

Beyond Black and White: Visualizing Cultural Identity Amidst Racial Anxiety and
Nativism in American Modernist Novels

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“Peering into the interstices, one must reverse the processes by which the subject was overshadowed, hoping at the same time to expose those very processes.”

- George Hutchinson, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*

Abstract

Walter Benn Michaels' *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* highlights that the search for identity is a mutual project of both nativism and Modernism and reveals how relevant racial identity is in American Modernism. While this is an important relationship in American Modernism, I argue that many recent studies following Michaels' legacy of scholarship on race and nativism in modern American literature reduce individual authors' projects, too often interpreting them all to have similar anxieties and desires for American racial identity and citing the presence of racial tropes as evidence of the authors' own social and political arguments. Michaels set a precedent of overlooking the aesthetic in critical examinations of racial identity in American modernist texts, but I argue that aesthetic spaces are often the spaces where authors work through issues of race and identity and that aesthetics are crucial to understanding identity formation in many American modernist novels. Modernism is a movement that explores the idea that identity is not one-dimensional or whole, and I wish to illustrate a more kaleidoscopic view of racial aesthetics in American Modernism, exploring the complexity and variations of race presented by a variety of authors. Various American authors come to both Modernism and race in different ways and have unique projects and perspectives about racial identity. I wish to broaden the scope of conversation surrounding American Modernism and race, and I hope to illuminate the significance of examining the various and unique aesthetic elements at play in individual works of modern American fiction. I will examine works by Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen to argue that race and Modernism have a more complicated relationship than much scholarship acknowledges and that the nativist and racial language and themes presented by many American modernist writers can be read more richly according to the various narrative perspectives and projects of the writers using them.

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Introduction

Nativism is by nature about controlling the collective, about perceiving a secure, shared identity, and about fearing a perceived corruption from the intrusion of outside peoples, such as people of certain races or immigrants from certain areas. As Walter Benn Michaels presented in *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995), nativism permeated all areas of modern American culture. It is often related to issues of eugenic thinking and associated with the biological ideas of bloodlines and breeding. It fueled economic and political perspectives, as many reacted in fear of outside Others invading the secure collective, seeing them as thieving and threatening to financial, economic, and political stability and comfort. I hope to build from this scholarship and to expand its scope by examining the individual works within this context on their own terms, instead of examining them so as to fit the novels into generalized readings with their contemporaries. As opposed to reading more broadly to reveal the larger trend in American Modernism as Michaels has already done, I hope to read to reveal the vast body of ideas, perspectives, and details that have been overlooked in the attempt to focus on what American modernist novels have in common.

Nativism and its racial anxieties generated clear cultural and social preoccupations. However, American modernist literary texts are rarely as straightforward and definite within these general categorizations as scholars attempt to suggest that they are. Significantly, Walter Benn Michaels exercises an approach in the structure of *Our America* that emphasizes this tendency. Michaels organizes *Our America* thematically, according to topics such as “A Family Matter” or “The Vanishing American.”¹ As a result, he groups various authors and works, such

¹ “A Family Matter” and “The Vanishing American” are chapter titles in Walter Benn Michaels’ *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*.

as F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, Ernest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, and Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* all within the same chapter, even often within the same page, forcing these very different texts into one generalized reading. While this reading serves to highlight the abundance of significant material that the novels provide that illustrates the widespread occurrence of nativism in American novelist's engagements with Modernism, Michaels' reading loses the nuance of the unique perspectives and projects that each of these authors presents regarding racial anxiety and nativism. This tendency to interpret texts according to generalized cultural and sociological readings tends to overlook the texts' and authors' unique and various vantage points within these larger trends. One of the most significant repercussions of this tendency is the overlooking of the uniqueness of each individual author's perspective and project within the visual and aesthetic spaces of their novel. By this, I mean the illustrations and aesthetic strategies employed by an author to emphasize that which is strikingly visual in a text to a certain effect. While Michaels is not interested in these spaces in his project, I argue that these spaces are often rich and complicated spaces of exploration that contribute important material to discussions of race and identity, particularly because these themes are best described in terms of the visible. For example, identity can be obscured or refuted, making someone less visible, or someone can be visibly marked as an Other by certain demarcations, which can be damaging to his or her social identity. Therefore, I suggest aesthetic spaces in American modernist novels explore important aspects of racial anxiety, nativism, and cultural identity.

Michaels set a precedent of overlooking the aesthetic in critical examinations of racial identity in American modernist texts, but I argue that aesthetic spaces are often the spaces where authors work through issues of race and identity and that aesthetics are crucial to understanding identity formation in many American modernist novels. I want to engage more intimately with

the ideological aspects of American modernist literature by providing space to examine individual texts and their unique engagements with certain ideas and questions that function within the larger scope of racial anxiety, nativism, and modernism. Specifically, by providing readings that focus on how authors and texts visualize race and nativism, I hope to illustrate how this approach can expand scholarship that explores the relationship between nativism and American Modernism. I suggest that careful evaluation of the aesthetic and visual elements in these texts raises significant questions and provides important details. Modernism is a movement that explores the idea that identity is not one-dimensional and whole, and I wish to illustrate a more kaleidoscopic view of racial aesthetics in American Modernism, exploring the complexity and variation of racial identity presented by a variety of authors. Various American authors come to both Modernism and race in different ways. They have unique projects and perspectives about racial identity that consistently expand conversations surrounding culture and identity. I argue that many recent studies following Michaels' legacy of scholarship on race and nativism in modern American literature reduce individual authors' projects, too often interpreting them all to have similar anxieties and desires for American racial identity and citing the presence of racial tropes as evidence of the authors' own social and political arguments. I certainly want to acknowledge that the search for identity was provoked, encouraged, and fueled by nativism in America in the 1920s, but I also wish to complicate and expand the ways that scholars understand various authors to have experienced this relationship. The aesthetic and visual elements of various American modernist texts provide rich spaces that are crucially entangled with racial themes that preoccupy studies of cultural and sociological trends. They are not straightforward or easily categorized, but this is what makes them valuable opportunities to expand the critical conversation. I hope to illuminate the significance of examining the various

and unique aesthetic elements at play in individual works of modern American novels by revealing how authors work through the complexities of identity formation and racial identity in aesthetic spaces.

I hope to more richly identify that many modern American authors were using race to highlight the complications of identity in the modern era. I will examine individual works on their own terms within their own chapters, as opposed to including chapters where multiple unique texts are forced into the same uniform generalizations. I hope to illuminate specific projects and their individual contributions to the landscape of American Modernism without the danger of misrepresenting them. In the process of engaging with distinctive explorations of visualizing identity amidst racial anxieties and nativism, I hope that highlighting and comparing unique projects side-by-side provides a more holistic and inclusive portrait of American modernist novels and authors of the 1920s. I hope to bring out of obscurity lost explorations and perspectives of race and identity in American modernity that can help to reconstruct a more detailed and accurate understanding of the nuances and complexities of this field of study.

I argue that, often, the aesthetic or the visual is not merely art for art's sake, but art that the author uses to draw the reader's attention to an important theme or social construct that the novel explores. I argue that reading for style and aesthetic and reading for a text's engagement with societal contexts and constructs need not be at odds in scholarship regarding race and American Modernism. Often, to read a text's unique aesthetic as simply a style, without considering whether that style might be constructed to reveal or comment on significant themes or social constructs regarding race and nativism, is to miss rewarding and rich readings of many American modernist novels, particularly because race was and still is commonly understood on terms that are very significantly visual. The aesthetic and visual elements of many novels engage

heavily with racialized descriptions and styles that should not be overlooked by scholarship interested in the social and cultural aspects of American modernist novels.

I will examine novels by Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen to argue that race and Modernism have a more complicated relationship than much scholarship acknowledges and that the nativist and racial language and themes presented by many American modernist writers can be read more richly according to the various perspectives and projects of the writers using them. This project exists because I want to try to present a more nuanced and complicated overview of American Modernism and the various authors' approaches to identity, culture, racism, and nativism that comprise it. Rather than trying to prove that Modernism and nativism have common trends and patterns among authors and works, as Michaels and others have already done to great effect, I want to show how vastly different projects employ these trends on the aesthetic level in order to enrich themes of modern racial identity that have been too neatly confined into homogenous, broad categories. In an effort to embrace the kaleidoscopic lens of Modernism's scope, I wish, now that Michaels and others have successfully proven that there is a crucial and unbreakable link between nativism, race, and American Modernism, to zoom the lens back out and to appreciate the differences, the span, the scope, and the details of American Modernism's relationship with these racial elements. I hope to expand the horizon of scholarship on this subject. It is my aim to move beyond simply registering nativist elements and making claims that an author indulged in them. I will explore the typically poignant and often complex and indistinct aesthetic spaces at play in the various artistic projects presented by a range of modern American authors in an effort to reinvigorate and expand the discussion surrounding race and identity in American Modernism studies. In doing so, I hope to illustrate that it is through

aesthetics that these authors work through, examine, and reveal issues of identity and racial anxieties.

The first chapter, “The Aesthetics of Exclusion: The Unreliable Construction of Nativism in Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*,” explores the complicated aesthetic of Willa Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, which endows its main character with an aestheticized nativist logic that fights with inherent contradictions in the text, imbuing the novel with a complicated aesthetic project. Professor Godfrey St. Peter uses aesthetics to determine readings of people that work to construct his desired identities for them. However, though the Professor tries to generate his desired identities for certain characters in the novel through his aesthetic constructions, the text clearly works to destabilize these constructions and to indicate that they are not reliable articulations of those characters. This chapter will focus on the Professor’s aesthetic and the ways in which it is complicated and destabilized by the novel’s resistance to its logic. Far more than merely revealing the exclusionary boundaries surrounding race and identity that pervade her world, I will further emphasize and illuminate the ways in which Cather’s novel explores, disrupts, and complicates these boundaries.

The second chapter, “The Invisible Man: The Black Presence and Its Impact in F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*,” examines a novel published in the same year as Cather’s *The Professor’s House*, F. Scott Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*. I have selected this novel in order to illustrate that there is still much work to do in the field of racial anxiety, nativism, and American Modernism even with texts that have amassed large bodies of scholarship due to their privileged status in academia. While scholarship surrounding race in *The Great Gatsby* has been developing since the 1990s, this novel has frequently fallen victim to generalized interpretations by scholars in the wake of Walter Benn Michaels’ and Jeffrey Louis Decker’s work revealing this text’s

relationship to nativism. In this chapter, I offer a reading of this well-known novel that draws attention to the text's focus on visibility, invisibility, and social identity. *The Great Gatsby* is often considered a standard read in conceptualizing modern New York fiction, at least within the white elite milieu. It paints a concise, yet saturated, portrait of the challenges and disillusionment associated with American modernity, and I suggest that there is more detail to examine within the white elite milieu's awareness of racial issues in this modernity. I argue that this is a novel in which examining aesthetics and the language detailing visibility is crucial for understanding how the novel works through issues of race and identity. I propose that this novel is constructed to lead readers to see and sympathize with figures that society works to obscure. Using the complicated and tragic figure of Jay Gatsby, the novel leads readers to focus on and to invest in a figure attempting to leave the obscured space of society into the restricted, visible space. Significantly, the African American figures in the novel are attached to the sympathetic figure fighting a society that renders him unnoticed or, when in the restricted visible space, aesthetically and visibly Othered. Gatsby's attempt to aesthetically construct a visible identity for himself and Nick's attempt to aesthetically construct a visible identity for an overlooked African American character are ultimately thwarted over the course of the novel, but readers are left mourning this failure with the narrator. This structure reveals the significance of the relationship between identity, race, visibility, and aesthetics in the novel. I argue that this reading broadens the critical discussion about *The Great Gatsby*, identity, and race, which in turn broadens the critical discussion of American modernists' scope of experience and portrayal of racial anxiety, nativism, identity, and modernity.

