierska’s impassioned depictions of Jewish life, most Jewish-American critics regarded *Bread Givers* as “yet another up-from-the-ghetto tract [...] cartoonish in plot and characterization, assimilationist in drive, anti-Semitic in effect if not in intent” (Ferraro 53). Perhaps Yosef Gaer’s review of the novel in *The Menorah Journal* most succinctly conveys the resentment that marked most of the Jewish reception of the novel.

“How does one go about tempting the palate of your typical American?” Gaer begins:

One serves him with everything he already knows about Jews from the burlesque shows, Hebrew joke books, and the funny-strips. [...] One follows up with repeated assurances that everything American, from the Statue of Liberty to the use of toothpicks, is marvelous, wonderful, unsurpassable; and everything Jewish, from the Talmud to the inescapable gefulte-fish, is—ugh!

(105)

Lacking the civility to own toothbrushes or face towels, happy to live in filth, and allowing their wild emotions to run amok, Yezierska’s Jewish characters are coarse “half-savages” who never “talk” or “discuss,” but instead “scream” and “yell,” argues Gaer (106). “And in what language do these half-savages cry, scream, and yell? Like all uncivilized people, they
do not speak English. They gesticulate in an amazing dialect all their own,” Gaer suggests (106)—as in an ironic twist, Gaer at once defames Yezierska for producing degrading depictions of immigrant Jews, yet in the same breath reifies English as the language of the civilized. For Gaer, Yezierska’s unrestrained, “uncivilized” Jews seem irresponsible representations that play into the stereotypes of crude foreigners incompatible with American “civility.” Yet the wrinkle in Gaer’s theory rests with his implied yardstick of civility. What would a more responsible representation look like to Gaer, one wonders? Would he have better embraced a novel populated by English-speaking Jews devoid of any of the embarrassing habits of greenhorns, restrained in their emotion and orderly in their housekeeping? Would these fictitious Jews seem more civilized had they better embodied middle-class native-born Americans? As Gaer accuses Yezierska of celebrating America at the expense of Jews, one cannot help but notice that his terms of “civility”—including, but not limited to, speaking English—suggest his own valorization of American values even as he accuses Yezierska of the same crime.

Yet neither fans or foes of *Bread Givers* took notice of the complex and conflicted nature of her depictions, preferring instead to quickly categorize her tale as pro-assimilationist—a charge that continues to be leveled at the book. Merely the work of a confessor, a reporter, a sociological voice, but certainly no artist, *Bread Givers* wasn’t read too closely by the contemporary reviewers, and both camps were content to see in the novel what they expected to see. Both indignant Jews and self-congratulatory WASPS failed to see that *Bread Givers* was less about exchanging one identity for another, and more about exploring the (im-)possibilities for one Jewish/American woman’s hybrid identity. The battle to be seen, to be recognized, to belong—the perpetual homelessness, the unending guilt
that accompanies this battle—these are the foci of Yezierska’s depictions. In *Bread Givers*, Yezierska does not blindly praise America, as critics from either camp surmised; instead, she problematizes both American and Jewish ideologies in her portrait of a woman not allowed to exist. Yet despite the knee-jerk reaction and surface-level reading of her work, in *Bread Givers* Yezierska in fact composed dark portraits of her perpetual displacement in America; she interrogated myths of the American Dream; she showed the failure of the nation to allow any space for the woman “not a Jewess and not a Gentile” (*Bread Givers* 294). Nonetheless, these indictments went largely unnoticed.

In *Bread Givers*, as well as within the novel’s critical reception, no space exists for the hybrid identity of Sara Smolinsky, or, by implication, her autobiographical-analogue author. In the press, Sara emerged as a true American and emblem of the American Dream, or conversely, a failed Jew. As an ethnic writer in the 1920s, Yezierska and her characters were easy objects of ethnographic gazing, subject to the judgments and classifications of those to whom her social placement was consequential. Aspects of her work that threatened such easy classification were simply not discussed. Critics elided—or simply failed to see—those instances in which Yezierska gazed back, composing complex and troubling portraits of the process of Americanization. Instead, her reviewers largely stuck to the formula of interpretation most suited to the image they expected to find in Yezierska’s “true” depictions. Yet during a time in which an unprecedented influx of immigrants had fostered a taste for “ethnographic ‘slumming’ expeditions” and true-story exposés into how the other half lives (Jirousek 25), Yezierska gazes back, offering a portrait too complex and conflicted to be domesticated.
Rather than painting a picket-fence portrait of Americanization, in *Bread Givers* Yezierska instead explores the discrepancies between myths of happy assimilation and the realities of her own experience. As Zaborowska explains, Yezierska’s texts register the conflict between the model narratives of female acculturation, which are constructed for them by the dominant culture, and their own accounts, which often challenge or revise the ‘master plots’ they are expected to follow. [...] I suggest that, by pointing out the unfulfilled promises of the Promised Land, they subvert the traditional narratives of immigrant gratitude and success. (Zaborowska 14)

Aware that the immigrant woman was scrutinized and judged by anyone with an opinion, Yezierska switches the scrutiny. *Bread Givers*, told from the critical and insightful consciousness of an unruly Jewish woman much like the author herself, reverses the lens from “how America sees me” to “how I see America and myself.” Anzia Yezierska “turns the tables on her observers, and puts America on display,” argues Berch. “Instead of offering the immigrant for inspection, she holds America up for a look” (location 2411). Yet these critiques were largely ignored by contemporary readers in favor of a more-sellable and easily-digestible branding.

Nonetheless, alienation and ambivalence permeate the novel. These apparently difficult-to-swallow qualities emerge in particularly condensed form in two scenes—Sara’s mother’s funeral, in which the protagonist’s estrangement from immigrant Jews emerges in high relief; and the novel’s final scene of father-daughter reconciliation, in which Sara’s Jewish ties collide with her American plans to keep her ever straddling two cultures, neither of which will claim her fully.
Shortly after Sara realizes her dream of becoming a teacher—and after years of separation from her family—her beloved mother dies. While Sara has been out of the Jewish community for years by the time of her mother’s death, her break with the Old World proves most palpable at the funeral scene, when she horrifies her Jewish relations by refusing to submit to the traditional ripping of the deceased’s family’s clothes. While all other family members submit—including Sara’s father, who allows a valuable robe from the homeland to be destroyed—Sara, wearing her only suit, rejects the rabbi’s knife: “‘I don’t believe in this. It’s my only suit, and I need it for work. Tearing it wouldn’t bring Mother back to life again,’” she insists. “A hundred eyes burned on me their condemnation,” she then notes, as her fellow Jews proclaim in disgust, “Look at her, the Americanerin!” (255).

To Sara, the suit represents the culmination of her upward struggle; it is the symbol of how far she’s come. To her Jewish compatriots, however, the suit symbolizes her attachment to American wealth, her privileging of American status over Jewish tradition. Her refusal, and the crowd’s horror, reveals the depth of the rift that Sara’s forays into American success have caused, and cements her identity as Jewish pariah. This young immigrant woman, grown up on American soil, has grown too American for the Jews. Yet, she also remains too Jewish to become “American,” as the novel’s final scene demonstrates.

Like many other immigrant authors, Yezierska “was expected to produce ‘happy’ portrayals of acculturation that arose from preconceived narrative structures and implied predictable solutions” (Zaborowska 119), and seeking such happy endings, contemporary critics apparently took little notice of the dark undertones that mark this novel’s final scene. Zaborowska argues that the novel’s conclusion, so widely dismissed as clichéd and dis-
appointingly assimilationist, in fact dramatizes the “unglamorous side of female Americanization” (121), highlighting the costs rather than the gains of cultural border-crossing.

The novel’s conclusion begins to unfold when Sara runs into her now-destitute father peddling chewing gum in the street—an encounter that forces her into guilty introspection.

“How could I have hated him and tried to blot him out of my life?” she demands of herself,

Can I hate my arm, my hand that is part of me? Can a tree hate the roots from which it sprang? Deeper than love, deeper than pity is the oneness of flesh that is in him and me. Who gave me the fire, the passion, to push myself up from the dirt? If I grow, if I rise, if I ever amount to something, is it not his spirit burning in me? (286)

After years of fleeing her father, Sara recognizes that she cannot exorcise his presence from within herself; the embodiment of all she has tried to escape exists inalienably within her.

