

From Respectable to Pleasurable:  
Companionate Marriage in African American Novels, 1919-1937

A Dissertation

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## ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the ways in which companionate marriage ideology of the 1920s and 30s affected representations of heterosexual relations in novels written by African American authors of that time. Scholars often consider respectability as the dominant concept of African American sexual politics of this era. I propose, instead, that, under the influence of companionate marriage ideology, African American authors pushed forward the notion of pleasure in the sexual lives of African Americans. The background for this argument is set up in the introduction which provides a historical overview of African American discussions of sex and marriage in the early decades of the twentieth century.

The first chapter analyzes W.E.B. Du Bois's promotion of a race-specific, uplift-minded version of companionate marriage, identified specifically as partnership marriage. He expressed his vision of marriage for the race in his nonfiction as well as his novel *Dark Princess*. In the second chapter, I suggest that Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* is a critique of traditional, reproduction-centered marriage, while *Passing* by the same author explores various problems that arise from the expectation of eroticized marriage. The third chapter explicates Zora Neale Hurston's representation of African American companionate marriage in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and suggests that it directly opposes existing sexual norms including Du Boisian

partnership marriage. The fourth chapter analyzes Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* to argue that Thurman not only considers the institution of marriage as contradictory to the reality of African American men's and women's sexual lives but also proposes an alternative way in which to look at intimate relations.

To conclude my argument, I suggest that all the texts discussed in this dissertation share a move from respectable to pleasurable, which is to say, their representations of marriage are premised on the idea that pleasure is fundamentally good and should be recognized as a healthy trait of human sexuality. The emphasis on pleasure in Harlem Renaissance literature presents a parallel, rather than a contrast, to the sexual expressiveness of the blues culture of the same era. This dissertation thus lays the ground for a reconsideration of the often-assumed division of cultural work between the two genres of African American blues music and African American literature.

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## Introduction: Harlem Renaissance Authors as Sexual Modernists

Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral—according to their own standards—it could be! (*Quicksand* 134)

In Nella Larsen's 1928 novella, *Quicksand*, heroine Helga marries an Alabama preacher, bears three children "in the short space of twenty months" (123), and gives birth to a fourth one, "born of such futile torture and lingering torment," who dies shortly thereafter (131). The text concludes with Helga pregnant with her fifth child, having "hardly. . . left her bed and become able to walk again without pain" from her last childbearing (135). Helga's tragedy should not be mistaken as biological destiny imposed by nature; instead, it serves as a critique of marriage and the culture that, preferring reticence to the knowledge about sex, tolerates such mistreatment of women.

This dissertation examines the ways in which novels of the Harlem Renaissance negotiated sexual modernism. Although feminist critics have observed that a "gradual resexualization of black womanhood" (duCille 10) took place in African American women's literature of this period, such a tangible shift from the nineteenth-century African American literary representation of woman as sexless has



not yet been fully situated within the historical context of the marriage reform movement of the early twentieth-century U.S. Scholars have assumed that African Americans were not interested in or deliberately avoided the modern sexual discourse, since many believe that respectability remained the prominent way in which African Americans in the 1920s and 30s approached “proper” sexuality. As a result, the black middle-class embracement of Victorian sexual mores has been the dominant idea against which to examine sexual expressions of the Renaissance literature. In fact, there has been a tradition since the late 1980s among feminist critics that considers African American women’s novels of the 1920s and 30s to be negotiating such cultural and literary conventions in representing women characters as sexual beings.<sup>1</sup> In this dissertation, then, I revise this view by suggesting that the language of normality, introduced through the works of sexology and the marriage reformers, played an equally prominent role in the way in which many African Americans of the time thought about sexual relations, including within the context of marriage. Renaissance literature not only commented upon African American respectability but also responded to, as well as was constituent of, the national discourse of normality.