The final chapter, "No, Forever!": An Aesthetic Rejection of Modern Constraints in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," examines Nella Larsen's distinctive and powerful voice on modernity,

visibility, aesthetics, and racial identity. Despite Larsen's unique and forceful rejection of society's constraints on individual identity, *Quicksand* and Nella Larsen herself are often misread according to preconceived expectations of tragic mulatto tales or female writers of the Harlem Renaissance. I argue that Nella Larsen uses vivid colors and strikingly aesthetic descriptions to simultaneously highlight and complicate the boundaries of race and identity enforced by modern culture. She illuminates and complicates the space in between "black" and "white" and resists concrete categorizations. Larsen's aesthetic and illustration of the fragmented and racially complicated modern identity offer a useful portrait of American Modernism.

Chapter I: The Aesthetics of Exclusion: The Unreliable Construction of Nativism in Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*

Musingly aestheticizing the natural October landscape that has drifted into his home, Professor Godfrey St. Peter notes that nature benefits from some aesthetic molding: "It struck him that the seasons sometimes gain by being brought into the house, just as they gain by being brought into painting, and into poetry. The hand, fastidious and bold, which selected and placed-it was that which made the difference. In Nature there is no selection" (61). Simultaneously appearing to reject natural selection and enforcing the influence and necessity of some "selection" and "placement" through aesthetics, the Professor's philosophy illustrates how Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* underscores the complexity of the relationship between aesthetics, identity, and the politics of culture, while emphasizing the paradoxical failures of socially-influenced biological and aesthetic racial systems of logic in place in the 1920s.

The Professor's House, published in 1925, was published amidst the racial exclusion and the prominent desire to practice racial selection in American society, through both art and science. Nativism-inspired rhetoric was widely circulated in early twentieth-century America, spreading paranoia about non-Nordic peoples. As Betsy Nies explains:

In the United States, such social stratifications found their challenge in the 1920s when a predominantly white Protestant population from Northern Europe found itself confronting large numbers of immigrants from Southeastern and Central Europe who brought with them differences in language, region, and culture.

Eugenics, a racial science that heralded the Nordic or Northern European descendant as the whitest and most superior of the white European 'races,' gained

ground as the newcomers arrived in droves, settling in Northeastern cities in record numbers.²

Many scholars have written about this nativist phenomenon and its influence on culture and literature. Walter Benn Michaels in *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism* (1995) emphasizes the significance of the relationship between nativism and Modernism, as both seek “to work out the meaning of the commitment to identity-linguistic, national, cultural, and racial (3). Although Michaels’ account of Cather’s *The Professor’s House* distinguishes the important connection between Louie as a threatening racial outsider and the Professor’s family’s purity and security, he reads over the significant nuance and complexity of the aesthetics of racism, or exclusion. By the terms “aesthetics of racism” and “aesthetics of exclusion,” I mean the style of applying visual details to construct the characteristics and features of identity of Others in order to accommodate interpretations of desired exclusion. I argue that such aesthetics of exclusion are prominently at work in the *The Professor’s House*.

Ultimately, I wish to illustrate that the aesthetics of exclusion in this novel are an appropriated form of biological determinism, which I will refer to as “aesthetic determinism.” An important level of the complexity of this aesthetic detail in *The Professor’s House* involves a significant influence from the scientific trends surrounding racism of the 1920s. In an account of the science of exclusion, Stephen Jay Gould’s *The Mismeasure of Man* (1981) discusses biological determinism. Gould defines biological determinism: “It holds that shared behavioral norms, and the social and economic differences between human groups-primarily races, classes, and sexes-arise from inherited, inborn distinctions and that society, in this sense, is an accurate reflection of biology” (20). Gould describes the influence of culture, social trends, and structures

² From page 2 of Betsy Nies’ book, *Eugenic Fantasies: Racial Ideology in the Literature and Popular Culture of 1920s*. Routledge, 2002.

on the practice of biology. He claims that, “science must be understood as a social phenomenon, a gutsy, human experience, not the work of robots programmed to collect pure information...Science, since people must do it, is a socially embedded activity. It progresses by hunch, vision, or intuition” (21-2). I suggest that this argument can be extended to science and society’s influence on the aesthetic of novelists and that *The Professor’s House* vividly demonstrates this. The Professor’s aesthetic determinism is not art in isolation from cultural influence and is clearly still dependent on the structure of biological determinism, exhibiting the inevitable relationship of art to social biases, particularly ethnic biases.

Following this trend, Daylanne K. English provides an excellent account of the science of racism and exclusion in *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (2004). Her “project, by its textual selection and methodology, implicitly argues that democratic, historically grounded, highly nuanced literary and cultural study offers a useful-though not the only-means to assess a social, scientific, political, and aesthetic phenomenon as flexible and pervasive as eugenics” (30). The flexibility of the scientifically influenced aesthetics in the novel illustrates this pervasive phenomenon and the unreliability of its logics.

Despite the Professor’s apparent preference and desire for aesthetic selection over scientific natural selection, of which there is no control, he uses aesthetics in a manner that echoes and borrows elements from the science of exclusion of the time, creating descriptions of people that serve exclusionary and nativist purposes. Just as scientific racism does, the aesthetic selection used in this novel serves to create evidence for social exclusion. The two are brought into striking comparison, and the reader is invited to explore the complexities of such a comparison. Though explicitly rejecting scientific explanations of superiority or inferiority, the aesthetics continually describe anatomical or biological traits that are supposed to prove the

value of a person or object, such as Tom's hand, Louie's nose, or the Professor's skull. Although frequently appearing to desire to assert his own aesthetic control over natural selection's control in the novel, the Professor's aestheticization of human beings frequently focuses on elements that are anatomical and, thus, reflective of the science of natural selection and phrenology. For example, the Professor's desire to select his family members, such as his adamant desire for Tom Outland to be his son, is an example of his desire to control something that is usually secured by biological determinists as naturally, biologically occurring. Tom Outland is not his biological son and does not share his "blood," and the Professor desires to gain control over the reproductive forces of natural selection. He hopes Tom will marry his daughter and have children who do share Tom's and the Professor's "blood." To secure his artistic vision of his idealized family, he tries to appropriate biological determinism in order to empower his own aesthetic control. As his descriptions of Tom Outland highlight, the Professor wants Tom Outland to fit the ideal, white, American male expectations desired by most white, American biological determinists. He constructs, in his aestheticized illustrations of Tom, the kind of man Tom needs to be in order to appear the ideal addition to his family and its biological security, while constructing Louie Marsellus, Tom's competitor, as an exotic un-American outsider who threatens his family's biological security. Just as Gould argues science was unable to escape cultural influence, the Professor's artistic "cultivation" of human beings is entangled with scientific, natural, elements. This tautology highlights the faulty reasoning in both artistic and scientific racism. Neither can support the other. As if to emphasize this logical breakdown, the Professor's aestheticized logic is consistently undermined, complicated, or contradicted.

Godfrey St. Peter's relationship with Louie Marsellus, the Jewish outsider, most clearly exemplifies the Professor's exclusionary aesthetics. It is important that Louie is frequently

described as an Othered figure trying to make his way into the St. Peter family. Michaels suggests that a major focus in the novel is the threat posed by the contaminating outsider, Louie, on the Professor's family: "The long first section of Willa Cather's *The Professor's House* (1925) is called 'The Family,' and it is entirely animated by the impossible vision of Rosamond St. Peter saved for her father and sister by having married Tom Outland, who was 'like an older brother,' instead of the 'foreign' Louie Marsellus" (7). The Professor is certainly threatened by Louie, as evidenced by a particular quote from the novel highlighted by Jessica A. Rabin in *Surviving the Crossing: (Im)migration, Ethnicity, and Gender in Willa Cather, Gertrude Stein, and Nella Larsen* (2004): "The Professor expresses surprise at the ease with which Lillian [his wife] integrates Louie into the family, as he reflects: 'He would have said that she would feel about Louie just as he did; would have cultivated him as a stranger in the town, because he was so unusual and exotic, but without in the least wishing to adopt anyone so foreign into the family circle'" (63). The Professor expects his wife to actively construct, to "cultivate," Louie as an imposing outsider, just as he does. Godfrey St. Peter does not want his daughter to marry Louie Marsellus because he sees Louie as an invasive threat to his family, as Louie is trying to fill the position that the Professor feels should have been Tom Outland's. While the argument that Louie, an ethnic outsider, poses a threat to the Professor's family is consistent with most criticism about nativism and *The Professor's House*, I will proceed to explore the significance of the Professor's aesthetics as he "cultivates" Louie as "a stranger in the town." I argue that Godfrey St. Peter's aesthetic constructions of Louie and others adopt the same exclusionary role as biological determinism and illustrate the unstable but critical link between the science and aesthetics of exclusion in the novel.

The connection between aesthetic and biological determinism is underscored by the description of the Professor's skull early in the novel. The skull, though echoing scientific practice such as phrenology, is explained aesthetically in order to emphasize the Professor's attractiveness, bodily and spiritually. I quote this description at length because of its critical importance to this discussion:

His daughter Kathleen, who had done several successful studies of him in water-colour, had once said: —‘The thing that really makes Papa handsome is the modeling of his head between the top of his ear and his crown; it is quite the best thing about him.’ That part of his head was high, polished, hard as bronze, and the close-growing black hair threw off a streak of light along the rounded ridge where the skull was fullest. The mould of his head on the side was so individual and definite, so far from casual, that it was more like a statue's head than a man's.

(Cather 5)

The head and skull are clearly described from an artistic perspective despite their odd and striking allusion to the biological determinism that Gould discusses; the aestheticized focus on the skull appropriates the scientific practice of biological determinism. However, given the absurdity of the unusual features that are selected to exhibit value and the Professor's distaste for natural selection despite this type of science's haunting presence in the passage, this process might have been intended to unsettle the reader from the start, highlighting the absurdity and complications of the logic rooted in biological and aesthetic determinism.

The emphasis on Godfrey St. Peter's garden deepens the novel's focus on manipulated aesthetics that are closely tied to the biological. The Professor's garden is described as being very “cultivated.” It is under the Professor's control, and it is idealized:

There was not a blade of grass; it was a *tidy* half-acre of *glistening* gravel and *glistening* shrubs and *bright* flowers. There were trees, of course; a spreading horse-chestnut, a row of slender *Lombardy* poplars at the back, along the *white wall*, and in the middle two *symmetrical*, round-topped linden-trees. Masses of green-brier grew in the corners, the prickly stems interwoven and *clipped* until they were like *great* bushes. There was a bed for salad herbs. *Salmon-pink* geraniums dripped over the wall. The *French* marigolds and dahlias were just now *at their best*—such dahlias as no one else in Hamilton grew. (Cather 6, emphasis added)

The garden is described as an idealized space of aesthetic manipulation. There is “not a blade of grass,” so there are no naturally occurring weeds. There are plants not local to the natural environment, such as the “Lombardy poplars” and “French marigolds.” He has personally selected what should be included and excluded from his ideal space. The Professor spends time with Tom, his selected son-figure, in his garden, and he particularly likes his garden when things do not go his way or feel out of his control.³ This aesthetic cultivation, again, is strangely close to, but decidedly not, described as natural and scientific. Rather, the Professor’s control, though hauntingly similar to biological determinism, is aesthetically driven.