Wearing an American business suit on the outside, yet harboring the spirit of her Jewish roots on the inside, Sara personifies the two-ness of the immigrant generation. When the weight of her past forces Sara to unhappily invite her father to move in with her and her new husband—an offer Sara’s husband endorses, as her Americanized Jewish husband desires a reconnection with his ethnic roots—Sara despairs as she is re-tethered to the man she fought so hard to escape:

My breathing spell of happiness was over. Just as I was beginning to feel safe and free to go on to a new life with Hugo, the old burden dragged me back by the hair. Was there no place in the whole world for Father? My home! Must I give it up to him? But with him there, it would not be home for me. I suddenly realized that I had come back to where I had started twenty years ago when I
began my fight for freedom. But in my rebellious youth, I thought I could escape by running away. And now I realized that the shadow of the burden was always following me, and here I stood face to face with it again. (295)

With Reb Smolinsky’s rhythmic Torah-recitations echoing through the apartment, Sara and her husband approach Reb’s room to offer an official invitation to join their home—an offer which Reb will assuredly accept. This final scene, marked by bold imagery of control and repression, illustrates Sara’s decidedly unhappy ending: “Hugo’s grip tightened on my arm as we walked on,” Sara notes. “I felt the shadow still there, over me. It wasn’t just my father, but the generations who made my father whose weight was still upon me” (297). And with these words, the novel concludes. This final image of Sara—restrained both physically and emotionally, altogether thwarted from achieving the existence she has long pursued—makes the contemporary reading of this novel as a happy success story particularly puzzling. Perhaps readers find only what they wish to find, after all.

While the joining of her old life (symbolized by her father) with her new life (symbolized by her marital home) seems to suggest a happy medium of assimilation—Sara at once retains a connection with her Old World roots and her New World ambitions—the dark undertones of oppression and unhappiness that shadow Sara’s compromise supports a much more cynical reading. As Wilentz explains, “Sara finds a way to be true to both her culture and the American ideal of independence, at least on the surface. [...] Yezierska’s ‘fairytale’ text has strong elements of incongruity inscribed in it, and the novel ends as a Jewish lament rather than in a happy-ever-after” (35). Rather than bringing together in harmony two incompatible parts of herself, Sara’s final concession to the wishes of her father and husband instead only “destroys her independence” and leaves her “neither a Jew
[..] nor an American” (Zaborowska 151). With her husband’s tight grip around her arm and the “weight of generations” on her shoulders, Sara’s concession results not from her free choice but rather from feelings of inescapable responsibility. As Ferraro argues, “the terms, the tone, and especially the imagery of Sara’s rapprochement suggest that she has conceded too much” (Ferraro 77). Perhaps Berch’s reading most concisely expresses the conflictedness at the heart of this scene; indeed, at the heart of the novel:

it’s not a too-happy-ending, as others have said with dissatisfaction, but a very complex and very sad ending. Sara will marry, yes, but she concludes by talking about feeling the shadow of her father and her father’s fathers still upon her. […] Indeed, in so many of Y’s works, the faux happy ending reminds readers of how impossible the heroine’s situation really has been.

(Berch, location 2349)

Throughout Bread Givers, and most concisely in this final scene, Yezierska depicts the complex costs of acculturation. She demonstrates how assimilation is never simple, never complete. Instead of becoming an American, instead of remaining a Jew, Sara Smolinsky becomes something at once both and neither, her “quest for identity” resulting in “a new cultural creation, fathered neither by a simple transformation of Old World values nor by a straightforward assimilation to the New World,” (Tiefenthaler 46). Her contemporary readers failed to recognize this complexity. Instead, reading her novel as an uncomplicatedly pro-American, the public did not appreciate the hybrid nature of her ever-conflicted protagonist, Sara Smolinsky. Certainly, there existed no cultural space in which to place such an unusual character. Neither concerned with the preservation of traditional Jewish culture, nor the celebration of the American middle class, Yezierska was instead “concerned
with her hybrid cultural identity as an American Jew, one marked by contradictory and
ambivalent appropriations and internalizations of America’s cultural norms” (Konzett 30).
Through Sara Smolinsky, Yezierska gave voice to marginal woman not yet allowed to exist,
a character thoroughly impossible for most contemporary readers to fathom.

Conclusion

Interpretations of Bread Givers have certainly changed over the last nearly-hundred
years, as the cultural climate that informs interpretations has evolved. Piper summarizes
this critical evolution thusly: “The novel’s initial critics saw [Bread Givers] as politically in-
formed by the desire to prove the assimilability of eastern European Jews. Since then, it has
been read as a critique of American ideals, a preservation of ethnic values, and a testament
to the “hybrid identity” of its female protagonist” (99). Over the course of the twentieth
century, Yezierska has been read as a true American, a Jewish sell-out, a proto-feminist, a
representative of the Jewish-American experience, and/or a hybrid creature not quite of
any world. Indeed, the ambiguity of her texts – that very quality that has always challenged
readers—has also made her life and work especially ripe for wide variations in interpreta-
tion.

The changing nature of these interpretations reflects the evolution of popular con-
ceptions of identity over the course of the 20th century. The push in the 1920s to categorize
her neatly as either an American or a Jew, assimilative or outsider, reflects the segregation-
ist way of thinking characteristic to that time, an era in which one must be one thing or the
other. Throughout most of the 1920s, reviewers and critics saw Yezierska as transforming
from one state of being (immigrant Jew) into another (white American). However, after her
rediscovery in the 1970s, during the era of identity politics and multiculturalism, many critics read Yezierska’s life and work as representative of the marginal experience of the Jewish American woman immigrant. While the nuance of her experience was regarded with more attention in this era—and her unconventional lifestyle largely celebrated rather than defamed or elided—she was once again essentialized, as Yezierska the author came to represent the “World of the Mothers” (Zierler 421), the female voice of a Jewish literary canon dominated by men.

Despite furthering very different interpretations of the author, the critics of both the 1920s and the 1970s needed Yezierska’s work to be true in order to support their own cultural narratives. In the 1920s, much of the public demand for this immigrant Jew’s “truth” proved an exercise in “spectacle ethnography,” an effort to glimpse the hidden life of exotic people for the entertainment and edification of a white middle-class audience while at once buttressing the belief that America was a promised land of opportunity for immigrants. When second-wave feminists invested in multiculturalism reclaimed her literature, Yezierska was given the identity of “visionary foremother” (Golub qtd in Cocklin 137), and critics began to read Yezierska’s texts as representative of “the” Jewish woman’s immigrant experience, as well as a proto-feminist experience. Those aspects of her identity that were criticized or ignored in the first flower of her fame—her devotion to her art, her critique of traditional Jewish gender paradigms, her attacks on the myth of the American Dream—are the very qualities celebrated in the second wave of literary attention to this rediscovered author. What is powerful and useful for each generation of readers is what these readers find. The ambivalence and ambiguity of Yezierska’s works makes finding such contradictory readings possible. As times change, and as interpretational frameworks change, the ways
in which readers can reasonably interpret Yezierska change, as well. Now that postmodernism has problematized any notion of a stable subject, Yezierska’s life and work can no longer be read as “the” Jewish woman’s experience, “the” immigrant experience, or any essentially representative experience. Under this rubric, Yezierska can instead be read as a subject-in-process, ever-changing not only within her own lived experience and literary self-representations, but moreover as a public persona whose identity fluctuates along with changing needs of the discourse community evaluating her work.
CHAPTER 3.

EVELYN SCOTT’S ESCAPADE:
AN UNCONVENTIONAL NARRATION OF A CONTROVERSIAL LIFE

Today, most people have never heard of Evelyn Scott. In Scott’s own time, however, writers were celebrities, and Scott was a famous woman. A bold and scandalous female interloper into the masculine realm of high modernism, throughout the 1920s and ‘30s Scott held an influential position among the most elite literary circles. Perhaps the most famous evidence of her literary clout, Evelyn Scott can be credited with legitimizing William Faulkner to the American reading public—in 1929, asked to write a review for Faulkner’s novel *The Sound and the Fury*, Scott’s enthusiastic endorsement not only fueled book sales but moreover lead Faulkner’s publisher to proclaim “*The Sound and the Fury* should place William Faulkner in company with Evelyn Scott” (Bach, “Serious Damn” 128). Yet today, when critics discuss Evelyn Scott, an important part of this discussion remains the fact that she is now “forgotten.”

“The answer to the question of how this gifted, well-known, and well-reviewed writer could almost disappear from literary sight […] is complex and speculative,” Dorothy Scura mused in 2001(xiii). Over a decade later, the answer remains obscure. However, the scandalized public reaction to Scott’s first autobiography, *Escapade*, displays in high relief the elements of Scott’s life and work that so outraged readers, inspiring both her Southern home community as well as her literary compatriots to erase her from memory. “Nowhere in our generation perhaps has the reaction of a conservative people to its more intelligent, gifted and outspoken variants been so diametrically revealed as in the response accorded to Evelyn Scott, who rebelled first against the customs of a social group and later against
the platform of a literary group,” Paula Snelling, one of Scott’s contemporary champions, insisted in 1937 (qtd in Scura xviii). Indeed, the irreverent, unapologetic, and controversial Evelyn Scott was a rebel from a young age.