During the interwar period, the need for marriage modernization was being vigorously voiced by white marriage reformers in the United States, and African Americans attended to what these commentators were saying. Relying on sexology that developed during the late nineteenth century, modern marriage commentators emphasized the importance of sexual intimacy, the freedom and privacy of the couple, and the equality of modern women. They recognized the need of sex education to cultivate pleasure, the use of birth control to postpone and/or space out the births of

children, and the acceptance of divorce as an appropriate option when the spousal relationship irretrievably broke down (Simmons, *Making Marriage Modern* 122). Lacking these elements, it was said, marriage was wrong. This modern form of marriage is also known as companionate marriage, a term Judge Ben B. Lindsay, one of the most prominent proponents of marriage reform in the U.S., adopted in the title of his co-authored book that came out in 1927.

Until recently, the assumption has been that African Americans were unaffected by the emerging ideology of companionate marriage, given their investment in the politics of respectability as a way to combat traditional stereotypes of the hypersexual African American man and woman. It has been argued that African Americans, especially women, responded to such stereotyping with relative silence about sexuality. The culture of dissemblance was developed in order to protect them from the oppressive sexual myth of promiscuity, which was used by whites to exploit black women's bodies since the time of slavery (Harris-Perry 53-69). In modern times, the myth of promiscuity that viewed black women's sexuality as animalistic and closer to nature was present in the romanticized and stereotypical portrayal of the black urban working class as primitive that was associated with modernist cultural productions. Accordingly, it has been assumed that African Americans avoided or ignored the modern form of marriage in which mutual sexual pleasure was being prominently and publically advocated as the cornerstone of the marital bond. The assumption has been that the African American middle class could not afford to embrace such a model since doing so might undermine the progress they had made in distancing themselves from the myth of primitive blacks.

However, as Cristina Simmons has recently suggested in *Making Marriage Modern: Women's Sexuality from the Progressive Era to World War II* (2009), African Americans also took part in the modernization of sexuality and marriage. Simmons challenges the assumption that the African American aspiration for respectability did not allow space for modernization of sex and marriage, thus opening the door for a reassessment of the heterosexual politics of the Harlem Renaissance. When compared to white contemporaries, admittedly, African Americans were less explicit about sex, and more likely to emphasize the aspect of marriage as social commitment—African American professionals, for example, did not publish any marriage advice works (Simmons, *MMM* 186). Nevertheless, as Simmons maintains, sexual elements were becoming pivotal to their marriage ideas, and the need for sex education, including how to avoid pregnancy, based on science rather than religious morals, was being recognized.

This dissertation joins Simmons's work in challenging the assumptions among scholars that silence and/or reticence was the primary reaction of African Americans to modern marriage discussions. African Americans of this era explicitly and implicitly voiced what they considered problems of marriage in their writings, and the literary works of the Harlem Renaissance, my primary focus in this dissertation, negotiate discourses of sexual modernism in complex ways. The four authors I will examine, W.E.B. Du Bois, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman, centrally comment upon and revise sexual as well as racial expectations for African American men and women in the early decades of the twentieth century.

Within African American literary criticism, it has been long acknowledged that women Renaissance novelists, particularly Jessie Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston, represented marriage as a site of conflicts rather than of harmony. In her classic study *The Coupling Convention*, for example, Ann duCille suggests that “[f]ar removed from the utopian partnerships theorized by nineteenth-century black women novelists, coupling in the modern black feminist text is more often fictionalized as marital horror than as hearthside harmony” (145). Nevertheless, scholars including duCille have not historicized such a shift from harmonious to disastrous in representation of marriage within African American women’s literature and failed to situate it within the historical context of the marriage reform movement of the early twentieth century U.S.