The Professor’s propensity to appropriate the strategy of biological determinism into a habit of aesthetic control is illustrated most meaningfully in his constructions of his son figures, Tom Outland and Louie Marsellus. Both are outsiders and both enter into the Professor’s family by marrying (or almost marrying in Tom’s case) Godfrey St. Peter’s daughter, Rosamond. His illustrations of each man create the determinations that the Professor makes about each man and

³ See pages 6-7 of *The Professor’s House*.

his worthiness to enter into the St. Peter family. His first experience with Tom Outland is aesthetically situated during a “bright, windy spring day” (95). Tom is described as an ideal figure of white masculinity. His voice stands out among other young men. It is full and strong: “his manly, mature voice- low, calm, experienced, very different from the thin ring or the hoarse shouts of boyish voices about the campus” (95). He is attractive and idealized: “The boy was fine-looking, he saw—tall and presumably well built” even under the “stiff, heavy coat” he wore (95). Tom’s skin is also emphasized as being “very fair” though the sun has colored most of his face (95). Tom’s most poignantly aestheticized description occurs during his primary encounter with the Professor and his family when he shows them his turquoise stones:

‘Hold them still a moment,’ said the Professor, looking down, not at the turquoises, but at the hand that held them: the muscular, many-lined palm, the long, strong fingers with soft ends, the straight little finger, the flexible, beautifully shaped thumb that curved back from the rest of the hand as if it were its own master. What a hand! He could see it yet, with the blue stones lying in it.
(103)

The Professor describes Tom’s hand with absurd detail that is aestheticized yet oddly anatomical. He highlights the hand’s independence, strength, and masculinity. It is “straight,” “strong,” “masculine,” and has an independent thumb. However, readers also receive contradictory information about Tom’s hand. The passage also describes Tom’s hand as flexible, soft, and beautiful, which subtly contradicts the hard masculinity more prominently praised in the Professor’s description. These contradictions appear in Louie’s descriptions as well, complicating the aesthetic logic that the Professor presents.

Despite being a stranger to the St. Peter family and their social environment, just as Louie Marsellus is, Tom Outland receives a very different reception than Louie. The Professor describes Louie Marsellus very differently than Tom, despite the objective similarities the two men share. Both are strangers described as friendly and generous men who become engaged to Rosamond. However, Louie is ethnically different, and the Professor's description of his son-in-law is clearly that of an estranged outsider eager to get in. Unlike Godfrey St. Peter's depiction of Tom, Louie's depiction is pervaded by a sense of intrusion and pathetic unbelonging:

Marsellus looked distinctly disappointed. He stood gazing wistfully after them, like a little boy told go to bed. Louie's eyes were vividly blue, like hot sapphires, but the rest of his face had little colour-he was a rather mackerel-tinted man. Only his eyes, and his quick, impetuous movements, gave out the zest for life with which he was always bubbling. There was nothing Semitic about his countenance except his nose- that took the lead. It was not at all an unpleasing feature, but it grew out of his face with masterful strength, well-rooted, like a vigorous oak-tree growing out of a hill-side. (32)

Overall, this description leaves a striking impression. The invasive aestheticized details of the description paint over the contradictions inherent in the Professor's knowledge of Louie Marsellus. Louie is "always bubbling with a zest for life," yet this is depicted by the Professor as being performed by "quick, impetuous movements," investing the affable nature with a suspicious, rash, and child-like performance. Louie is described as having vividly blue eyes, yet this is quickly negated by an aesthetically unattractive description of his "mackerel-tinted" skin. The description goes on to imply that Louie is not defined by his Jewishness, yet his nose "takes the lead." It was "not at all an unpleasing feature" yet it is aestheticized as growing from his face

“with masterful strength, well-rooted, liked a vigorous oak-tree growing out of a hill-side.” This obtrusive image dominates the description, burying the initial statement that his Jewishness is not noticeable or that his nose and his ethnicity do not interfere with his countenance. Furthermore, the aesthetic of this illustration conveys the very anxiety that the Professor has about Louie. It is intrusive, invasive, like a weed contaminating the Professor’s garden. Louie and his outsider, ethnically Other, status are intruding upon the Professor’s home and threatening to overtake Tom’s place in the family, and this is reflected in his description. This is contrary to Tom’s description because although he is also a stranger, his qualities that conflict with his idealized features are not emphasized as invasive. Louie is painted as an intruder, despite the fact that he seems generous, friendly, and a lover of life, much like Tom. His ethnic features are enflamed and his description is hyperbolized, warping his “pleasant” features and corrupting his image. The Professor aesthetically excludes or invites in order to accommodate racial prejudices. Louie’s nose and Tom’s hand embody the aestheticized focal points and remind readers of the Professor’s complicated engagement with biological determinism in his unstable tautological process of racial exclusion. In his attempt to aesthetically construct his idealized image or circumstance, the Professor borrows from the faulty logic of biological determinism. Despite the Professor’s complicated attempts to aesthetically construct the identities of those around him, the text clearly demonstrates that these constructions are not reliable articulations of those characters.

Professor Godfrey St. Peter uses aesthetics to determine readings of people that utilize racial prejudices in order to accommodate his desires and expectations and to soothe his anxieties. This feature of *The Professor’s House* reflects the culture of nativism and racism of the 1920s. The Professor’s tendency to appropriate the trend of biological determinism and to

perform it aesthetically is prominent in the novel, and just as biological determinism is influenced by a faulty social system, so is his aesthetic determinism. As Gould says, “The most creative theories are often imaginative visions imposed upon facts; the source of imagination is also strongly cultural” (22). The imaginative aesthetics of the Professor ultimately rely upon the logic of the system of anatomical reading of biological determinism, which is itself unstable and informed by the cultural imagination. In short, the cultural imagination’s work upon the racially Othered bodies presents an unreliable and complicated system of faulty logic. Although consistent with the trend in American Modernism at the time the novel was written, the clear unreliability of the descriptions might lead the reader to question Cather’s intention. Perhaps this construction is meant to criticize the racial and nativist trends in modern American art. Whatever Cather’s intention, *The Professor’s House* offers a unique, complicated, and thought provoking exploration of identity, racial anxiety, and art in modern America.

Chapter II: The Invisible Man: The Black Presence and Its Impact in F.

Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*

Published in the same year as Willa Cather's *The Professor's House*, F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* engages with the themes of race, nativism, and identity much differently.

Despite the attention the novel gets with regard to the American identity, class issues, and James Gatz's tragic rags-to-riches story, *The Great Gatsby*'s engagement with race was, for a long time, a neglected area of study. Despite Tom Buchanan's explicit and forceful attention to the racial climate of the 1920s, race, as Adam Meehan puts it, "was the elephant in the room in Fitzgerald studies for decades" (76). However, since scholars such as Jeffrey Louis Decker, Jeffery Clymer, and, most significantly, Walter Benn Michaels, started the conversation in the mid-1990s, there has been a great deal of scholarship on the racial elements of the novel. Many critics, following Michaels' lead, have focused on the presence of nativism and the non-Nordic anti-immigration discourse of the 1920s within *The Great Gatsby*. While I agree that this has been important work and that this racial context is crucial to understanding the full complexity of the novel, I argue that much of this scholarship has focused the lens too narrowly on nativist anxieties, missing the holistic view of Fitzgerald's novel. I wish, like Meredith Goldsmith, John Callahan, and Benjamin Schreier, to complicate this racial understanding of the novel and to reveal details that have been overlooked by many scholars' sweeping observations about nativism and racial anxiety in the text.⁴ Goldsmith, Callahan, and Schreier argue for a more complex and nuanced approach to race in Fitzgerald's novel. More specifically, I will focus on

⁴ See Schreier's "Desire's Second Act: 'Race' and 'The Great Gatsby's': Cynical Americanism" (2007), Goldsmith's "White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in the Great Gatsby" (2003), and Callahan's "Ralph Waldo Ellison, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and 'The Dark Fields of the Republic'" (2002).

Fitzgerald's treatment of the African American presence in *The Great Gatsby* by expanding upon the ideas and scholarship presented by Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, John Callahan, and Sinéad Moynihan, who all explore the idea of this lingering, overlooked African American presence.⁵ I would like to suggest that, through an aesthetic that works to bring readers to see the cultural and social landscape of 1920's New York City in a certain way, the novel encourages the reader to challenge the nativist thinking in the novel, mainly presented by Tom Buchanan, and the ignored African American presence. More specifically, expanding upon ideas presented in Ellison's essay "The Little Man at Chehaw Station" (1978), and Callahan's comparative study of Ellison and Fitzgerald, "Ralph Waldo Ellison, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and 'The Dark Fields of the Republic,'" I will explore the novel's brief encounter with an African American man, whom I have termed the invisible man of *The Great Gatsby*, in reference to Ellison's relevance in this essay. This African American man offers an ignored testimony about the car that killed Myrtle Wilson, and I will examine his meaning within the form and thematic workings of the novel as a whole. I argue that Gatsby's abstract and peripheral character opens up structural and empathetic connections for the narrator, Nick Carraway, and thus in extension, the reader, in order to grapple with the racial setting of the 1920s in America. I propose that, not only does the novel provide a more complex illustration of nativism in the 1920s than many scholars give it credit for, but it also incorporates the weight of the African American presence and its invisibility in America into this portrait.

There are two scenes in *The Great Gatsby* that include African American characters. The first occurs early in the novel when Nick and Gatsby are driving together across the Queensboro

⁵ See Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (1992), Ellison's Essays "Twentieth-Century Fiction and the Black Mask of Humanity" (1953), and Moynihan's essay, "Beautiful White Girlhood?: Daisy Buchanan in Nella Larsen's *Passing*" (2014).

Bridge into the city to have lunch. While on the bridge, they encounter a car with African American passengers being driven by a white chauffeur. Nick laughs in amazement at the possibilities that the bridge and the city allow. He marvels, in apparent delight, as peripheral members of society, Gatsby and the African American passengers, transcend their societal boundaries, even though society says that they should not. The striking visuals of this passage explicitly link Gatsby to other, even more, marginalized peoples, subtly linking the reader's association with Gatsby to African American characters. This becomes important in the second scene involving an African American. Again placing the reader's focus on visibility and invisibility, this scene is much less conspicuous, but it is silently significant. It takes place in Wilson's garage after Myrtle's death. A policeman is interviewing witnesses, trying to determine who committed the tragic hit and run. A black man offers that he saw the car, but as the policeman turns to ask him for his name, Wilson interrupts them, claiming he knows whose car it was, although, as the novel shows, Wilson did not, arguably, ever find out that the driver was Daisy Buchanan. The black witness claims that he saw the car on the road, and he would have, it seems, been able to give more information about the driver (and passenger), which suggests the possibility of an alternative ending had the man been acknowledged. However, he is silently pushed aside and, subsequently, ignored. These sections of the text have been largely overlooked or mistreated. I argue that the focus has been misplaced. I agree with Schreier that, rather than focusing on Gatsby's specific racial profile, the focus should be on the failure of identification systems in American society.⁶ Characters, such as Gatsby and the invisible man at Wilson's

⁶ Schreier argues: "This book [*The Great Gatsby*] enacts a deeply problematical drama of identification whereby the representational capacity of identity-ultimately *American* identity-is an object alternatively of desire and skepticism. Interpreted through Nick's insecure skepticism rather than through Gatsby's deluded optimism-and therefore through doubt about identity's

garage, who do not fit into idealized American society, are marginalized, and, if like Gatsby, they try to overcome their societal demarcations, they are destroyed. It is no coincidence that between Gatsby and the African American passengers in the Queensboro Bridge scene, a hearse is also present, looming with the somber reminder that Gatsby's and, for that moment, Nick's idealistic dream of transcending societal bridges is doomed. Despite his clearly outstanding nature, Gatsby is ambiguous. He works to reestablish himself from the dusty, obscured poverty of his childhood as a flashy, visible figure, yet he is still Othered when in that limelight. Instead of trying to place a label on him that the novel does not provide, he should be used as a gateway into seeing beyond the socially proscribed labels and identifications that 1920's New York, and America, provide. Gatsby opens Nick, and in extension, the reader, to the possibility of seeing something like Morrison's "fishbowl."⁷ This ambiguity is made racially relevant in the first scene featuring African American characters, and the second and final scene featuring African American characters prepares us for the tragic consequences of the inadequate and inaccurate racial constructions of society, as I will discuss at length later in this chapter.