Although born blue-blooded in a Tennessee mansion, Scott was never content to live within the social boundaries of genteel white Southern womanhood. After bucking Southern conventions of femininity, running away with a married man, and becoming an author, Scott was neither compelled to attend to the literary conventions of an intensely masculinist modernism that devalued all things feminine. Entering the modernist literary consciousness in the early 1920s as a mystery woman penning experimental works from the heart of a Brazilian jungle, Scott’s writing explored women’s minds and bodies (often her own), and spotlighted aspects of womanhood that flew in the face of ideals of both Southern womanhood as well as serious art. A pariah from Southern aristocracy and male modernist conventions, cultural memory and literary history has constructed Scott as a sick, unimportant woman, a forgettable relic from the past.

The seeds of this historical and literary construction of Evelyn Scott can be found in the critical reaction to *Escapade*, as well as the public reaction to the events narrated within. An unconventional narration of a controversial life, the tale of a young woman run away to the jungle with an adulterer twice her age, an unromantic detailing of childbirth, motherhood, the female body, and perhaps most distasteful to her critics, an unapologetic exploration of one exceptional woman’s own subjectivity, *Escapade* embodies the problematic issues that incited her expulsion from the canon and her home.

Even though social scandal and literary achievement made Scott famous by the time she was thirty, her small home town of Clarksville, Tennessee, seemed to have quickly for-
gotten her name. When researching Scott in the late 1960s just a few years after her death, one of Scott’s earliest scholarly champions, Robert Welker, could find “only four people in Clarksville who knew of her or were willing to talk of her. [...] Everywhere people seemed ignorant of her name and her reputation” (9). When remembered at all, Welker continued, the scandal she incited with her elopement remained her most recognizable feature, while her books remained largely forgotten. Her passing unmentioned in the major presses, her grave unmarked, Evelyn Scott had ended her life “on the lowest rung of genteel poverty” (Callard 179) as pitiful madwoman to many, a relic of the past to most.

Along with Welker, whose 1958 dissertation *Evelyn Scott: A Literary Biography*, initiated a renewed scholarly interest in Evelyn Scott, a number of other scholars and critics have shed some light upon the life and work of this long-ignored author. Two have penned biographies about her: first, D.A. Callard, with the 1985 *Pretty Good for a Woman: The Enigmas of Evelyn Scott*, and secondly Mary Wheeling White, with her more nuanced 1998 publication *Fighting the Current: The Life and Work of Evelyn Scott*. Other notable scholars to reintroduce Scott to the critical landscape include Peggy Bach, who wrote numerous articles about the author and her work through the 1980s and ’90s; Patricia Jean Tyrer, who started her Scott scholarship with her 1998 dissertation and continues to publish critical work on the author; and Dorothy Scura, who edited a 2001 collection of essays entitled *Evelyn Scott: Recovering a Lost Modernist*. While otherwise there have been occasional appearances of scholarly articles on Scott, with the 1990 Scott-themed special issue of *Southern Quarterly* marking the pinnacle of scholarly attention (prior to Scura’s 2001 collection), nonetheless this once-influential modernist writer and heir to Southern aristocracy has
largely disappeared from literary and cultural history. How did this high-born, well-respected woman of letters descend into such obscurity?

Born “Elsie Dunn” in the sprawling estate of a high-bred yet fading Tennessee family, the future Evelyn Scott seemed destined to follow the rites of the Southern belle, as did her mother before her. Yet to the chagrin of her family, Scott proved a non-conformist from youth. A few examples of young Elsie’s early eccentricities: as a teen, she wrote a newspaper editorial advocating the legalization of prostitution, left the Louisiana’s Woman’s Suffrage Party because they weren’t radical enough, and finally, at nineteen, ran away to Brazil with a married Tulane University dean twice her age (White 17). The couple’s illicit flight caused international scandal, and further provided the raw material upon which Scott would later base her autobiography, *Escapade*.

“The qualities that were to characterize Scott throughout her lifetime seem to have been manifest from early youth,” writes Welker:

> First was a hatred of hypocrisy and its positive manifestations—an absolute honesty about herself which required that she explore every nuance of her thought and feeling with cold exactitude and that she hide nothing in her relations with others. [...] The second quality, and a corollary to honesty, was the sacredness of the individual’s right to his own inner vision. (10, 17)

Certainly, one consistent aspect of Scott’s personality, and much of her writing, was her conviction of unapologetic righteousness. Not only did she do the things a good girl wasn’t supposed to do, she examined them, laid them bare, in unflinching detail. Furthermore she claimed that her taboo subject matter proved neither sinful nor wrong, but rather worthy objects of artistic treatment, righteous in their honesty. Scott broke big rules, and remained
unrepentant. Punishment weighs heaviest on those who worship society's ideals, Scott suggests in *Escapade*; conversely, Scott embraces the excommunication: “It somehow pleases my vanity to know that I no longer have a respectable reputation,” she muses, as she reflects upon the newspaper articles that smear her name (33).

While Scott’s autobiographical treatment of her Brazilian experience would eventually incite critical dismay from the literary taste-makers of her time, she nonetheless enjoyed a position of some artistic authority throughout much of her career. “From approximately 1920-1940, Evelyn Scott was hailed as one of the leaders of the American modernist movement for her work in poetry, drama, and fiction,” writes Tyrer—and indeed such influential thinkers as Sinclair Lewis, Ludwig Lewisohn, and H.L. Mencken praised Scott’s work (diss 1). In fact, Scott’s early reputation as an author and critic was such that her literary recommendation helped launch not only William Faulkner’s, but also James Joyce’s, American reputation—indeed, Evelyn Scott wrote the first important review of *Ulysses*, one that would be used to defend the novel in court (Brantley 205). As Lola Scott succinctly proclaimed in 1921, "Scott will take high place in her generation" (qtd in Tyrer, diss 1).

Yet despite her respectable literary reputation, reviewers found *Escapade* to be a subject of little interest and no importance. Not merely the scandalous nature of the work’s content, but moreover the fact that the work was expressly autobiographical, fueled the fire of critical disdain. How dare this woman suppose that her inner life be of interest to any paying customer, critics demanded, especially when that inner life was so disturbing? While most of Scott’s works incited some degree of critical controversy, none proved so controversial as *Escapade*. Narrated throughout by the apparent inner consciousness of the
author, Scott herself referred to *Escapade* as “absolutely truthful” (Scott qtd in Callard 14). Her critics would gawk in shock at this apparently unwholesome and self-indulgent tale.

Despite the unconventional format of the work, readers generally accepted *Escapade* as a factual chronicle. Yet while the truthfulness of the work remained uncontested, the literary and moral worth of such an autobiography remained up for debate. When *Escapade* was published in 1923, the word “autobiography” was generally used to refer to a particular type of work—namely, the honorable account of a great man’s life—and on that count, Scott’s story failed to fit the bill. Indeed, the work’s lack of narrative linearity, its impressionistic renderings, and its focus on the internal life of the narrator caused contemporary readers some difficulty in classifying this book within traditional terms of autobiography. As one reviewer noted upon the book’s publication, “If autobiography is a calm and collected narration of events of a life in their chronological order, then it is a total loss and no insurance. On the contrary, if it is properly a portrait of a soul in torment then it is a masterpiece of autobiography” (“G.W.J.” 10).

Even in recent years, as scholars have come to view the autobiographical genre in broader terms, most critics still do not know how to classify *Escapade*. Peggy Bach calls *Escapade* an “imagist memoir” ("From Tennessee" 63); Andrea Powell Jenkins decides upon “experimental novel” (80); and Dorothy Scura refers to the work as an “unstable text” (288) and suggests that “the question of genre needs addressing”:

It is clearly autobiographical—Scott did spend several years in Brazil, in the same places and under the same circumstances related in *Escapade*. But the text also echoes other genres—the novel; the travel journal; in some respects, the diary. Moreover, a kind of fictional veil is erected in the narrative
that somehow locates the text outside the parameters of standard autobiography: Cyril, Scott’s common law husband, becomes John; their son, Creighton, becomes Jackie; Scott’s mother, Maude, becomes Nannette, and so on. Even the narrative style of *Escapade*—poetic and imagistic—subverts the typically factual and realistic autobiographical voice. And of course, the experimental ‘Shadow Play’ that functions as the final section of the book further complicates the issue of genre in its apparent incongruity with the preceding narrative. By thus defying conventional boundaries of both autobiography and fiction, *Escapade* spurns categorization. (11-12)

Indeed, while an unqualified characterization of this work as “autobiography” proves problematic to recent scholars, the fact remains that, at the time of the work’s publication, as well as within recent criticism, the acceptance of this work as the “truth” about the author persists. In fact, the public reception of the work—or, more accurately, the public backlash against the work—depended largely on the notion that *Escapade* tells a true story. Deemed sick and disturbed for her transgressions against her proper place as a Southern woman, Scott had no business writing an autobiography, the general consensus agreed. Her critics weren’t just mad about the story she was telling; they were mad that she was telling it.