My goal in this dissertation, then, is to demonstrate the thread of thought shared by the four Renaissance authors and yet at the same time to illuminate the differences among them. It is indicative that Hurston’s *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which I will examine in the third chapter, is often considered a deviation from other Renaissance works written by women. In duCille’s argument, too, Hurston’s canonical text is dismissed as unimportant since it is “a celebration of heterosexual love” (121), while other novels written by women, including Hurston’s own *Seraph on the Suwanee*, provide powerful critique on gender and sexual politics of their time. As I will suggest, however, such exception of Hurston is not only an inaccurate description of the Harlem Renaissance but also a shallow understanding of sexual modernism. Hurston’s celebration of marital pleasure and, say, Larsen’s

condemnation of repeated unwanted childbearing both arise from the same, modern understanding of female sexuality I will explain in the next section.

### Modern Marriage and the Discourse of Normal Sexuality

Modern marriage promoters stressed sexuality as a healthy part of human life and denounced the existing view of sex as evil. Theologians supposed that men and women had sex for reproductive purposes only and thus birth control, since it signaled sexual practice for pleasure, “interfere[d] with nature” (Lindsey and Evans 228). Opposing the Roman Catholic Church’s logic that reliable methods of contraception were not only unnecessary but immoral, Ben Lindsey and Wainwright Evans’s *The Companionate Marriage* asserts that “continence is a sham”: “Normally sexed people will not practice continence in marriage. They will run all risks rather than practice it. That is the *fact* of the matter” (229). Drawing on what they considered scientific fact, modern marriage proponents, including Lindsey, insisted that sex was a vehicle of love and that birth control needed to be accepted in order for married couples to strengthen the love knot.

As evident in Lindsey’s reference to “normally sexed people,” behind the discourse of modern marriage was the influence of sexology and the idea of “normal” sexuality. An emerging genre of sexual science, sexology developed in Britain, Europe, and North America beginning in the 1870s. Richard von Krafft-Ebing’s *Psychopathis Sexualis* (1886) is the first influential work in this field. Men such as Krafft-Ebing, Havelock Ellis, and Magnus Hirschfeld displaced the old view of sex as sinful, and sought to define and diagnose perverse sexuality within the discourse of

medical science rather than under the jurisdiction of the criminal law. They produced an exhaustive classification of non-normative sexual practices including homosexuality, sadism, masochism, and fetishism, among others. In the 1890s, works of British sexologist Havelock Ellis became prominent in the United States. Arguing that homosexuality should not be considered a crime but a physiological abnormality, his *Sexual Inversion*, published in the US in 1900, became “a definitive text” in the study of homosexuality at the turn of the century (Somerville 19).

Sexologists, especially Ellis, played a crucial role in the rethinking of heterosexuality and gender difference as well. In his influential configuration of courtship, Ellis described sexual modesty as naturally feminine and central to the dynamics of heterosexual sexual relations in which the male conquers the female. Although this argument may seem to reinforce stereotypes about female passivity, Ellis acknowledged the erotic rights of women. Indeed, one of the most important contributions of the turn-of-the-century sexology to modern discussions on female sexuality was their redefining of the clitoris as a seat of erotic pleasure. Ellis represented women’s sexuality as comparable to men’s, while at the same time emphasizing sexual differences in ways that naturalized heterosexism and existing gender roles. He writes in “Analysis of the Sexual Impulse,” which is included in the *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, “[i]n women we have in a clitoris a corresponding apparatus on a small scale. . . which also demands satisfaction” much like the male penis (Ellis; rpt. in Bland and Doan 113-4).

Reflecting such sexological ideas, marriage reform discussions, widespread in the 1920s, recognized women’s sexual need, claiming that sexual intimacy is the key

to a successful, egalitarian marriage. Marriage sex advice literature that flourished in this era standardized a modern marriage model in which sex is separated from reproductive duty. While marriage revisionists such as Lindsey and Evans, and Floyd Dell outlined the moral, historical, and scientific rationales for companionate marriage, the marital advice work of such authors as Marie Stopes, Margaret Sanger, and Theodoor Van de Velde described sexual anatomy to a different degree. The marital sex advice works emphasized the importance of female orgasm, and, in order for it to happen, they taught, the husband should take the initiative at the proper time to engage in normative intercourse, which “concludes with the ejaculation. . . of the semen into the vagina, at the nearly simultaneous culmination of sensation—or orgasm—of both partners” (Van de Velde 145). The cult of simultaneous orgasm would become a popular sex ideal in the 40s.