Despite race's significant and explicit presence in the novel, it was not until 1994, excluding Ellison, that race in *The Great Gatsby* began to receive academic attention. Jeffrey Louis Decker started the conversation in "The Diminishment of the Self-Made Man in the Tribal Twenties" (1994). This early work about race in *The Great Gatsby* argues that the novel reflects the country's nativism and anti-Nordic anxiety, stating: "A story of entrepreneurial corruption, accented by the language of nativism, competes with and ultimately foils the traditional narrative of virtuous American uplift. In this way, *Gatsby* stages a national anxiety about the loss of white

ability to signify rather through faith in its representational promise-the novel ultimately lacks faith in the symbolic orders on which stable conceptions of identity rely" (155).

⁷ See pg. 17 of Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

Anglo-Saxon supremacy in the Twenties” (52)⁸. This argument opened a floodgate, and shortly after this was published came the most significant early text in the critical history of *The Great Gatsby* and race—Walter Benn Michaels’ *Our America: Nativism, Modernism, and Pluralism*. Michaels identifies the presence of nativism in *The Great Gatsby* and other modernist works, expanding and strengthening Decker’s thinking about race in Fitzgerald’s novel.

While nativism, explicitly through Tom Buchanan, is certainly present in the novel, some critics, such as Meredith Goldsmith, widened the critical lens, moving beyond looking solely at anti-immigration Nordicism in *The Great Gatsby*. In “White Skin, White Mask: Passing, Posing, and Performing in *The Great Gatsby*,” she engages with race in the text in a much more nuanced manner.⁹ Her concepts of visualizing gaps in society and of approaching race in the novel in a more subtle and complex manner are both foundational approaches for my argument in this essay. Benjamin Schreier, in his essay “Desire’s Second Act: ‘Race’ and ‘The Great Gatsby’s’: Cynical Americanism,” goes so far as to question even critics such as Goldsmith for applying a racialized identity to *Gatsby* because they are looking for it.¹⁰ He also claims, while discussing

⁸ Decker also argues that as the term “American dream” was not coined until the 1930s, it is incorrect to associate *The Great Gatsby* with this idea (though this could be disputed as the *Oxford English Dictionary* traces the term back further than Decker). He proposes rather, “it is a product of the rising tide of anti-immigrant sentiment in the 1920s, which activated narrowing definitions of whiteness and, in doing so, weakened the moral authority of the myth of the self-made man” (68).

⁹ Goldsmith argues that Fitzgerald does engage with racial elements in the “subtext” of the novel, illustrating that “far from ignoring or repressing this aspect of his day, Fitzgerald sublimated difference to the level of style, engaging with the racially and ethnically diverse popular culture of his day through textual allusions and stylistic innovations” (463). She grapples with issues such as Fitzgerald’s treatment of passing and Americanization and argues that “Framing the revelation of *Gatsby*’s past with African-American and ethnic comparisons F. Scott Fitzgerald reveals a lacuna in the narration of white, working-class masculinity” (443).

¹⁰ Schreier questions critics such as Michaels and Goldsmith for applying a racialized identity onto *Gatsby* because they are looking for it. He claims that this only serves to reinforce the way of thinking that they are attempting to deconstruct: “This scholarship thus often ends up reifying a variety of presumably characteristic raced American identities in place of a presumably

Michaels, that “Racist characters do not make a racist book, and Michaels has done little to argue that Fitzgerald’s book itself... is ‘deeply committed to the nativist project of racializing the American’” (157). I agree that projecting racial issues where they are not creates a skewed study of this novel, but, as Goldsmith and Callahan explore, there is more to race in the novel than simply trying to argue whether or not the novel reflects an anti-Nordic anxiety. Schreier stresses the novel’s focus on the failure of identity:

The book dramatizes meaning’s escape from the desire to fit experience into identifiable patterns that render it representative. While a character like Tom-and recent critics like Michaels et al.-may evade the indeterminacy in favor of the racial decisiveness of nativism, the novel does not. It does not take any sign system-racial or otherwise- for granted, either as a sociological bedrock or as the basis of a critical methodology. (174)

Shreier’s concept is particularly present in *Gatsby*, who remains unidentifiable. His abstract nature is significant to my argument that Fitzgerald structures the novel and *Gatsby* a certain way in order to present those members of society who the system of identification has rendered invisible or peripheral.

John Callahan also suggests that *The Great Gatsby* is more complicated than early race critics previously theorized. His essay, “Ralph Waldo Ellison, Francis Scott Fitzgerald, and ‘The Dark Fields of the Republic’” compares the lives, works, and ideas of Ellison and Fitzgerald, revealing their similarities and pointing out that both writers were interested in the American ideal and identity and their appeal, limitations, and cost. Callahan points out that Ellison examined the racial elements of *The Great Gatsby* well before others started to do so. Here,

characteristic unraced (if surreptitiously white) one, reinforcing the very formations whose genealogy it purportedly seeks to unearth” (154).

Callahan explores Ellison's analysis of Fitzgerald's African American characters. I quote this passage at length due to its significance within this chapter:

Ellison's further comments show him finely attuned to how, in their submerged roles below the threshold of American social hierarchy, Fitzgerald's incidental black characters are somehow better able to sort out the ambiguities of moral and cultural behavior than his white protagonists. Again, focusing on *Gatsby*, he noted

[h]ow ironic it was that in the world of *The Great Gatsby* the witness who could have identified the driver of the death car that led to Gatsby's murder was a black man whose ability to communicate (and communication implies moral judgment) was of no more consequence to the action than that of an ox that might have observed Icarus's sad plunge into the sea (Essays 499)

Exactly so, for Fitzgerald exquisitely conscious of the paradoxical subtleties of American life, brings the Negro man forward as a witness, then has him recede into the background as one whose full testimony would likely have gone unsought in the time and place of *The Great Gatsby*. (130)

I will expand upon Callahan's statement that Fitzgerald is in fact "exquisitely conscious of the paradoxical subtleties of American life," as he illustrates the ideal of transcending societal delineation, but the silent tragedy of their inability to do so. Meredith Goldsmith also discusses this in her essay. She cites the same excerpt from Ellison, and responding to it within the framework of her own argument, she claims that Fitzgerald was using it to better illustrate the

white, middle class.¹¹ I agree with both Callahan and Goldsmith that Fitzgerald understood and intended the implications present in placing the African American man in the scene; however, I suggest that the construction of *The Great Gatsby* is composed in such a way that when this scene comes to play, the reader is meant to notice the invisible man and to cringe with frustration when this ignored peripheral character's testimony is overlooked. Fitzgerald is not just directing the reader's gaze at one demographic or another, but rather providing a holistic portrait of the whole of society, and is suggesting we feel a frustration with the way it works.

As Goldsmith and Callahan illustrate, Ellison's essay, "The Little Man at Chehaw Station: The American Artist and His Audience" needs to be situated in my analysis. Ellison's focus in the essay is the American audience. He describes Hazel Harrison's advice to him when he complains about criticism he had received at a music recital at Tuskegee Institute:

"...you must *always* do your best, even if it's only in the waiting room at Chehaw Station, because in this country there'll always be a little man hidden behind the stove."

"A *what?*"

She nodded. "That's right," she said. "There'll always be the little man whom you don't expect, and he'll know the *music*, and the *tradition*, and the standards of *musicianship* required for whatever you set out to perform!" (489-90)

He decides to accept this, though he does not yet understand it, thinking: "Besides, something about her warning of a cultivated taste that its authority out of obscurity sounded faintly familiar" (491). Ellison goes on to connect this notion to audience: "[of the little man] I

¹¹ Goldsmith claims: "Here the author reverses Nick's earlier examination of the black middle-class [This takes place in chapter 4 of this novel in a scene that will be discussed later in this essay], allowing a representative of this group to return the gaze of the white elite, providing its definitive-albeit unrecorded-interpretation" (462).

especially associate him with the metamorphic character of the general American audience, and with the unrecognized and unassimilated elements of its taste” (492). Ellison eventually moves to directly relate these ideas to *The Great Gatsby*, and in this section, Ellison says: “As a citizen the little man endures with a certain grace the social restrictions that limit his own social mobility, but *as a reader* he demands that the relationship between his own condition of that of those more highly placed be recognized. He senses the American experience is of a whole, and he wants the interconnections revealed” (498-9). I argue that Fitzgerald answers this call in *The Great Gatsby*. The passage cited by both Goldsmith and Callahan in which Ellison remarks upon the irony of the ignored witness is not, as Ellison states, thoughtless reproduction of societal norm by Fitzgerald, but rather a thoughtful placement that attempts an aesthetic depiction that displays exactly what Ellison seems to be advocating for. Before examining this scene with *The Great Gatsby*’s invisible man, I will illustrate how the novel’s construction of form and aesthetic informs the theme of frustration of peripheral characters, preparing readers to notice and to be troubled by an African American man being rendered invisible and overlooked by American society despite his place in it.

The novel’s narrator, Nick Caraway, introduces himself as someone who tries to be open-minded, saying, “I’m inclined to reserve all judgments, a habit that has opened up many curious natures to me...” (Fitzgerald 1). This immediately begins the novel with the expectation that something or someone is going to force the narrator to interact outside of the spectrum of general expectation. We assume that Nick inhabits this norm due to the background that he gives, telling readers that he comes from “prominent, well-to-do people” (3). Nick first introduces Gatsby’s name on the second page of the novel. He describes him as someone unique to everyone else, and he says: “...Gatsby turned out alright at the end; it is what preyed on Gatsby, what foul dust

floated in the wake of his dreams that temporarily closed out my interest in the abortive sorrows and short-winded elations of men” (2). Gatsby, a character not in tune with normal society, is destroyed, and this devastates Nick. This information is given to readers immediately, framing the construction of the novel in a way that asks the reader to be receptive to marginal characters and to be on the lookout for what might cause them harm. Readers are invited to step outside of everyday, expected social standards to follow the story of a character who pays the price for his uniqueness. Shortly after this, we meet the characters who live in East Egg, the privileged and the ideal of societal expectations. Tom and Daisy Buchanan not only illustrate the exclusionary privileged, but they recite exclusionary rhetoric as well—rhetoric that pervaded the 1920s in the United States. Tom explicitly engages in Nordic discourse: ““The idea is that we’re Nordics...And we’ve produced all the things that go to make civilization- oh, science and art, and all that. Do you see?”” (13). Daisy mocks his interest in it, and Nick seems rather disgusted with Tom in this and every other way. Immediately after Tom finishes his diatribe, Nick says: “There was something pathetic in his concentration, as if his complacency, more acute than of old, was not enough to him any more” (13). Also, Tom seems to render the women, Daisy and Jordan, invisible by frequently cutting them off or dismissing them. This generates an anxious and frustrated tone, leaving the reader wishing that others, who are being kept quiet, could speak.