As a young white woman of social standing from the American South, Scott’s ability to “rebel” was a social privilege. In order to rail against ideal womanhood, one must of course first be identified with it. “The heroine of the white South’s most cherished story about itself,” the Southern belle represented the sexual, racial, and moral purity of the white race (Roberts 102), and Scott’s renunciation of this role—that is, her “fall”—reflects
her initial position upon the pedestal. While women of color (and white women of certain “low” social backgrounds) were expected to behave badly, a young white woman who betrayed the laws of supposed racial moral superiority was labeled “sick.” This diagnosis thus helped preserve the ideal of white womanhood by framing the morally-impure as an unwell deviation rather than a representation of the norm.

While her apostasy may have pleased Scott, it certainly did not please her home community in Clarksville, who were scandalized by her adulterous liaison. Recording in *Escapade* her mother’s desperate reaction to her decision to run away with Cyril, Scott depicts a desperate scene in which “Nannette” took out “an old pistol which belonged to Uncle Alec and threatened to kill herself with it” (14). Cyril Kay-Scott elaborates on the ripples caused by their elopement in his own autobiography, *Life Is Too Short*, written twenty years after *Escapade* in 1943. “I had eloped with the only daughter of a well-known New Orleans family,” Kay-Scott recounts as he describes the fall-out:

> That was practically stop-press news, at least through the South. I realized there would be a scandal, and a big scandal, but I did not dream that there would be nation-wide scandal. [...] As our steamer plowed quietly through the calm sea, behind us in America headlines were shrieking from coast to coast. (173)

Scott nurtured a lasting desire “to protest the lingering antebellum tradition under which I grew up” (Scott qtd in Entzminger 95), and her international flight with Cyril on December 26, 1913 certainly flew in the face of years of Southern indoctrination. When, ten years later, Scott published a book about that experience, she transgressed even further. As a fallen woman, the least Scott could have done was felt guilty for her crimes—repentance, of
course, being the price of re-admittance into the fold. But Evelyn Scott did not feel bad, nor did she desire the pedestal being offered. As she would reflect years later in her second experimental autobiography, *Background in Tennessee*, “both literally and metaphorically, I have travelled far from the South of my childhood” (qtd in Entzminger 95).

Not only was Evelyn Scott not the “ideal” Southern woman, neither was she typical of her literary contemporaries within the Southern Renaissance guard, the *I’ll Take My Stand* Agrarian-types—writers such as John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Robert Penn Warren—who bemoaned the loss of Southern identity and culture to modernity, and called for a return to pre-industrial agrarian values industrialization. Scott, on the other hand, held no romantic ties to the South of the past and myth. In fact, she felt herself to be an exile, and identified only begrudgingly with the South. “Scott believed that her unorthodox behavior caused Tennessee to disown her, and she attempted for twenty years to retaliate and disown Tennessee,” explains Bach (“Foreground” 716). While the Agrarians mourned and celebrated the South of myth and legend, Scott instead distanced herself from the Southern romance and those who celebrated it:

> The Agrarians recognized Scott as an important southern writer and she agreed with some of the views they expressed in *I’ll Take My Stand* (1930). [...] But Scott felt the agrarians’ view of the South was a romantic one and that like many southerners whose very being was saturated with an either ‘before the war’ or ‘after the war’ time sense, they envisioned not only a South they had lost through the war, but a South that had never been. (“Foreground” 715)
If Scott were to be affiliated with any literary movement at all, most closely her work aligns with the principles of high modernism, an aesthetic in many ways exemplified in *Escapade*. Indeed, of the work, famed literary critic Ludwig Lewisohn wrote, “The book is written within an ultra-modern convention” (Lewisohn 141). However, beyond simply belonging among these artistic elite, her work arguably helped to form the foundation of the modernist aesthetic. Her early experimental texts preceded that of most of the now-famous male modernists (such as Hemingway, Faulkner, and Joyce) by several years (Tyrer, “A Bird” 45), and in these early works Scott employs a number of techniques that would later become aesthetic benchmarks of the movement, such as “exploration of self, stream-of-consciousness, disruption of narrative structure, montage, and the theme of Kunstlerroman” (Tyrer. “A Bird” 45). With critics from the 1920s and ‘30s moreover comparing Scott’s work to that of Woolf, Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Flaubert, and Joyce (Tyrer diss 1), Scott seems to have been not merely a participant but in fact a founder of what would become an intensely-masculinist literary movement.

Yet while Scott proved innovative in form and subject, an implicitly-male modernist literary establishment was almost categorically uninterested in women’s stories. Women’s stories, in fact, were precisely what male modernism was fleeing.

**Masculine Modernism**

Monika Faltejskova’s 2006 *Djuna Barnes, T.S. Eliot and the Gender Dynamics of Modernism* sheds much light on the modernist conventions that hemmed women writers out. Through her exploration of Djuna Barnes’ rise and fall, Faltejskova explores the ways
in which modernism was not only gendered masculine, but was moreover antagonistic to the so-called “feminization of culture.” Gender is at the heart of modernism’s making, suggests Faltejskova. Calling high modernism “an elitist and masculinist movement” (4) “formed as a reaction to the feminization of culture, fears of which pervaded the society around 1910” (14), Faltejskova claims that the modernist aesthetic had as its foundation the early twentieth century anxiety surrounding women’s rights and the artistic backlash that followed. Made anxious by early feminist and suffragist movements; disturbed further by middlebrow women authors dominating book sales, the male modernist aesthetic found its roots in direct opposition to all things “female.” Indeed, the “New Woman” of the early twentieth century was “perceived as both a cause and a symptom of cultural disintegration and social decline,” writes Faltejskova:

This was not only due to the crisis of gender definition that the New Woman represented and embodied through her challenges to Victorian ideas of femininity, but also in part due to the development of scientific discourses in the nineteenth century. The new sex science and the theory and practice of psychoanalysis claimed the authority of speaking about and for women. (23)

Yet despite the mounting cultural antagonism towards the voices of women, the 1920s and ‘30s proved a prolific time for female writers, even as social conservatives became less inclined to trust women’s self-authored stories, even as the literary elite categorically excluded most women’s writing from the realm of high art. As women writers formed professional writer circles, hosted literary salons, started magazines, and sold novels as quickly as they could write them, many of Scott’s female contemporaries enjoyed success on the literary scene. “However [...] the makers of high modernism, as it has come to be
known, did not see female literary practice as compatible with the modernist manifesto they were advocating,” writes Faltejskova (2):

Women were blamed by the turn-of-the-century critics [...] for increasing the demand for ‘low art,’ and writing popular books to meet that demand. Secondly, women were accused of making men incapable of producing great art, which was not degenerate and effeminate. Modernist writers and critics thus came to believe that the ‘novel’ as an art form suffered generic and gender degeneration and needed to be saved from feminization. (14) Academic institutions in the 1950s and 1960s solidified the masculine identity of modernism’s by engaging in “selective canonization” that wrote modernist women writers out of existence (Faltejskova 2). Not only had the founders of modernism expressly gendered the movement a manly resistance to a parasitic feminization of culture, this masculinization of the movement continued via scholars who “defined canonical modernism as the writing of a selective group of white, privileged men” (Faltejskova 1).

Faltejskova states that the goal of her study is to “prevent the ‘case of Djuna Barnes’ Nightwood’ from being seen as an isolated misfortune of an exceptionally gifted but misunderstood female writer, and to contextualize it as part of a conscious gendered strategy inherent in the very formation of Anglo-American modernism” (38). This study proposes a similar goal for Evelyn Scott, who like Barnes was also subject to “the gender politics involved in determining of literary value and the shaping of literary reputations during the transformation of literary criticism that began in the late 1920s and was fully established in the 1940s” (Overbye qtd in Scura xvi). Nightwood, Barnes’ lesbian tour de force, not surprisingly met a harsh critical reception, much as did Escapade. Barnes, like Scott, also fell from a place of high literary respectability into the shadows of former fame, only in recent
years receiving renewed attention from scholars. The censorship of *Escapade*, and the critical disgust that met its eventual publication, demonstrates (much like the "case of *Nightwood"*) the dilemma of the early twentieth century woman writer composing challenging and disturbing accounts. Scott wrote unruly women, and not only refused to punish them, but depicted them with dignity and pride. None of this was well-received by contemporary critics.