The promotion of sexually gratifying marriage as an effort to confine sex within marriage also finds its roots in the social hygiene movement that assumed formal shape in the early 1910s and gained momentum in the context of the United States’ extensive military activities of 1916 through 1918. In 1914 Charles W. Eliot, president emeritus of Harvard and president of the newly formed American Social Hygiene Association, described venereal disease as “most destructive of the white race,” adding that they were “without doubt the very worst foes of sound family life, and thence of civilization” (qtd. in Carter 128). Venereal disease was simply incompatible with modern marriage, and had no place in “normal” American family life. When the United States entered the war in April 1917, the War Department established the Commission on Training Camp Activities to organize venereal disease

education and provide alternative entertainment for the troops (Simmons, *MMM* 26).

Congress also created in 1918 the Venereal Disease Division of the U.S. Public Health Service and disbursed money for hygiene courses at normal schools and colleges, and occasionally for biology or social hygiene instruction in elementary or high schools.

Army statistics showed much higher proportions of these diseases among black than among white troops. Because these numbers were marred by racist practices and reporting, the reality is unclear, but the reports did lead to action. The Commission on Training Camp Activities, the YMCA, and the ASHA provided social hygiene instruction for black as well as white units. After the war, official government promotion of social hygiene among African Americans continued through the work of the U.S. Public Health Service, supported by the ASHA, the NACW, and the Urban League. The Public Health Service employed black physicians Roscoe C. Brown and Charles V. Roman to lecture on social hygiene in African American communities. The ASHA set up a preventive program for blacks and hired black social worker Franklin O. Nichols to head it. Before coming to the ASHA, Nichols had attended Temple University and the University of Chicago, and worked for the International Red Cross during the war to organize services for black troops in France and then for the U.S. Public Health Service (Simmons, *MMM* 50). Promoting positive education about for “normal” development, black social hygienists taught young people just like whites that modern marriage was not only normal but also superior to all other forms of sexual practice, emotional connection, or family structure that had ever existed.

Modern Marriage and African Americans



African Americans visited white clinics and possibly received advice about sex problems as well as read advice literature written by whites, but there is no evidence of published sex manual written specifically for and identifiably by African Americans in this period. Simmons suggests that stigmatization of black sexuality might have caused this; the concerns for the stereotype of black promiscuity prevented African American physicians from specializing in sexual problems (186). I would add to Simmons's suggestion the possibility that the explanations of sexual organs might not have seemed racialized to black physicians, considering the depoliticizing effect of the scientific tone which helped sex manuals appear universal.

In 1928, the year after Lindsey and Evans published *The Companionate Marriage*, an Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem held a forum about companionate marriage, at which journalist Alice Dunbar-Nelson presented a paper entitled "Delinquent Colored Girls" (unwed adolescent mothers) and a discussion of companionate marriage took place (Simmons, *MMM* 121). Such a forum reveals that the interest of the African American community in companionate marriage had evolved to the point of public discussion. But even before the term "companionate marriage" was beginning to emerge in the black press, various African Americans critiqued the existing mode of marriage through discussions on birth control.