The narrative moves from the visit to the Buchanans in East Egg to Nick first seeing Gatsby, quietly reaching out towards Daisy’s dock. He is quite clearly set apart from them. There is a contrast between light imagery in the scenes with the Buchanans and the darkness that surrounds Gatsby upon this first encounter. Furthermore, there is a pathos attributed to this moment that is so significant that Nick was going to introduce himself but decided not to:

for he gave a sudden intimation that he was content to be alone—he stretched out his arms toward the dark water in a curious way, and, far as I was from him, I could have sworn that he was trembling. Involuntarily I [because of the clear earnestness that Gatsby has expressed towards this direction] glanced seaward—and distinguished nothing except a single green light, minute and far away, that might have been the end of a dock. When I looked once more for Gatsby he had vanished, and I was alone again in the unquiet darkness. (20-1)

Nick is willing to listen, though Gatsby is silent, but clearly Nick and the reader are led to pause and wonder what Gatsby desires and what he is reaching for. This, too, contrasts Tom's impatient assertions of things that are of his own interest and dismissal of things that are not. This suggests an intimate connection between Gatsby and those kept silent. This structure differentiates Gatsby as distinct, emotionally longing, and within the aesthetically prominent "unquiet darkness" that Nick seems to be attune to because of his attempted openness and dismissal of Tom's racist thinking. The reader becomes attuned to listening for those that are silenced and rendered invisible. This connection is important in understanding race in this novel. It is neither the main focus, nor is it uncomplicated. It is subtle and nuanced. It works itself crucially into the narrative and becomes part of the pathos. It should therefore be included, in its attachment to Gatsby's tragedy, to Nick's own elegiac longing at the end of the novel. Not only is the subtlety something that seems to be crucial to its message, but it is something that should neither be missed nor misread. The frustration with the invisible man being overlooked at the garage is related quietly to the pathos of frustration with the inability of the marginalized to speak and be heard in society, especially to people like Tom Buchanan.

Gatsby's juxtaposition to the elite members of society, particularly Tom Buchanan, within the first chapter of the novel establishes him as a peripheral character. He is also an ambiguous figure. Although many characters, and scholars, try to define his particular identity, they cannot. His racial markers are vague, and Gatsby is always marginalized.¹² Even at his parties, filled with varieties of people, he is the pariah and a mystery that cannot be solved. Nick expresses: "I would have accepted without question the information that Gatsby sprang from the swamps of Louisiana or from the lower East side of New York. That was comprehensible. But young men didn't—at least in my provincial inexperience I believe they didn't—drift coolly out of nowhere and buy a palace on Long Island Sound" (49). Gatsby does not make sense; society is baffled by him. Further in the novel, Nick says of Gatsby:

Through all he said, even through his appalling sentimentality, I was reminded of something—an elusive rhythm, a fragment of lost words, that I had heard somewhere a long time ago. For a moment a phrase tried to take shape in my mouth and my lips parted like a dumb man's, as though there was more struggling upon them than a wisp of startled air. But they made no sound, and what I had almost remembered was uncommunicable forever." (111)

Here it seems that Nick is opened up to something that he cannot quite remember, something that eludes him. It is something he knows but cannot remember, reminiscent of Morrison's looming African presence in American literature.¹³ Although this passage can hold many meanings for the

¹² Jeffory A. Clymer's article, "'Mr. Nobody from Nowhere': Rudolph Valentino, Jay Gatsby, and End of the American Race" (1996), discusses Gatsby's complication of social binaries as he compares Gatsby to Rudolph Valentino. He concludes, much like Michaels and Decker, that Gatsby "embodies the threat of racial pollution to 'Nordic' Americans in Fitzgerald's novel."

¹³ See *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*.

novel, I argue that it serves to remind readers of something that Americans have forgotten or repressed.

Gatsby's peripheral existence in the novel, despite his attempt to be his conception of an ideal man for Daisy, and Nick's attention to him, create a novel that is far from professing the same close-minded beliefs of a Tom Buchanan. Nick, and so the reader, sympathize with Gatsby, and Nick is angry and frustrated with society when Gatsby is destroyed. Although he often expresses distaste in Gatsby's sentimentality and idealism, he is drawn to the man.¹⁴ The novel's construction and the narrator's clear fascination with and ultimate affection and emotion for this Othered character, prepares the reader to be receptive to other peripheral characters. Like Nick at the end of the first chapter, the reader is invited to lean in and listen to the "invisible darkness" (Fitzgerald 21).

The first scene involving African American characters appears in the fourth chapter of the novel. In this chapter, Nick goes with Gatsby into the city and he describes the promise he feels in an aesthetically striking passage focused on imagery surrounding visibility:

Over the great bridge, with the sunlight through the girders making a constant flicker upon the moving cars, with the city rising up across the river in white heaps and sugar lumps all built with a wish out of non-olfactory money. The city seen from the Queensboro Bridge is always the city seen for the first time, in its first wild promise of all the mystery and beauty in the world. (68)

¹⁴ Schreier discusses this, examining the relationship between Gatsby's idealistic sentiment and Nick's cynicism in the novel. He says, "Gatsby's naively romantic sincerity and sentimental dream of fetishized identity, or course, are not the center of this text; their impertinence is, and while Nick remains skeptically incapable of identifying with Gatsby's desire, he also wants to disown the conditions that undermine it" (167).

Nick seems to be infected by Gatsby's optimism here. As mentioned earlier, he admires the hopeful spirit, the "wild promise," that pervades the bridge. The moving cars over the bridge create a sense of potential for elevating one's societal position. The sunlight permeates the steel delineations. Shortly after this, Nick and Gatsby pass a limousine with African American passengers: "As we crossed Blackwell's Island a limousine passed us, driven by a white chauffeur, in which sat three modish negroes, two bucks and a girl. I laughed aloud as the yolks of their eyeballs rolled toward us in haughty rivalry" (69). Nick responds to this with a continuation of his light-hearted hopefulness:

"Anything can happen now that we've slid over this bridge," I thought; "anything at all...."

Even Gatsby could happen, without any particular wonder. (69)

Nick's association with the racial delineations being rearranged in his moment of "wild promise," despite his still troubling vocabulary which should not be dismissed, illustrates that he both finds this an unlikely occurrence and one that he is happy to see, as this rearrangement of societal expectation occurs in a dreamlike moment of hope while he laughs.¹⁵ His laughter seems to erupt with his pleasure with the sight, as he describes the surrounding scene with positive imagery and compares the characters to Gatsby's existence, something the novel proves to be a thing of tragic beauty for Nick. He wants Gatsby to succeed, and he resents society for preventing his success. This association with two provincials, the African American and Gatsby, and Nick's reaction to them, prepares us for the scene with the invisible man, as a "dead man...in a hearse" visibly haunts this bright moment of idealistic hope (68). The positivity

¹⁵ Despite the reading I am proposing that I argue this novel demands, *The Great Gatsby* is not without racism and problematic language. Another area of study surrounding racial anxiety in this novel that should be examined in more detail is the racism surrounding Meyer Wolfsheim.

radiated by these peripheral characters defying society's demarcations is haunted by a grim reality, foreshadowing the imminent failure of this pattern-breaking moment, which will be realized by the silencing of an African American man and the death of Gatsby.

This scene takes places in the penultimate chapter of the novel. The accident is described in the context of Michaelis's testimony, stating that he was the "the principal witness at the inquest." Yet, he does not even know the color of the car in question:

The "death car" as the newspapers called it, didn't stop; it came out of the gathering darkness, wavered tragically, for a moment, and then disappeared around the next bend. Michaelis wasn't even sure of its color-he told the first policemen that it was light green. (137)

Soon after, while a policemen is questioning witnesses to gather more information, the invisible man steps forward:

"A pale well-dressed negro stepped near.

"It was a yellow car," he said, "big yellow car. New."

"See the accident?" asked the policeman.

"No, but the car passed me down the road, going faster'n forty. Going fifty, sixty."

"Come here and let's have your name. Look out now. I want to get his name."

Some words of this conversation must have reached Wilson, swaying in the office door, for suddenly a new theme found voice among his gasping cries:

"You don't have to tell me what kind of car it was! I know what kind of car it was!"

Watching Tom, I saw the wad of muscle back of his shoulder tighten under his coat..." (139-40)

This exchange provides the most potential for information in the investigation thus far, and, yet, it is ultimately overlooked. The nameless African American man remains nameless, and his vital information about the past event, present investigation, and future of the novel is ignored. The invisible man embodies the African American presence discussed by Morrison and Ellison. He is a vital part of societal function, as the novel makes painfully clear, yet he is forgotten and overlooked. Interestingly, Fitzgerald, or his narrator, Nick, seems to be trying to generate a positive reception of the black man from the likely prejudiced reader, in response to the prominent racial anxiety and discrimination popular at the time this novel was published. The man is depicted in an aesthetically pleasant manner: he is well dressed and his skin is described as "pale," which suggests his proximity to whiteness. Given the narration's attempt to associate the black man with Tom Buchanan's social realm, that of the white and wealthy, it seems like it is meant to be jarring for readers that Tom does not even think to question the unnamed man about who was driving, even though the testimony would have benefited him, as he thinks Gatsby was driving the car and Wilson's statement implies that he thought the car was Tom's because Tom had been driving it when Wilson last saw it earlier in the day. When Tom starts to defend himself to Wilson, only Nick and the black man hear the conversation: "Only the negro and I were near enough to hear what he said..." (140). Here Nick and the African American man are in congruence with one another, and again, the invisible man has information that the rest of society does not. He is a missing piece of society that is being overlooked, and the novel, as has hopefully been shown, equips the reader to notice, to see what has been tragically rendered invisible.

The novel closes with Gatsby's death and funeral, which few attend, and Nick's return to the Middle West. Nick is devastated by Gatsby's death, and the end of the novel is pervaded with mournful longing. Nick's recollection of the last words he says to Gatsby reflect this sentiment:

We shook hands and I started away. Just before I reached the hedge I remembered something and turned around.

“They're a rotten crowd,” I shouted across the lawn. You're worth the whole damn bunch put together.”

I've always been glad I said that. It was the only compliment I ever gave him, because I disapproved of him from beginning to end. First he nodded politely, and then his face broke into that radiant and understanding smile, as if we'd been in ecstatic cahoots on that fact all the time. His gorgeous pink rag of a suit made a bright spot of color against the white steps, and I thought of the night when I first came to his ancestral home, three months before... (154)

After Gatsby's death, Nick has trouble finding anyone to come to his funeral, and his devotion to the tragic figure is emphasized: “I wanted to get somebody for him. I wanted to go into the room where he lay and reassure him: ‘I'll get somebody for you, Gatsby. Don't worry. Just trust me and I'll get somebody for you—’” (164). This mourning for Gatsby and anger at the “rotten crowd” of society for facilitating his destruction solidifies Nick's desire for the peripheral figure to succeed in this world and his mourning that it cannot. This connection is clearly associated with the African American presence in society, most explicitly with the invisible man in Wilson's garage. This novel illustrates that despite society's regulations, those who do not fit into assigned identification patterns still exist and have value, such as the invisible man and Gatsby. However, these marginal characters are repressed by American society, such as the

overlooked invisible man, and if they attempt to move out of their tangential locations, like Gatsby, society destroys them. Gatsby, through his many aesthetically vibrant choices, tries to render himself visible, just as Nick tries to make the man with even less agency, the invisible man from Wilson's garage, more visible through his description of him as a lightly colored, nicely dressed man. These attempts to aesthetically construct desired identities are ultimately rejected for the characters in the novel. However, while the characters' aesthetic constructions are not granted success within the novel, the novel's readers are lead to see these frustrating struggles for visible identities. This is part of Fitzgerald's portrait of his 1920's America, and, through the construction of the novel, Nick guides readers to mourn this state of things. So, while this novel reflects a strong presence of nativism through Tom Buchanan and includes racially problematic language, critics should not stop there. As with the other novels explored in this project, *The Great Gatsby* presents a complicated and vivid portrait of American Modernism that should not be overlooked. Fitzgerald seems to be nudging us to see the invisible man and to listen.