While Scott’s non-condemnatory treatment of the modern woman in *Escapade* was certainly not a popular approach of her time, she was far from the only writer of her generation to engage the figure of the dangerous modern woman. "The fact that the turn-of-the-century was a period of massive gender crisis played an extremely important role in the social and intellectual formation by which early twentieth-century fiction was produced," writes Faltejskova (22), as many writers of this time, both male and female, began composing fictional femme fatales reflective of the rise in women’s power. “By the 1920’s, the literary representation of the American girl had fully evolved into a modern woman who was independent, sexual, and convinced that she could achieve personal fulfillment outside the marital or familial relationship, which she viewed as a form of slavery," writes Tyrer, with Fitzgerald’s Daisy Buchanan, Hemingway’s Lady Brett Ashley, Stein’s Melanctha, Faulkner’s Caddy Compson, and Hurston’s Janie Crawford exemplifying this trend in representation (Tyrer, diss 41). While not always the case, these unruly female characters were usually punished by the end of the work, or at least finally judged as utterly contemptible. “Although women writers would experiment with presentations of this independent new woman in a more sympathetic light, the portrayals were nevertheless often pessimistic and the outcomes disastrous," writes Tyrer, citing the grim fates of Edith Wharton’s Lily Bart
(The House of Mirth) and Henrietta Stackpole (The Age of Innocence), as well as Antonia in Willa Cather’s My Antonia as evidence (Tyrer, diss 33).

Scott, however, made a habit of composing unrepentant and unpunished women, and she was among the few to do so. Or, perhaps more likely, she was among the few to gain a public voice doing so. Certainly, Scott was not alone in writing unruly women. One notable literary counterpart to Escapade’s protagonist might be Edna Pontellier, the protagonist of Kate Chopin’s 1899 novella The Awakening. Preceding the “Evelina” of Escapade by over two decades, Edna shares many important similarities with the protagonist of Escapade—both characters are eccentric, unapologetic woman who refuses to submit to shame. Despite the fact that Edna’s final fatal ending, self-selected though it may be, may smack of the punishment that Scott so stringently avoided, the similarities between the publication and critical reception woes that greeted both Chopin’s and Scott’s works are nonetheless remarkable.

Suppressed immediately after publication, then ignored for years before finally facing critical disdain, The Awakening might have escaped the censorship inflicted upon Escapade, but still suffered the burrs from an unfriendly reading public and literary establishment. “Conservative writers and critics found it difficult to acknowledge women as an authority on female experience and female sexuality,” Faltejskova suggests (29), and thus both The Awakening and Escapade, steeped as they were in explorations of female subjectivity and sensuality, were viewed with distrust. As an interesting side note, another literary contemporary, Charlotte Perkins-Gilman, faced similar publication troubles years earlier with “The Yellow Wallpaper” (1892), which also famously places at narrative center the consciousness of a “mad woman,” and further indicts the abuses of authority undertaken by
the paternalistic medical system of the early twentieth century. Clearly, publishers feared the backlash of a reading public not prepared to tango with women writers that burned the wrong idols.

With *Escapade*, Scott confronts this squeamish readership head-on, delivering a shameless examination of her mind and body, proudly claiming these subjects worthy of literary attention, and refusing to end her portrait with punishment or contrition. “I love myself entirely, completely, and I will not accept from them any criticism of my acts,” she asserts in *Escapade* (187), as throughout the work Scott remains not only unapologetic for her supposed crimes, but rather self-righteous about the absolute morality of her actions. Furthermore, Scott refuses any characterization of herself as a victim, as the acolytes of Southern mythology would wish to cast her, as she was indeed cast in the newspapers—the young Scott was only the naïve paramour of an old parasite, reporters insisted, a victim of a bad man. In fact, Scott hotly resented such characterizations of herself. Scott knew what she was “supposed” to be, and aggressively demanded the right to be just the opposite. Reviewers, of course, reacted with revulsion.

**A Sick Subjectivity**

On the whole, book reviewers criticized Scott’s work for being too “subjective” and of little interest to anyone beyond the writer herself. Regarding her subject matter—her inner consciousness, her body and its transformations, the sensual experience of maternity—reviewers decreed such topics morbid and appalling. As one reviewer, Henry Seidel Canby, perhaps most succinctly surmised, “In short, the book is diseased” (19).
In 2001, Paul Christian Jones catalogued some of the most prominent participants in this trend in 1920s criticism:

the New Republic review [...] says ‘Mrs. S’s view of the world will isolate itself from general experience and become a ‘case’—a pathological case at that;’

the Dial review [...] complains about being subjected to obstetrical woes and finally proves ‘more interesting to the writer than to the reader’; the New York Times review [...] laments that ‘unfortunately, every page is a personal record’; finally Cyril Kay-Scott’s assert[s] [that] the novel was ‘so subjective that it might as well have been written in Newark, New Jersey.’ (Jones 37)

This sick woman’s story was not worth listening to, critics roundly agreed. As another reviewer, Elmer Davis, surmised in The Springfield Republican: “Like most autobiographical documents the book is more interesting to the writer than the reader [...]. [T]he cash customers may legitimately ask for something a trifle more interesting or significant to themselves” (qtd in White 83).

Perhaps, however, the Boston Transcript review of Escapade authored by “D. L. M.” most powerfully impugns the subjectivity of the work, angrily joining in the critical chorus that characterized Scott’s life and work as pathological and worthless to the greater public. “Why should she imagine that we desire to read her autobiography?” “D.L.M.” demands. “It is gruesome and unrelieved, and much of it is undeniably distasteful. Its significance for any large number of people we doubt” (“D.L.M.” 6).

Beyond the outrage incited by Scott’s apparent assumption of the public value of her story, another major complaint that “D.L.M.” and his fellow reviewers leveled against Escapade was the “abnormal” nature of the writer’s mind. Scott’s outlook and subject matter
revealed an unwell mind, these readers insisted: “Her outlook is certainly abnormal and her mind [...] has the appearance of a sick mind,” writes “D.L.M.;” “we feel certain that no scientist nor physician would be much at a loss where to place such tendencies” (6). Notably, such paternalistic diagnostics as dished out by “D.L.M.” were frequent subjects of Scott’s denunciation throughout Escapade, especially in Scott’s accounts of her dealings with the obstetrician Dr. Januario (her resentment of this doctor I will explore in more depth later).

Henry Seidel Canby agreed with “D.L.M.”’s assessment of Scott’s mental illness. In his Literary Review assessment of Escapade, tellingly entitled “Morbid Art,” Canby levels many of the same indictments against Escapade that “D.L.M.” smugly issued. After determining that the “moral world of the book is lurid,” Canby concludes that Escapade “should never have been published in its present unhealthy form. The author’s mind is morbid [...] The world she sees is unnatural, [...] a mirror distorted by her own pathology (19). Not only did Scott have no business assuming that others would be interested in her autobiography, this reviewer suggested, she further insulted readers by daring to lead them through the twists and turns of an unwholesome and unsound mind.

Scott’s “unnatural world” as depicted in Escapade centered around her own mind and body, as well as her unromantic experiences of birth and injury—subject matter that clearly caused discomfort and dismay among an entirely male cohort of book reviewers. As for Alyse Gregory, reviewer for the Dial, these topics proved not only distasteful, but ultimately boring: “We are instructed in the pangs of childbirth, endure an ensuing obstetrical operation from which no details are spared,” writes Gregory. “We weary of Evelyn Scott’s
reiterated allusions to the contours and habits of her body” (598). Where her depictions failed to elicit revulsion, it seems, they instead brought forth only a disinterested yawn.

While her more generous reviewers conceded that Scott was talented—her work was “indeed literature, [...] the major portion of it belong[ing] to what we have in America of quite serious art,” Ludwig Lewisohn decreed—nonetheless, most critics agreed with Lewisohn’s final assessment—“Our period [...] needs plainer, manlier, more passionate expression”(141).