Starting from the May 1923 issue, *Messenger* carried an advertisement for Margaret Sanger's *Birth Control: What It Is, How It Works, What It Will Do*. The July 1919 issue of Sanger's *Birth Control Review* was entitled "The New Emancipation: The Negroes' Need for Birth Control, As Seen by Themselves." Not only did this issue contain Mary Burrill's one-act play about a helpless African American mother

suffering from repeated childbearing and Angelina Weld Grimke's short story, "The Closing Door," which dealt with an African American mother's fear of having a child in the lynching-pervasive society, but it also featured an interview with Chandler Owen, editor of *The Messenger*, about the reproduction situation for black women in the south as well as a short letter from W.E.B. Du Bois stating: "I believe very firmly in birth control" (Du Bois, "A Word" 15). Although (if often unreliable) methods of contraception had been in practice,<sup>2</sup> this particular issue of the *Birth Control Review* provides one of the earliest pieces of evidence of African American engagement in the modern rethinking of the female body, reproductivity, and sexuality.

In this issue, Burrill's play "They That Sit in Darkness" portrays a black woman who continues to have children until finally she loses her life, ascribing the cause of her death specifically to the lack of the knowledge of birth control. Grimke's stories, "The Closing Door" and "Goldie," that appeared in *Birth Control Review* in 1919 and 1920, both thematizes the horror of the racist society that tolerates lynching as an inevitable condition for black children to be born under, hinting that planned parenthood may help reduce the number of lynching victims. In "The Closing Door," for example, young mother Agnes goes insane and kills her own newborn baby from the fear of losing him to lynching like she did her brother in the past. Depictions of childbearing in such works as those written by Burrill and Grimke resonate with and revise numerous real-life cases reported on *Review*. The first issue of the journal, published in 1917, for example, contains a section entitled "De Profundis!" which reports letters from across country requesting an informational pamphlet about birth control. One such letter from a mother of six claims that she is "in very poor health"

and that “it is a sin for me to raise any more children,” while another tells a story about her neighbor who went insane after having her seventh child. The author writes: “She is a well educated woman and says if she would not have any more children, she is sure she will be entirely free from these insane spills” (5). Although Margaret Sanger did not include African American women’s “de profundis” in the first issue, their claims for legalization of birth control are represented in later issues and through fictional work.

Over the next decade after the publication of the first Negro issue of *Birth Control Review*, various African American authors explored multiple aspects of reproduction in their work. Novelists, poets, playwrights, and essayists explicitly and implicitly referred to black women’s need for limiting or spacing children. Claude McKay’s poem, “My Mother,” which was included in *Harlem Shadows* (1922), is one of the examples of literary works by an African American that indirectly narrates the tragedy caused by repeated childbirth. The poem describes the day the narrator loses his mother in his boyhood, which implies autobiographical information that the poet was the eleventh child of his parents and that his mother, depicted in the poem, became sick after giving birth to him. In both Jessie Fauset’s *The Chinaberry Tree* (1931) and McKay’s *Banana Bottom* (1933), a mother dies when she gives birth to a baby, signaling the modern awareness that childbirth can be life-threatening for woman. Countee Cullen joined this discussion through his autobiographical poem “Saturday’s Child” (1925), in which the birth of the narrator means “one more mouth to feed” for his parents, indirectly referring to the fact that the poet’s parents abandoned him as an infant. Anne Spencer’s “The Wife-Woman” (1931) depicts the hardship of a widow

and mother of seven children, “these seven links the *Law* compelled.” The *Norton Anthology of African American Literature* notes that the phrase possibly refers to “the Old Testament, particularly ‘Be fruitful, and multiply’ [Genesis 1.28]” (Gates and McKay 974 n.4), but I would suggest we might also read this poem with yet another law in mind—the Comstock law, enacted in 1873, which prohibited sending any “obscene” materials including contraception information and devices through the mail until 1936.

While the dominant explicit claim to support birth control made by African Americans concerned a mother’s health and/or children born into poverty, I argue that a second understated (or, often unstated) purpose of birth control was, unmistakably, to enjoy sex within marriage without anxiety for pregnancy. For example, Du Bois states in a Negro number of *Birth Control Review* that “an intelligent and clearly recognized concept of proper birth control” should be available to African Americans, “so that the young people can marry, have companionship and natural health, and yet not have children until they are able to take care of them” (“Black Folk” 167).