Chapter III: “No, Forever!”: An Aesthetic Rejection of Modern Constraints in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*

Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*, published in 1928, is a rejection of the molds expected of writers during her time. Her novel and some critical responses to her novel have worked to reject a hegemonic reading of Afro-American literature of the American modernist period. Hazel Carby, whose book, *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), discusses the problematic grouping of races and genders into large uniform groups with the same goals, social and political concerns, and points of view, praises Larsen’s novel for its ability to consciously navigate the multiplicity of constraints with which she was confronted: “In *Quicksand*, Larsen... was unable to romanticize ‘the people’ as the folk or to accept the worldview of the new black middle class” (170). Carby claims: “Helga explored the contradictions of her racial, sexual, and class position by being both inside and outside these perspectives” (170). However, despite Carby’s praise, Larsen’s unique and resistant voice has long been overlooked or misconstrued by scholars. As George Hutchinson argues in his 2006 biography of Larsen, *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*, Nella Larsen and her novels have frequently been forced into preconceived expectations and dichotomies about race and identity that she often, it seems, fought to resist and to expose. “What began to emerge,” writes Hutchinson about his research, “as an archaeological dig at a site with mythical associations, was a marked correlation between the pattern of erasures and fabrications in the prior subjection in Larsen’s life experience on the other” (10). Hutchinson argues that the very grey areas that Larsen illustrates in *Quicksand* had been ignored or written over in previous scholarship: “In both, a stark color line eliminated ‘gray areas’ and ambiguities, buttressed the division between black and white, and supported diagnoses of Larsen’s audacious social

consciousness as pathological. This phenomenon has significance extending well beyond the understanding of Nella Larsen alone” (10). Clearly, the erasure of unique voices that generalizations can cause when applied by scholars to singular texts and authors, is vividly illustrated in the history of Nella Larsen scholarship. Ironically, literary scholarship on *Quicksand*, a novel that boldly resists being swept away by larger, broad categories, has fallen prey to the very themes that Larsen strove to bring to light.

It seems worth noting that the novel was originally going to be titled “Cloudy Amber.” As this title reveals, ambiguity, the multiplicity of colors that complicate the idea of a clear cut, colorized racial code, and obscurity are critical themes in the novel, and they are themes that are expressed prominently through the aesthetic descriptions in the text. Larsen clearly employs the aesthetic of *Quicksand* to illustrate social and political patterns, some of which were being overlooked. Larsen works to visualize and highlight the “gray areas” that the generalizations of groups were overlooking. The aesthetic descriptions in the novel are crucial in shaping and emphasizing the novel’s themes, and the aesthetic quality of *Quicksand*’s voice and what this aesthetic contributes to the novel’s project are worth exploring.

As Keguro Macharia notes, “No, Forever!” “seems to mark Helga’s ethos, a continual puncturing of her social world and possibilities.”¹⁶ Larsen uses the multiplicity of color and shadows to complicate the notions of nativism, purity, and clarity. Her aesthetic, as Jeanne Scheper discusses, challenges the modern norms, providing a truly modernist reply to reveal the hypocrisy of modern limitations and confines that she as an artist confronts.¹⁷ As Scheper argues, Larsen “produces an aesthetic space that challenges representations of the effects of modernity

¹⁶ See Macharia, Keguro. “Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*.” *MFS Modern Fiction Studies*, vol. 57, no. 2, 2011, p. 265.

¹⁷ See Scheper, Jeanne. “The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen’s ‘Quicksand.’” *African American Review*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2008, pp. 679-695.

that do not account for the intersections of race, class, and gender. But in pushing beyond a kind of parallel representation of racial worlds or modernisms, Larsen invents a *flâneuse* that also disrupts and calls into question those very boundaries by repeatedly drifting across them” (688). She exposes all areas she explores, finding nothing suitable. In the process of laying out Crane’s journey, Larsen depicts an honest modern vision, and paints her portrait of “Modern Life,” as Helga defies the aesthetic vision of herself that the “modern” artist, Axel Olsen, forces upon her.¹⁸ Larsen’s aesthetic presentation over the course of the novel presents a counter-portrait that exposes the failings of society’s and culture’s realities. This counter-portrait rejects the portrait that Olsen produces with his projected representation of Helga generated from the forced, exotic image that the white European avant-garde desires to make her into. Larsen’s portrait is unstable and kaleidoscopic, multi-colored, imperfect, complicated, and unreliable. It does not fit perfectly into any predesignated category. It engages in a desire for aesthetic pleasure, while problematizing the challenge for the black female body to embrace color and beauty for fear of being labeled Other and exotic. It portrays the virtue of the uplift movement, while illustrating its problematic exclusiveness and hypocrisy. White aesthetes, black nativists and activists, black women who embrace aesthetic pleasure and engage with white communities, and the black southern folk ideal are all engaged with and problematized. Nothing is left unexplored and nothing is left uncomplicated. The “black and white” nativist and racial boundaries fueled by white American and African-American communities are rendered impractical. Various shades of color, shadows, and grey areas complicate circumstances and people and illustrate how limiting and unrealistic cultural, racial, and societal boundaries are. Helga Crane actively acknowledges these limitations and fights to resist them and to reject them, until her death. Though her tragic

¹⁸ In reference to the flâneur of Charles Baudelaire’s essay, “The Painter of Modern Life” (1863).

character succumbs to modernity, it is not because Helga Crane is not strong. Her resistance illustrates for the reader the flaws that she and others face in modernity. Her strength to resist and articulate the boundaries that she faces allow for a clearly visible portrait of the racial conflicts of modern culture. The aesthetic image that the novel in its entirety leaves is complex, striking, and anything but black and white.

The first passage of the novel is aesthetically arresting and noticeably full of a variety of color and shade, setting the tone for the novel. The first sentence sets Helga alone and in a “soft gloom,” so, already, our protagonist is set apart in a space that is connoted as both a space created by a mixture of lightness and darkness and a space that is distressing. This space, however, is not bland. It is in between light and dark and is teeming with various shades of color. A lamp is “*dimmed*” by *shade* that is “*black and red*” making “a pool of *light* in the *blue* Chinese carpet, on the *bright* covers of books” (Larsen 1528, emphasis added). The description continues:

...on the *white* pages of the opened...[book]... selected, on the shining *brass* bowl *crowded with many-colored* nasturtiums beside her on the low table, and on the oriental silk which covered the stool at her slim feet. It was a comfortable room, furnished with *rare and intensely personal taste*, flooded with Southern *sun* in the day, but *shadowy* just then with the drawn curtains and *single shaded light*.

(Larsen 1528-9, emphasis added)

The space between what George Hutchinson refers to in his biography of Nella Larsen as “the color line” is vivid and complex. The aesthetic of *Quicksand* illustrates thematically the consequences and realities of strict racial social codes and those who fall in between them. In the gloomy mixture of dark and light, evoking the sharply contrasted black and white, there is a multiplicity of color and shade, but it is isolated and set apart.

The novel's first description of Helga Crane further strengthens the critical connection between the novel's aesthetic and its themes. I quote it at length because of its importance to this discussion:

An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade. A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In *vivid green and gold* negligee and glistening *brocaded* mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose *dark tapestry* her sharply cut face, *with skin like yellow satin*, was distinctly outlined, she was—to use a hackneyed word—attractive. *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 little wayward, delightful way. Just then it was tumbled, falling unrestrained about her face and on her shoulders.

(Larsen 1529, emphasis added)

From the start, Helga Crane is the object of an observer's gaze. This description draws the reader's attention to the idea of Helga as an aestheticized image. It immediately centralizes the importance of the visual in the novel. This portrait of Helga, alone, is not the rendering of an observation of other characters in the novel. It is interesting because it provides the description of Helga that is perhaps the most approved by the novel. Yet, the passage is still written to describe how "an observer would have thought her." This focus on how Helga Crane appears to others,

described in the visual, aesthetic sense, is crucial to the novel's engagement with its major concerns about the social and the cultural: "An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade" and her room was furnished with "rare and intensely personal taste" (Larsen 1539). These themes arise in the multiplicity of color and the various shades and shadow imagery. Helga is best viewed in the grey area. She doesn't fit into any one side of a dichotomy. Her space is full of colors of various shades; nothing is solidly or solely black and white. This style and these themes continue and develop throughout the novel.

Helga begins her odyssey at the fictional Naxos school, which is focused heavily on the policy of uplift. Helga feels very isolated at Naxos, and color plays an important part in her disillusionment:

Turning from the windows, her gaze wandered contemptuously over the dull attire of the women workers. *Drab colors, mostly navy blue, black, brown; unrelieved, save for a scrap of white or tan about the hands and necks.* Fragments of a speech made by the dean of women floated through her thoughts—'Bright colors are vulgar' —'Black, gray, brown, and navy blue are the most becoming colors for colored people' —'Dark-complected people shouldn't wear yellow, or green or red.' (Larsen 1539, emphasis added)

Yellow, green, and red are all present in Helga's décor in the opening passage of the novel, clearly defying the expectations set upon her by Naxos. Here color is explicitly associated with themes of race, identity, and belonging. The uplift boundaries enforced by Naxos work to suppress the frequent narrative of exoticism and hyper-sexuality assigned to African-American women, but for Helga, it robbed each woman of her vibrant, unique potential. The association of isolation in terms of aesthetic style and color is also closely related to racial anxiety. The isolated

Crane, who refuses to stifle color and unique personality, is distanced from her community on the grounds of race. Helga defies the boundaries imposed by the uplift movement. She prefers color and is ostracized by both this non-normative aesthetic choice and by her racial identity, “a despised mulatto.” Helga does not entirely disagree with uplift, but rejects, through her style, the definition imposed by Naxos; her perspective is unique and not captured by any mold provided, leading to her exasperated isolation:

The dean was a woman from one of the ‘first families’—a great ‘race’ woman; she, Helga Crane, a despised mulatto, but something intuitive, some unanalyzed, driving spirit of loyalty to inherent racial need for gorgeousness told her that bright colours *were* fitting and that dark-complexioned people *should* wear yellow, green, and red. Black, brown, and gray were ruinous to them, actually destroyed the luminous tones lurking in their dusky skins. One of loveliest sights Helga had ever seen had been a sooty black girl decked out in a flaming orange dress, which a horrified matron had next day consigned to the dryer. Why, she wondered, didn’t someone write *A Plea for Color?* (Larsen 1539)

Helga is concerned that something valuable about her being African American is lost in muted color and conformity: “These people yapped loudly of race, of race consciousness, of race pride, and yet suppressed its most delightful manifestations, love of color, joy of rhythmic motion, naïve, spontaneous laughter. Harmony, radiance, and simplicity, all the essentials of spiritual beauty in the race they had marked for destruction” (Larsen 1539). Helga Crane’s defiance and the critical relationship of aesthetic style to the cultural perception of Helga’s racial and social identity sets the tone for the rest of the novel. Her later rejection of being overly-aestheticized and of being overly associated with the “joy of rhythmic motion” in the Harlem night club

further reinforce and complicate Helga's refusal to be bound to one absolute definition. Despite her position as an object that is gazed upon and read, Helga fights to resist the definitions that are assigned to her. Keguro Macharia writes that by "unsettling the bond between appearance and eugenics, dysgenics and aesthetics, *Quicksand* offers an important commentary on black engagement with nativism. Larsen shows how constructions of race and gender queer subjects who do not fit within specific parameters" (270). *Quicksand* is a testimony for individual identity in modern America that exposes the toxicity of racial and cultural binaries.