When considering the dismay with which the critics greeted *Escapade*, it must be noted that these unhappy readers had not even encountered Scott’s full text—the work was censored before publication. Not surprisingly, however, the very elements that were subject to censorship aligned well with the same offenses that inspired critical ire. As Scott explained in a 1923 letter to her friend Theodore Dreiser, *Escapade’s* publisher’s lawyers had proclaimed the work a “borderline book, which [...] would be considered, in its original form, a menace to American institutions “(Scott qtd in White 75); thus, to avoid legal suit, the publishing house required these segments to be cut from the manuscript before publication. In the same letter to Dreiser, Scott catalogues the offending material:

“‘I was requested to cut out all statements that I was proud of my relation to Cyril, all statements of my emotional rebellion when I’d [sic] rather die than marry to please people who were my moral inferiors. I was also requested to take out all physical statements about pregnancy because I was an unmarried mother, all remarks about giving milk or other indecencies.’” (Scott quoted in White 75)
One of Scott’s biographers, D.A. Callard, notes that, along with the suppressed passages relating to Scott’s sexuality and pregnancy, also suppressed were all accounts of bathroom functions (Callard 14). Of course, the notable implication of this censorship, in which accounts of non-ideal femininity were ranked alongside accounts of excrement, is that such explorations of a woman’s body proved as foul as anything humans could produce. In his *Literary Review* article, Canby makes this implied alignment explicit: “No one comes near her without a subtle transformation by which loathsomeness, if it is present (and it usually seems to be), is made manifest,” Canby writes. “If there is a child birth she witnesses it, if there is excrement about she sees it, if there is a beastly thought anywhere she detects it” (Canby 19). Here, Canby makes evident this unflattering comparison elsewhere only implied, as he ranks childbirth alongside feces and other “beastly” things. With such violent reaction to the censored text, one might only imagine what reaction the unedited manuscript would have generated.

The vitriol with which critics received her autobiography likely did not come as a shock to Scott, who was well-versed in the expectations of a conservative readership. Indeed, “Scott could hardly have been surprised by this response from a literary establishment which, she was well aware, little valued woman’s subjective experience and found accounts of pregnancy and maternity both irrelevant to male readers and unsuitable content for works of literature,” writes Jones (37). To be sure, Scott could not have been surprised when her autobiography, steeped in righteous self-examination and bereft of repentance, caused an uproar among critics who found her work tiresomely self-involved at best, dangerously immoral at worst. While, according to the aesthetics of the male modernist literary establishment, “women writers’ interest in portraying feelings and emotions was [...]

perceived as indulgence, which was considered effeminate and obscene” (Faltejskova 33), when Scott further filtered this “indulgence” through a tone of irreverent moral righteousness, the critical outrage proves unsurprising.

Throughout *Escapade*, Scott refuses to adopt the shame thrust upon her by public opinion; she refuses to act the role of the contrite reformed woman; she refuses to subject her autobiographical narrator to punishment for her actions. As earlier noted, this refusal of shame and punishment is unusual in the context of Scott’s literary contemporaries, since most wayward women characters generally receive some form of retribution throughout most modern American literature. Scott not only refuses shame and contrition, but instead feels proud of her acts, righteous in her honest living. As Scott considers the bad press she and “John” (AKA Cyril) receive back home, she summarily expresses the unapologetic attitude that so vexed readers:

Though I am at a loss to understand the unkind assumptions of the newspapers from home that, without a single fact as to what actually occurred, anathematize John and me in the most vulgar terms, the exposure of injustice gratifies me, and gives me an almost mystical assurance of my sense of right. Yes, I want to be an outcast in order to fully realize what human beings are capable of. Now I know that fear and cruelty underlie all of society’s protestations in favor of honesty and moral worth. (Scott 9)

In Scott’s opinion, “society was at fault, and the young rebel resolved to face that society with no remorse” (White 24).

Scott’s refusal to recognize herself as criminal was troubling to her readers. She was first a failed Southern woman, living far beyond the pale of behavioral prescriptions. Her
failure in this capacity—her status as a fallen woman—furthermore troubled her authorial legitimacy, as a male-dominated literary establishment paired with a public readership fearful of women’s advancement proved unsurprisingly reluctant to tolerate the musings of an unlawful and unrepentant woman.

While Scott’s actions were considered horrendously shameful back home in Tennessee—indeed, across the United States, and even into Britain—she was nonetheless cast in national press as a pathetic victim of a predatory man, a degrading experience she bitterly recounts in *Escapade*. With rumors and press back home painting John as a lascivious predator and Evelyn as a naïve girl, Scott protests, “What I resent most deeply is the attempt to deprive me of responsibility for my own acts, to have John sent to prison as though I had not equally selected the condition to which we have been brought!” (17). Here, Scott protests the indignity of her authority and agency being called into question. Yes, she ran away with a married man; yes, she has his child; further, she professes these experiences to be worthy of artistic representation, rather than sins to be atoned.

While Scott’s bold claims of self-love in the face of public condemnation certainly added to the critical assessment of her as unwell and unworthy of an audience, her sensual and often visceral depictions of pregnancy and motherhood fell far outside acceptable conventions as well. Pregnancy continued during much of Scott’s life to be considered a shameful condition (Jenkins 88). As the apparition of sexual activity, the visible proof of defilement, pregnancy insinuated more than was comfortable for polite society. For example, pregnant school teachers had to leave their positions before the pregnancy began to show. Just as smoking cigarettes and attending dance halls was not seeming behavior for a young
woman of respectability in the early twentieth century, neither was drawing attention to one’s pregnancy.

Throughout *Escapade*, the only sections in which Scott exhibits shame are in relation to her pregnant body. “Scott’s narrative persona […] is vividly aware of the transgressiveness of the maternal body,” writes Tim Edwards (8), and two very similar passages describe Scott’s experiences of indignity and violation by the knowing gaze of strange men. In the first passage, Scott writes, “I want to be proud of myself, and I am ashamed. […] Conscious of a kind of nudity, I try to ignore the men who stare at me” (5). In the second passage, she similarly reflects, “The consciousness that I am pregnant makes me feel helpless most of the time. I cannot bear to expose myself to the naked gaze of the men I see. It is almost as if they have touched me, and this uninvited contact is more than I can endure” (38). In both passages, Scott depicts her pregnant body as a bulls-eye for uninvited contact with unfriendly men, and an affront to her dignity.

Aware of the taboo surrounding the maternal body, Scott wonders “why the birth of a child appealed so little to the imagination of the artist. Why were all the great realistic novels of the world concerned with only one aspect of sex?” (58). In that spirit, Scott set out to “challenge this movement to reduce motherhood merely to a pleasant ‘mental,’ emotional, or even sentimental experience” (Jones 38), as she vividly depicts motherhood in all its sensual, painful physicality. As Scott explained to Dreiser, “she found it unbelievable that in ‘America, the great mother worshiping [sic] land,’ artists were discouraged or even prevented from depicting ‘mothers physical functioning’ because such images were considered objectionable by readers, editors, and courts” (Scura 312). Scott was aware that the subject was a closed one, yet nonetheless believed the experience of motherhood—not the mythic
motherhood ideals, but the gritty reality—to be a sorely neglected subject of American art, and she did her part to change that.

In a time in which male obstetricians were considered near-gods and the only possible deliverers of a safe birth, childbearing became a sterilized process that moved out of the hands of home-bound midwives and into the charge of men in hospitals. The safest course of birth belonged fully within the domain of the scientific man, the medical establishment decreed, and by the 1920s, general anesthetization of laboring mothers was almost universal—most women were not even conscious during the birth of their babies ("Childbirth in Early America). Women's bodies belonged under the control of male doctors, who were supposed to act as benign and logical architects of a complex scientific occurrence of birth. Scott's account of the traumatic birth of her son, attended by the brutal Doctor Januario, indicts this patriarchal set-up, laying bear the indignities of a woman treated only as a specimen for dissection.

Under Scott's pen, Januario emerges a sinister butcher, as a man that perceives her not as a human being with real needs, but rather as a hysterical woman not worth serious consideration. "He is the Devil," she writes of Januario. "I am afraid of him. As far as he is concerned, I am a mere thing on which he wants to operate" (66). Throughout the text, Januario, as well as the other doctor she encounters, Dr. Beard, treat Scott gruffly, dismiss her pain, call her a difficult patient, and blame her for their own medical missteps. When seeking treatment from Dr. Beard for chronic injuries caused by her son's birth, Scott encounters only paternalistic condescension: "Dr. Beard made no effort to conceal his impatience," she writes. "I was a hysterical woman and had no excuse for being disturbed by such an insignificant experience. His expression was of deliberate inattentiveness to all I
said” (113). In her depictions of medical men as power-abusers with little concern or understanding for the well-being of their female patients, Scott’s treatment of the medical establishment echoes sentiments raised in the “The Yellow Wallpaper.”