Presumably, Du Bois’s choice of the word “companionship” refers to the marital intimacy whose importance is central in the companionate marriage ideology. Given the social attention to the spreading of syphilis and gonorrhea after WWI, Du Bois’s conception of marriage as a means to sustain “natural health” may also point to the idea that marital intimacy or “companionship” prevents sex that will lead to sexually transmitted diseases, which might occur outside of marriage. In order for Du Bois to promote sex within marriage among young people so that they also can go to school

and/or pursue their professional career before they have children, contraception was indispensable.

In the same number of *Birth Control Review*, Chandler Owen, editor of the *Messenger*, spoke of the amusement sex serves people in rural areas. Explaining the context in which African American girls in the south marry early and have many children, Owen points out not only the purpose of relieving their parents economically but also the boredom young girls experience: “there are little dances once or month or so, in some room or barn. There are few amusements—little recreation; there are little dances once a month or so, in some room or barn. There are occasional candy pullings, peanut-poppings, wood-chopping and rail-splitting parties” (9). Owen’s conception of birth-controlled marriage as something that can be added to this catalogue of recreations available to African American girls indicates a recognition of an aspect of marriage for pleasure rather than simply for procreation. Thus, the growing support for legalization of birth control among African Americans signals a distinct departure from the nineteenth century sexual norm which defined non-reproductive sex as immoral.

#### Respectability, Normality, and Scientific Racism

In *Private Lives, Proper Relations*, Candice Jenkins explores twentieth-century African American novels using her theory of the salvific wish, the desire of African Americans to achieve the privileges of civilized status through the embracement of gender and sexual norms of genteel respectability. Through her analysis of the novels of such authors as Nella Larsen, Ann Petry, Alice Walker, Gayl Jones, and Toni

Morrison, as well as criticism on these authors' works, Jenkins suggests that the salvific wish "remains a central part of the black cultural imaginary, even as the actual prospects for its success, particularly as attempted through the embrace of conventional sexual and familial behaviors, are much less widely accepted than in the Victorian era" (23). Even though Jenkins's argument that "the central aim of the salvific wish, 'respectability,' might itself be understood as a marker of black racial identity" points to uplift ideology (29), what is troubling is that Jenkins assumes that even during the 1920s, when marriage reform discussions were widespread in the United States, the African American middle class maintained late nineteenth century Victorian sexual codes and still avoided talking about sex.

Jenkins's assumption about sexual mores becomes more obvious when she examines W.E.B Du Bois's review of Claude McKay's *Home to Harlem* (1928) and Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928). In the famous 1928 review, Du Bois calls the latter novel "the best piece of fiction that Negro America has produced since the heyday of Chestnutt," while the former "nauseate[d] me." Jenkins speculates about Du Bois's reasoning in the following way: "For Du Bois, presumably, Larsen's novel avoids the sexual excesses of McKay's work, crafting a less offensive tale of racial disquietude and individual tragedy" (27). For Jenkins, Du Bois praised Larsen's sexually charged novel primarily because he overlooked the sexual implications of the novel, deceived by Larsen's accommodation to "conventional patterns of decorum in her community" (28). Not noting the novel's historical context of modern marriage discussions, Jenkins's argument fails to acknowledge that Larsen and Du Bois were both motivated to challenge existing sexual codes sustained by the politics of respectability.

With the information that Du Bois had been since the late 1910s a prominent African American supporter of modern marriage and the legalization of birth control, it can be argued that Du Bois praised *Quicksand* precisely because he understood Larsen's critique of respectable gender and sexual norms which silenced women like heroine Helga Crane who could not escape from repeated childbearing. *Home to Harlem*, on the other hand, with its focus on "drunkenness, fighting, lascivious sexual promiscuity" of black workers, greatly disappointed Du Bois. While scholars including Jenkins have interpreted this disapproval as an expression of his desire for African American respectability, I instead suggest in this dissertation, especially Chapter 1, that the guiding logic of Du Bois's review on the two novels was in fact that of normality, a modern conception of the desirable state of being.