From the beginning, Helga is defined by her appearance as different. Her ideological uniqueness is represented and perceived outwardly:

Clothes had been one of her difficulties in Naxos. Helga Crane loved clothes, elaborate ones. Nevertheless, she had tried not to offend. But with small success, for, although she had affected the deceptively simply variety, the hawk eyes of dean and matrons had detected the *subtle difference from their own irreproachably conventional garments*. Too, they felt that the colors were *queer*; dark purples, royal blues, rich greens, deep reds, in soft, luxurious woolens, or heavy, clinging silks. (Larsen 1539, emphasis added)

Helga Crane is actively monitored and discriminated against on an aesthetic level that reflects her racial isolation. Though Helga's own racial difference is minute, even "subtle difference" is "detected" and stifled.

The novel's use of color works to destabilize the dichotomy of color in terms of understanding race. While Helga is reflecting on her failure at Naxos, she watches the students and observes: "Yes, it was like that; a few of the ideas which she tried to put into the minds behind those *baffling ebony, bronze, and gold* faces reached their destination. The others were

left scattered about. No, it wasn't the fault of those minds back of the *diverse colored faces*" (Larsen 1531). Helga observes the various colors of "black" students' faces and connects that uniqueness with what is being stifled in the attempt to perform the expectations of racial uplift. Just like with the clothing requirements, Helga despises the "pattern" that each student is expected to conform to in the "machine," eradicating individuality: "It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern. Teachers as well as students were subjected to the paring process, for it tolerated no innovations, no individualism" (Larsen 1531). However, when Helga moves to Harlem, she is still unable to find a comfortable home for herself. She still feels out of place, and clothes, color, stifled individuality, and racial anxiety continue to follow her.

Helga's exclusion from "Negro society" weighs on her throughout the novel. When she breaks up with her fiancé, James Vayle, upon leaving Naxos, she does so knowing that she had never been accepted happily by his family: "She was, she knew, in a queer indefinite way, a disturbing factor" (Larsen 1533). Helga faces the fears of bloodlines and breeding so common during her historical moment, among members of her own "race."¹⁹ Larsen consistently undermines the idea of strict identities based on race throughout the novel, by illustrating its complexities and prejudices within the larger categories society tries to force her protagonist into. Helga reflects: "Negro society, she had learned, was as complicated, and as rigid in its

¹⁹ Helga's first conversation with Dr. Anderson is disrupted when he says that she has "dignity and breeding" and that her lack of money "can't destroy tendencies inherited from good stock." These comments anger Helga, who has a white mother and black father, and resents that her worth has been attributed to a "breeding" or "bloodline" that she doesn't have: "The joke is on you, Dr. Anderson. My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant...As I said at first, I don't belong here. I shall be leaving at once" (1541). For more on concern about bloodlines and breeding in Larsen's historical moment, see Daylanne K English's *Unnatural Selections: Eugenics in American Modernism Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance*, University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

ramifications as the highest strata of white society. If you couldn't prove your ancestry and connections, you were tolerated, but you didn't 'belong'" (Larsen 1533). The gray area in between black and white is the area that Helga Crane self-consciously and articulately exposes. She feels invisible and overlooked: "You could be queer, or even attractive, or bad, or brilliant, or even love beauty and such nonsense if you were a Rankin, or a Leslie, or a Scoville; in other words, if you had a family. But if you were just plain Helga Crane, of whom nobody had ever heard, it was presumptuous of you to be anything but inconspicuous and conformable" (Larsen 1534). Yet, "inconspicuous and conformable" are exactly what Helga Crane refuses to be. She boldly brings to light those whom society has rendered silent and "obscure."²⁰

When Helga moves to Harlem, she continues to be "a disturbing factor." Even as Helga finds herself in the company of Anne Grey, who embraces the forbidden colors of Naxos and wears "a cool green tailored frock" when they first meet, she still finds herself unable to be her true self:

In after years Helga Crane had only to close her eyes to see herself standing apprehensively in the small cream-colored hall, the floor of which was covered with deep silver-hued carpet...to hear herself being introduced to 'my niece, Mrs. Grey' as 'Miss Crane, a little friend of mine whose mother's died, and I think perhaps a while in New York will be good for her'; to feel her hand grasped in quick sympathy...And to feel like a criminal. (Larsen 1553)

Slowly, Anne's hared of white people begins to unsettle Helga. She notes the hypocrisy in Anne's professed beliefs:

²⁰ Larsen refers to Helga as "obscure Helga" in the context of racial hierarchy and exclusion: "The fact that they were a 'first family' had been one of James's attractions for the obscure Helga" (1534). For more on this idea, see George Hutchinson, Hazel Carby, and Jeanne Scheper.

‘Social equality,’ ‘Equal opportunity for all,’ were her slogans, often and emphatically repeated. Anne preached these things and honestly thought that she believed them, but she considered it an affront to the race, and to all the vari-colored peoples that made Lenox and Seventh Avenues the rich spectacles which they were, for any Negro to receive on terms of equality any white person.

(Larsen 1556-7)

Inherent in the image of “vari-colored peoples” is the idea the even Anne’s idealized racial purity is not uniform and straightforward. The visual color imagery in this passage highlights the hypocrisy and instability of the idea of racial purity. Harlem’s richness is idealized in an image of variation and unique individuals who are colored in a multitude of ways, yet Anne despises interaction with white people as an affront to the race, as if it were a pure concept that could be tainted by one interaction with another uniform race. In resistance to her isolation and frustration with racial exclusion in Harlem, Helga moves to Copenhagen. She complains of Harlem: “Here the inscrutability of the dozen or more brown faces, all cast from the same indefinite mold, and so like her own, seemed pressing against her” (Larsen 1560-1). Helga feels suffocated by the mold she is expected to conform to. She reflects on the weight of conforming to impossible expectations inherent in exterior and interior racial expectations: “She didn’t, in spite of her racial markings, belong to these dark segregated people. She was different. She felt it. It wasn’t merely a matter of color. It was something broader, deeper, that made folk kin” (1561). Helga soon relates these issues to the aesthetic themes of color and clothing, which are then explored more explicitly in the Harlem nightclub scene. Helga decides to wear a bold black and orange dress to the outing, as a symbol of independence and resistance:

Her mind trailed off to the highly important matter of clothes. What should she wear? White? No, everybody would, because it was hot. Green? She shook her head. Anne would be sure to. The blue thing. Reluctantly she decided against it; she loved it, but she had worn it too often. There was that cobwebby black net touched with orange, which she had bought last spring in a fit of extravagance and never worn, because on getting it home both she and Anne had considered it too *décolleté*, and too *outré*. (Larsen 1561-2)

Helga confronts the challenge of being unique and of falling into the danger of being painted as a primitive, exotic, sexualized black female. The nightclub scene is arguably the most aesthetically striking scene in the novel. It is full of color, rhythm, and movement. Harlem's "familiar medley," despite its bold and diverse setting, feels isolating to Helga: "Black figures, white figures, little forms, big forms, small groups, large groups, sauntered, or hurried by. It was gay, grotesque, and a little weird. Helga Crane felt singularly apart from it all" (1563). She is, to borrow a phrase from Fitzgerald, "simultaneously enchanted and repelled" by the experience.²¹ The club is filled with both white and black patrons and the aestheticized scene highlights a climax of disjunction and confusion for Helga Crane. She, surrounded by the "moving mosaic," feels the weight of her inability to find a foothold in the multifaceted and complicated reality of her experience:

A glare of light struck her eyes, a blare of jazz split her ears. For a moment everything seemed to be spinning around; even she felt that she was circling aimlessly, as she followed with the others... They danced, ambling lazily to a crooning melody, or violently twisting their bodies, like whirling leaves, to a

²¹ See *The Great Gatsby*, page 35.

sudden streaming rhythm, or shaking themselves ecstatically to a thumping of unseen tomtoms. For a while, Helga was oblivious of the reek of flesh, smoke, and alcohol, oblivious of the oblivion of other gyrating pairs, oblivious of the color, the noise, and the grand distorted childishness of it all. She was drugged, lifted, sustained by the extraordinary music, blown out, ripped out, beaten out, by the joyous, wild, murky orchestra. The essence of life seemed bodily motion. And when suddenly the music died, she dragged herself back to the present with a conscious effort; and a shameful certainty that not only had she been in the jungle, but that she had enjoyed it, began to taunt her. She hardened her determination to get away. She wasn't, she told herself, a jungle creature.²² (Larsen 1563)

The descriptions in the passage move from violent to comforting. People “violently” move their bodies, but they are also “ambling lazily” and softly “whirling like leaves.” The tone shifts from revolted to admiring; Crane is “drugged” but then “sustained” and “lifted.” She is “ripped,” “beaten,” “blown” but by something “joyous” and “murky” that is in between, ambiguous.

Helga, much like a *flâneur*, remains apart within her participation, and observes:

For the hundredth time she marveled at the gradations within this oppressed race of hers. A dozen shades slid by. There was sooty black, shiny black, taupe, mahogany, bronze, copper, gold, orange, yellow, peach, ivory, pinky white, pastry white. There was yellow hair, brown hair, black hair; straight hair, straightened hair, curly hair, crinkly hair, woolly hair. She saw black eyes in white faces, brown eyes in yellow faces, gray eyes in brown faces, blue eyes in tan faces.

²² Also on page 1563: “But she was blind to its charm, purposefully aloof and a little contemptuous, and soon her interest in the moving mosaic waned.”

Africa, Europe, perhaps with a pinch of Asia, in a fantastic, motley of ugliness and beauty, semi-barbaric, sophisticated, exotic, were here.²³ (Larsen 1563)

In addition to Scheper's argument that "[f]amiliar tropes of high modernist literature such as the alienated subject, *la flâneuse*, an aesthetics of fragmentation, and the urban crowd in Larsen's novel's, function to address the way that the material conditions of history shape raced and gendered realities," I suggest that, as in this passage, Helga's isolated condition allows her to observe how aestheticized bodily conditions such as color and texture function in the perception of race and cultural identity. Not only does this section generate the stifling pressure of the weight of being caught in the middle of a dichotomy, but the isolated character inhabiting the gray space, highlights how that dichotomy overshadows a "moving mosaic" of individuality and difference within one predetermined category: "black." Helga is meditating on the "gradations" within her "oppressed race," and she brings to light and describes a variety that others do not seem to acknowledge. The diversity that she sees, that complicates identity and existence, overwhelms her, and Helga soon sets sail for Denmark.