Interestingly, in his autobiography, Cyril Kay-Scott describes Dr. Januario as “the best Brazilian physician in town” (192). However, Kay-Scott’s approval of Januario comes as little surprise when considering another one of Kay-Scott’s remarks regarding his then-wife’s birthing experience: recounting the tale in which a local Brazilian woman gives birth in a field and then takes up her work again within the hour, Kay-Scott remarks of Scott’s obstetrical difficulties, “Civilized women are biologically incompetent” (193). Clearly, along with Scott’s doctors, Kay-Scott also finds Scott’s trauma and injuries the fault of her own incompetence, rather than any carelessness on the part of her doctors. The tendency to revere without question the correctness of the medical establishment, the tendency to dismiss as hysterical the complaints of an injured woman, has proven a historically tenacious one. Scott’s indictment of these doctors, her portrayal of them as less than beneficent deliverers, was a truly bold move.

In the 1920s, the meaning of motherhood was undergoing transformation from the “angel in the home” to the scientific logician. Motherhood, which had for the last century stood for an exalted source of unconditional love, an emotional well of giving, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century began to adapt to scientific notions, as the theories of Charles Darwin influenced physicians, academic experts, educators, philanthropists, reformers, and women’s groups (such as the National Congress of Mothers) to “call for the ‘reconstruction of motherhood’ along ‘scientific’ lines” (Mintz). By the 1920s, the new scientific approach led to mothering standards that severely limited her physical and emo-
tional contact with her child. “Early twentieth century childrearing advice recommended a
degree of maternal detachment that we would find surprising today,” writes Steven Mintz:
Childrearing experts advised mothers to establish strict schedules for their children and
avoid picking them up or caressing them. Writing in the 1920s, behaviorist psychologist
John Watson warned about ‘the dangers of too much mother love’; and a Children’s Bureau
manual expressed concern that maternal love presented mothers from adopting ‘the most
intelligent approach to many problems of childhood.’

Thus Scott’s intensely sensual description of her relationship with her infant son
proves another bold move on her part, especially during this period of detached mothering
standards. “My abandon to him was humiliating and sweet like abandon to a lover,” Scott
reflects as she nurses her new baby. “I thought, It is my body I give to him. And I was sur-
prised in recognizing this. I had imagined maternity as something thin and ideal” (60). So-
ciety, too, had imagined maternity as something thin and ideal—and wanted to keep it that
way. Particularly “thin and ideal” was to be the maternal state of the Southern white wom-
an—while the younger, unmarried “belle” was expected to flaunt a sort of coquettish sexual-
ity, the Southern matron was expected to appear sexually blank, a pure vessel of racial
and moral purity, the nurturer of new generations. Further, in line with the new scientific
motherhood, this mother must not get too physically or emotionally close. Yet as Scott as-
serts, “It is not the ideal conception of a child which appeals to me,” but the sensual experi-
ence, the feel of weak hands upon me, of eager lips at my breast”(158), she flies in the face
of these sterile maternal ideals.

Indeed Scott’s account of “giving her body” to her child, her professed desire for “ea-
ger lips at [her] breast,” and her delight in the “heavy sensuality” of it all, prove uncharac-
teristic inclusions in the published volume, as apparently all direct references to breastfeeding were censored before publication. Yet these rare inclusions, these heady descriptions of a love that was supposed to be sterilized, certainly caused a conservative readership to squirm, likely further encouraging the popular notion of Scott’s mind as unwell. Motherhood, after all, could not really be like this: this woman writer must be insane.

Conclusion

Scott’s reputation as a serious artist/sick woman, evident in its nascent form throughout the reviews that greeted the work’s publication, has proven to have a long shelf life. Twenty years beyond Escapade’s publication, Cyril Kay-Scott echoes this characterization in his autobiography. What follows is the most detailed depiction that Kay-Scott provides of his second wife:

“In Elsie Dunn I found one of the few women I had known up to that time with whom I could discuss philosophy. She had an unusually brilliant mind with which, had she been able to develop the character and emotional stability to match, she could have made herself a very famous woman. She did, in the years to come, attain fame through her books and, had she treasured fewer personal caprices, possibly might have become out greatest American writer” (Kay-Scott 168).

Scott was a brilliant woman whose misfortunes could be blamed only on her emotional instability and self-involvement, Kay-Scott suggests, as in accord with the critical consensus of two decades earlier, Kay-Scott concludes that Scott was a talented writer with an unwell mind.
This popular estimation of Scott can be explained by the following equation: Evelyn Scott’s transgressions against (first) white Southern aristocratic womanhood, paired with her transgressions against (second) the masculinist conventions of the high modernists, has resulted in the enduring characterization of the author as a potentially-ingenious, yet unwell and finally unimportant writer.

Although this damning categorization of the author depends as much upon her racial and social standing as her gender, from the beginning of her literary recovery little attention has been given to these specificities. Instead, critics have placed her work almost exclusively within the context of the modernist literary aesthetic, understanding the author as simply a woman silenced from the American literary canon, a trend that started with Welker’s 1958 dissertation *Evelyn Scott: A Literary Biography*. Unlike both Nella Larsen and Anzia Yezierska, whose works were rediscovered within a rather concentrated period of the 1970s rise in feminist multiculturalism, Scott’s whiteness—that is, her racial “blacksness”—did not place her within the same literary revival, her reentry into literary studies happening more gradually, over a longer span of time, reaching its pinnacle in the 1990s when scholars began to take a new look at modernism, challenging the traditional canon of white men for more diverse views of modern America. Evelyn Scott can only be understood in this racially-blank framework of gender, however, because of her whiteness and social standing. Only in recent years—particularly with Scura’s 2001 collection of essays, *Evelyn Scott: Recovering a Lost Modernist* collection, has Scott and her work begun to be considered in terms of race and class as well.

As the myths of Southern womanhood must endure despite individual proofs otherwise, Scott’s transgressions did not problematize ideals, but instead resulted in the public
relegation of her own unorthodox actions into the realm of madness. As Aída Hutado explains, “When white middle-class women rebel, they are accused of mental illness and placed in mental institutions. When people of Color rebel, they are accused of violence and placed in prisons. This difference in treatment is related to the distance of each group from the centers of power” (Hutado 19). Without a doubt, Evelyn Scott’s position as a blueblood white Southern woman allotted her the precarious privilege of being considered crazy rather than a typical manifestation of her people’s natural tendencies. For other women—those of color, or of low social standing—wild acts would be considered natural extensions of their uncivilized blood, fodder in the push for continued racial and class injustice. While Scott’s relegation as mentally-ill can be seen in this light as a racial and class privilege (and indeed, it is), the assumption of her madness effectively undercut much serious consideration of the woman and her art.

To be fair, later in life Scott certainly exhibited signs of mental illness, manifest primarily in the form of paranoid delusions. In the 1940s, she: writes to the FBI about her suspicions of communist goings-on in the WPA artists’ project; undergoes a brief conversion to Catholicism; accuses people are stealing her manuscripts; accuses people of altering Kay-Scott’s manuscript (so shocked was she by his denigrating portrayal of her). The crest of her mental instability during this period occurred at a particularly difficult time in her life: her second and current husband John Metcalf had been called into military service; her ailing mother was left in Evelyn’s care; her son (the baby in Escapade) as well as Cyril Kay-Scott now refused all contact with her; she suffered a stroke that left her hearing voices (Tyrer, diss 11). With her publishing successes falling off and her mental health worsening, the admiration she had once received from other writers turned to pity, and her literary
reputation became lost beneath the juicy details of her demise. Scott’s battles with mental illness late in her life “eventually led both enemies and admirers to attribute not only her eccentric behavior at the time, but, conveniently, her whole life of vocal rebellion to mental instability” (White 3).

Even Scott’s literary champions continue to fall back on wide-stroke depiction of Scott as a woman not right in the head, finally the author of her own failure. Callard, for example, calls Evelyn “adept at hysterics” as he frames Cyril as a martyr subject to his wife’s constant battiness (17). Indeed, throughout a number of biographical accounts of Scott’s life, Kay-Scott is portrayed as good guy beset with a difficult woman. Even White, one of Scott’s greatest critical advocates, favors Kay-Scott’s account of the couple’s escapade over Scott’s own. Ranking as truth Kay-Scott’s unromantic assertion that his elopement with Scott occurred only due to lack of other female applicants—“Miss Dunn was the only woman I knew at the time who would consent to go to the tropics,” Kay-Scott unceremoniously proclaimed (168)—White argues that “Elsie, on the other hand, fabricated for herself a romantic idyll in which two lovers would sail off together, never again to be bothered by society’s strict codes” (White 20). One must wonder—why does White accept Kay-Scott’s version of events as the fact of the matter, while Scott’s version gets relegated within the realm of fantasy? This easy assumption of Scott as unreliable narrator proves part and parcel of the author’s remaining reputation.