On the ship, metaphorically in movement, not bound to one place, Helga feels at peace. She is "glad to be at last alone, free of the great superfluidity of human beings, yellow, brown, and black, which...had so oppressed her" (Larsen 1565). At this point in her life, Helga feels stifled by the very variety that she sees so clearly. Yet, she enjoys the freedom that sailing offers her. Helga revels in the relieved pressure to make social and cultural sense of her unique presence in the crowd; she is allowed simply to be, unlabeled and uncategorized. She finds

²³ For more on Helga as a flâneur figure, see Jeanne Scheper's "The New Negro Flâneuse in Nella Larsen's 'Quicksand.'" *African American Review*, vol. 42, no. 3/4, 2008, pp. 679-695. This source reads Helga Crane's mobility, not as a condemning signpost of the tragic mulatta figure, but as a means of liberation and independence. She argues that Larsen creates a disruptive aesthetic sphere in which social boundaries and traditional modern aesthetics can be disrupted.

herself “reveling like a released bird in her returned feeling of happiness and freedom, that blessed sense of belonging to herself alone and not to a race” (Larsen 1566).

However, Helga soon finds herself under a new type of gaze, that of the upper-class avant-garde in Copenhagen. Though at first Helga enjoys being admired for being unique, she eventually finds herself overly aestheticized and objectified. Helga is dressed and shown around by her aunt and uncle like a piece of art, and her relationship with Axel Olsen magnifies Helga’s existence in Denmark: “To them this girl, this Helga Crane, this mysterious niece of the Dahls, was not to be reckoned seriously in their scheme of things. True, she was attractive, unusual, in an exotic, almost savage way, but she wasn’t one of them. She didn’t at all count” (Larsen 1570). Helga’s first encounter with Olsen, the highly regarded painter, reads like an exhibition. She is introduced to him as an aesthetic object, and the others await his approval. Helga finds his reaction and demeanor “affected” and “theatrical,” while he earnestly observes and admires her aesthetic qualities: “ ‘Superb eyes...color...neck column...yellow...hair...alive...wonderful...’ His speech was for Fru Dahl [not Helga]. For a bit longer he lingered before the silent girl, whose smile had become a fixed aching mask, still gazing appraisingly, but saying no word to her” (Larsen 157). Their relationship develops along a similar trajectory. They begin spending time together because Olsen is painting a portrait of her, and, ultimately, he proposes to her. The scene is aesthetically described: “ ‘Yes,’ and he reached for her *slim cream hand*...Helga let it lie in his *large pink one*, *noting their contrast*. ‘Yes, because I, poor artist that I am, cannot hold out against the deliberate lure of you. *You disturb me*. The longing for you does harm to my work. You creep into my brain and madden me,’ and he kissed the *small ivory hand* (Larsen 1580, emphasis added). The aesthetic juxtaposition of the two has everything to do with race for Helga Crane. Axel Olsen claims that her “talk of race and shame” is “strange,” yet he recites the exotic

and hypersexual stereotypes associated with beautiful black women. He says, “You have the warm impulsive nature of the women in Africa, but, my lovely, you have, I fear, the soul of a prostitute” (Larsen 1581). Helga tells him that she is not for sale to “any white man” and that she cannot marry him because she “simply couldn’t marry a white man...It isn’t just you, not personal, you understand. It’s deeper, broader than that. It’s racial” (Larsen 1581). She later further reflects on her decision to reject Axel Olsen, realizing that she could not forgive him for his portrait of her:

It wasn’t, she contended, herself at all, but some disgusting *sensual* creature with her features. Herr and Fru Dahl had not exactly liked it either, although collectors, artists, and critics had been unanimous in their praise and it had been hung like a line at an annual exhibition, where it had attracted much flattering attention and many tempting offers. (Larsen 1582, emphasis added)

This description could be of the portrait, or of Helga herself, striking the reader with the problematic nature of Helga’s experience with Axel Olsen and with Copenhagen. Here, she was noticed as unique, but she was still not seen as Helga Crane. She was an art object. The portrait and the Copenhagen elites’ gaze construct Helga to be something to be marveled at as a distanced Other. Helga resents the portrait and its pretentious authenticity:

“Now Helga went in and stood for a long time before it, with its creator’s parting words in mind: ‘...a tragedy...my picture is, after all, the true Helga Crane.’ *Vehemently she shook her head.* ‘It isn’t, it isn’t at all,’ she said aloud. Bosh! Pure artistic bosh and conceit. Anyone with half an eye could see that it wasn’t, at all, like her” (Larsen 1582, emphasis added).

Here, Larsen's protagonist actively resists and stands very visibly opposed to the image that society has imposed on her. Helga Crane ultimately decides to leave Denmark as well, still feeling unfulfilled by any one place or people.

This, however, is not the first time that Helga Crane has been viewed in this manner. In keeping with the novel's refusal to render clear categories of places or people, Helga is even objectified as something exotic and aesthetic at the plain, conformist Naxos. As she leaves, Margaret Creighton says, "I do wish you'd stay. It's nice having you here, Helga. We all think so. Even the dead ones. We need a few decorations to brighten our sad lives" (Larsen 1537). Even in a space defined by its encouragement of racial conformity, Helga was visibly marked as an object that stood out.

Perhaps it is Helga Crane's desire for roots and to belong that lead Helga to marry Reverend Greene and to move to the South, and it is her simultaneous complete distaste for those roots and conformity that then lead her to be destroyed by the oppressive weight of that lifestyle. In Keguro Macharia's article, "Queering Helga Crane: Black Nativism in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*," he discusses black nativism and the way(s) in which it queers Helga Crane. Macharia argues that Helga resists and defies nativist sentiment and is also excluded by it due to her heritage. Macharia makes the argument that in her lack of roots, Helga defies the Black Nativist ideal of "root[ing] Blackness in the South and appoint[ing] women as guardians of the race" and thus the "very foundation" of the nation (259). Again, Larsen illustrates the problems of a space that many authors of her time idealized. Scholars such as Hazel Carby often praise Larsen for "refus[ing] a romantic evocation of the folk" (Carby 175). Helga's spiritual journey

ends in a loss of faith,²⁴ and her Southern “folk” experience is described as “this bog into which she had strayed” (Larsen 1608). The “bog” where the novel leaves Crane, is reminiscent of the “gloom” in which she begins the novel. The themes which these settings connote are reflective of the novel’s major focuses. Gray areas within race, culture, identity, and other socially-generated categories, the imagery of shadows cast over the non-normative aspects which are obscured by the socially-enforced dichotomized views of race and identity, and the negative, problematic tone of “gloom,” “gray,” and “bog,” are all present throughout the novel. These aesthetic techniques permeate Helga’s journey and help highlight her social and personal struggle for racial identity throughout the novel.

George Hutchinson refers to Larsen as “a kind of shadow,” which feels appropriate given her tendency to illustrate her text with shadows in *Quicksand*.²⁵ They often appear during points in the novel where Helga feels obscured or out of place within her current setting. For example, when she first arrives in Chicago after leaving Naxos, “[g]ray Chicago seethed, surged, and scurried about her” (Larsen 1544). When she becomes disillusioned with Harlem and is about to leave: “It was a sulky night, a thick furry night, through which the electric torches shone like silver fuzz” (Larsen 1562). Again, when Dr. Anderson rejects her, she finds herself wandering through a storm, where her vision and clarity are obscured: “In the streets, unusually

²⁴ A the end of the novel, Helga’s faith in the religious fervor that she engages with upon moving to rural Alabama is shattered: “Her mind, swaying back and forth to the protection religion had afforded her, almost she wished that it had not failed her. An illusion. Yes. But better, far better, than this terrible reality. Religion had, after all, its uses. It blunted the perceptions. Robbed life of its crudest truths. Especially it had its uses for the poor—and the blacks.” It is this, decides Helga, that “ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man’s God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in ‘kingdom come’” (Larsen 1608).

²⁵ See page 13 of George Hutchinson’s *In Search of Nella Larsen: A Biography of the Color Line*.

deserted, the electric lights cast *dull glows*. Helga Crane, walking rapidly, aimlessly, could decide on *no definite* destination...In the next minute the black *clouds* opened wider and spilled rain with unusual fury” (Larsen 1594, emphasis added). In Helga’s description of the in-between space during her severe illness at the end of the novel, Helga describes a liberation similar to her experience on the ship, reflecting the complicated need for and yet frequent isolation and disconcerting instability of the isolation of inhabiting the gray areas: “she hovered for a long time somewhere in that delightful borderland on the edge of unconsciousness, an enchanted and blissful place where peace and incredible quiet encompassed her” (Larsen 1605). Helga Crane’s desire to be allowed to reside in the grey areas of society and identity is visibly tragic, as those spaces are frequently associated with anxiety, instability, or impermanence. Helga’s struggle to navigate these unaccepted, unnoticed, and often unattainable grey areas of identity allows readers to visualize challenges and aspects of identity that are typically rendered invisible by the binaries and dichotomies that dominate visualized identity.

In sharp contrast to Axel Olsen’s portrait of Helga Crane, Nella Larsen’s illustration of Helga works to capture an honest and visible portrait of an individual navigating social expectations and cultural constructs. In her portrait of Helga Crane, Nella Larsen captures the fractured and multi-faceted experience of racial identity. The aesthetic engagement with color, shading, and shadow generate an illuminating glance of racial identity that does not pretend to force a clear solution or to provide a stable vision of racial identity. This is why the illustration is so valuable. Reading this novel as another tragic mulatto novel or attempting to use the text to reinforce the concept of a generic Harlem Renaissance novel would be to miss the unique and enriching perspective that *Quicksand* brings to the conversation about American Modernism and the challenges of pursuing a stable racial identity.

Conclusion

My summation of this project is tentative, as I do not wish to generalize by interpreting all of the presented projects and authors together, which would contradict the insight I hope to have offered through this study. However, it is significant that though each author and each novel is unique, all of the novels examined in this project make important use of aesthetic spaces. Hopefully this project has demonstrated that not only should aesthetics not be overlooked in scholarship surrounding nativism, race, identity, and American modernist novels, but that aesthetic spaces are the crucial spaces where each of these authors works through issues of racial anxiety and identity formation. These texts all acknowledge and make visible through their various and unique styles and aesthetics, challenges and perspectives that existed within their visions of their modern social structure, and to overlook the aesthetics in these texts is to overlook the aspects that present the most significant material on race and identity. Aesthetics are crucial to identity formation in these American modernist novels. Each author's use of aesthetic elements is critical in some way to the development of characters' racial understanding and identity formation and often works to highlight the challenges of identity formation in the midst of racial anxiety and American modernity.

I also want to clearly acknowledge that all of these novels contain racially troubling content that should certainly not be overlooked, but that should also not strictly define critical understanding of the novels' engagement with racial and nativist themes. As I have worked to illustrate, all of these novels present thought-provoking content that has been grossly overlooked in the project to create a distinct definition of American Modernism and its engagement with these themes or in the attempt to read these novels according to assigned themes and ideals associated with certain places, genders, races, or dates. I hope that by presenting distinct figures,

such as Willa Cather, F. Scott Fitzgerald, and Nella Larsen, and their unique projects and perspectives, all of which have been generalized and largely overlooked, my project has illuminated new avenues for scholarship in this field. I also hope that this project encourages future scholarship on the aesthetics of race and identity in American modernist texts.

Furthermore, by no means is this an exhaustive example of my argument. Jean Toomer, Gertrude Stein, Zora Neale Hurston, and many other novelists would further enrich and flesh out the kaleidoscopic and complicated landscape of aesthetics, American Modernism, identity, and racial anxiety. Short stories and poetry, such as the work of Langston Hughes, should also be considered in this context. I hope that future research will continue to strive for more clarity and diversity within scholarship about identity, racial anxiety, and American Modernism by continuing to thoroughly examine the crucial aesthetic spaces of American modernist texts.

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