Through Scott’s life, her hierarchy of attention ran along the same lines as did Yezierska’s: first her literary work, next her devotion to her husbands, and finally her child’s and her own welfare. “For a male writer to embrace values so ordered has always been acceptable,” writes White,
But in the early decades of the twentieth century, for a woman to value career over family—especially over her child—was an unthinkable sin against the sacred duties of motherhood. Such societal conditions dictated not only that Evelyn Scott was an unworthy mother but that her position as ‘woman writer’ was therefore also corrupt. (162)

To be sure, Scott’s unwillingness to play any of her proper social roles, and her resulting relegation as sick woman, lastingly tainted her literary reputation. In Scott’s own time, high modernist taste makers, already antagonistic to even the most ideal versions of femininity, found Escapade, this autobiography by an unrepentant fallen woman, particularly easy to dismiss. “I had uncovered a story of failure,” Callard concludes at the end of his biography of the author (188). Certainly, it is under this assumption—that Scott is a failure—that much of Scott scholarship gets conducted.
CONCLUSION: MALLEABLE IDENTITIES

Nella Larsen, Anzia Yezierska, and Evelyn Scott broke different laws—indeed, they lived under different laws—but each of these women, even in the writing of their stories, behaved badly. Among their peers and contemporary critics, these women’s works were classified as dangerous, or bad writing, or unbelievable, or full of outright lies. Yet fifty years later, when feminists and multiculturalists of the 1970s began the work of unearthing their literary foremothers, these once-damned writers were resurrected and reframed.

To the feminist critics of the 1970s who championed these writers’ work, no longer was Larsen an unimportant member of the Harlem rear guard, as instead she rejoined the ranks of the Harlem elite, her novels praised for voicing the silenced black female perspective. No longer was Anzia Yezierska a forgotten middlebrow, as her independence and irreverence earned her recognition as both as a Jewish literary foremother as well as a proto-feminist. No longer was Evelyn Scott a mad woman with a failed career—she was a founding mother of the modernist movement. Along with the rediscovery of these women’s work arose entirely new ways of thinking about these women, ways that were at times constructed deliberately in contrast to previously-held popular opinions. The nature of these writers’ public personas—that is, whom they have been (and are) perceived to be within the public eye—fluctuates along with changing needs of the discourse communities evaluating their work.

Therefore, not only are these marginal writers and their protagonists perpetually in flux in terms of their own self-identification, not only do their marginal statuses, as a provisional members among a number of exclusive communities, keep them always changing, always adapting themselves, becoming, it may seem, different people in different settings—
but these marginal characters are moreover perpetually in flux within the changing discourses that attempt to name them. In other words, as historical circumstances change, as readers change, as different discourse communities, in different times, engage these women's writing, the ambivalence and ambiguity characteristic of Larsen, Yezierska, and Scott's texts makes their works particularly susceptible to wildly different interpretations and even contradictory political deployments. Just as Larsen's novels were in their own time largely read as an uncomplicated endorsement of bourgeois pretensions, only to be re-framed by the black feminists of the 1970s as a chronicle of the experiences of a subversive black woman; just as Yezierska was once read as uncomplicatedly pro-American by the Progressive-era audience that wanted to believe in the goodness of assimilation, but fifty years later reframed as an enemy of the patriarchy by second-wavers looking for foremothers; just as the intensely subjective nature of *Escapade* caused 1920s reviewers to dismiss the work as valuable literature, but that same autobiographical quality has inspired a new generation of critics to champion her work—changing times and changing frameworks engender new readings of these women, and with each new reading, we imagine we've finally hit on the truth, ended the ambiguity by at last naming them correctly.

These writers became famous in an era that was decidedly segregationist and nationalistic. The early twentieth century was marked by anxiety over unprecedented immigration, paranoia over “passing,” an explosion of lynchings, and the rise of the KKK—by the early ’20s, the focus was on drawing lines and guarding borders, and the claim to American identity was at a premium. What, exactly, constituted “American,” and who deserved the fruits of citizenship? This was not an era friendly to cultural hybridity: a person must be one or the other race, class, gender, nationality—being mixed was, literally, not an option,
and by 1928 "mulatto" was removed from the U.S. Census. Paradoxically, this intense segregationist mindset informed pro-assimilationism, as well, as some—but not all—cultural outsiders were encouraged to shed their old skin and be born anew in the (implicitly-WASP) American Way. Notably, while those who could potentially eventually pass as white—Jews, for example—were encouraged to assimilate, African-Americans were instead the object of segregation, never invited within the fold. This either-or framework informed the 1920s attempts to categorize Larsen, Yezierska, and Scott into ready-made forms of being—and when finding these women unable to fit any comfortable mold, determining their art and their words to be less than worthy of serious consideration, their work was delegitimized within the court of public and critical opinion. They would not be heard from again for nearly fifty years.

The 1970s scholars responsible for these writers’ revival were operating under a very different framework than the first round of critics to tackle these writer’s texts. Along with the rise of feminism and multiculturalism came the celebration of difference. The call of action of the day was the restoration of buried voices to the canon. This was the era in which identity politics began to pick up steam, and coalitions among women were being formed based upon shared experiences. Feminism(s) became more multiple and specific, as in rejection of America’s implicitly white middle-class feminism, women of color began to draw attention to the complicating factors of race, class, and nationality that marked their experience.

Yet just as the era of identity politics was born of an attention to diversity and specificity, so would attention to diversity and specificity become its undoing. As questions of how to tackle the differences among women became prominent, “differences (of power,
privilege, location and oppression)” (Lloyd 6), the presence of these very differences, even within the subcultures of shared experience, compromised any attempt to posit any collective history. Situating a certain experience as representative of a group, even a minutely-specified group, elevates a particular experience to the status of the authentic experience, thus making a monolith of cultural identity where the goal was to recognize multiplicity. Even within the deliberately nuanced subcultures of coalition that came to full fruition during this era of feminism and multiculturalism, there existed frameworks for authentic and non-authentic experience that challenged efforts for communal coalition.

With the advent of postmodernism and its critiques of the stable subject, positioning these writers as representative of certain ethnic groups became further problematized. “Feminist responses [to postmodernism] have been divided,” writes Lloyd, between those wedded to the belief that without a stable subject feminist politics is impossible (since postmodernism and poststructuralism allegedly disallows truth claims, decentres the subject, and as such destroys the capacity for agency so necessary to feminist politics), and those interested in pursuing some poststructuralist or postmodern insights in order to better understand, acknowledge and resist the power relations which constitute selves in the first place” (Lloyd 14).

Indeed, the advent of postmodernism changed feminism fundamentally, calling any claim to an essential “female” self, “African-American female” self, “Asian-American-lesbian-female” self—calling any claim to any coalitional self at all, no matter how increasingly specified and hyphenated—into question. However, “Feminism does not need the stable unitary subject to guarantee its politics,” Lloyd suggests—“It needs a deeper un-
standing of the political nature of subjectivity” (11). Such an investigation into the politics of subjectivity has been the goal of this dissertation.

Identities, being always contextual and in flux, are thus open to any number of interpretations and political deployments. One individual can be made to mean what the reader desires that individual to mean, although this malleable quality is more prominent in some individuals than others. The particular susceptibility of certain ambiguous individuals—people whom critics have variously called border figures, mestizas, hybrids, and so on—to be conceptualized in wildly different ways by their readers, their public selves constructed to stand for the political needs of the community doing the reading, demonstrates in high relief the power that public opinion holds in the construction of private identities.

For writers such as Larsen, Yezierska, and Scott, each marginal women straddling community boundaries and challenging expectations of what women in their social position could be, do, or express—the responses to these writers and the ambivalent texts they produce exemplify the ways in which a single text can be deployed to mean very different things to different people in different times. Moreover, the things that they mean to certain people—the taste-makers, influential critics, powerful scholars—then becomes the Truth about these difficult-to-pin-down women, the canonical way of understanding what was previously impossible to categorize. As each generation and discourse community decrees who and what these women stand for, that reading becomes the correct way of understanding these mysterious figures, for once and for all. What these women used to mean becomes “wrong,” what they mean to us now, “right.” Attempts at categorization—attempts to place individuals within one or the other ready-made social position—are always attempts at naming the Truth hidden within the mystery.
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