For African Americans including Du Bois, engagement with the normal served to counter what Siobhan B. Somerville has called scientific racism. In the interwar period when sexology and eugenics gave pseudo-scientific grounds for the stereotypical association of people of color with criminal activity, mental incompetence, and sexual license through the mobilization of the category of the abnormal, to speak in the language of normality, rather than in the church-related vocabulary of respectability, gained political meaning for claiming full citizenship. This need of resisting racism specific to African Americans may explain what Christina Simmons terms African American partnership marriage, a subcategory of companionate marriage in which the wife and the husband were considered socio-political, as well as sexual, partners (*MMM* 150-164). African American uplifters were increasingly embracing the idea of companionate marriage, acknowledging the

importance of marital intimacy and the need of more gender equality, and yet continued to view marriage as social commitment for the purpose of advancement of the race rather than purely personal or private engagement of love. Often, as I will suggest in Chapter 1, African American partnership marriage was accompanied by eugenic reproduction, embodying uplifters' desire to expand middle class and limit the poor.

This dissertation examines the ways in which novels of the Harlem Renaissance invest themselves in the difficult task of simultaneously negotiating scientific racism and engaging in sexual modernism. Using the idea of modern marriage as the conceptual framework of argument allows us to recognize that the works of authors I will discuss in this dissertation—namely, Du Bois, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and Wallace Thurman—are premised on the modern recognition that women's sexuality can be a source of pleasure and that mutual sexual pleasure of male and female is essential to a successful marriage. While the Harlem Renaissance is often divided into two in generational terms, I would emphasize the continued influence companionate marriage had on African American literature throughout the Renaissance era. It is often assumed that the older generation including authors and intellectuals such as Du Bois, Alain Locke, Jessie Fauset, and James Weldon Johnson valued respectability, and that the younger group of authors and artists including Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, Nella Larsen, Langston Hughes, and Zora Neale Hurston resisted it. Yet, this division makes it difficult to see the common ground of normality on which a wide range of authors stood in the 1920s to 30s. Indeed, the bourgeois politics of respectability was critiqued also by W.E.B. Du Bois—arguably



the most influential figure of the older generation.<sup>3</sup> What distinguishes Du Bois from others is his acceptance of sexual normality via modern marriage in his scheme to resist racism.

The first chapter of this dissertation examines Du Bois's engagement with "normal" sexuality through his advocacy of modern marriage for African Americans. I view Du Bois as a sexual modernist, a view that challenges the dominant understanding that the race leader was Victorian in regard to sexual matters. To make my case, I first read Du Bois's nonfictional articles written from the late 1910s to 20s, teasing out from them key elements of the companionate marriage model. Then, I move to my analysis of his novel, *Dark Princess* (1928), which later in life Du Bois named his favorite of all his works. Focusing on the novel's representation of the two marriages experienced by the black male protagonist Matthew Townes, I seek to illuminate Du Bois's project to eroticize African American marriage. I trace the way the sexual bond is depicted as the foundation of the idealized marriage in *Dark Princess*, which is in sharp contrast to the seeming sexlessness of celebrated marriages in turn-of-the-century African American novels. Du Bois's novel was largely neglected until recently due to its erotic content, making its reviewers believe that Du Bois revealed his personal fantasy as opposed to his political vision. I counter this assumption by claiming that Du Bois's vision was indeed that of partnership marriage, or marriage for the race, only he merged it with erotic elements of companionate marriage.

The rest of the dissertation examines the way three other authors responded to the idealization of partnership marriage within the African American middle class.

The second chapter examines how Larsen's work represents two marriage models available to middle-class African American women, traditional and partnership. The tragic ending of *Quicksand* calls traditional marriage into question, while *Passing* can be read as Larsen's critique of the promotion of partnership marriage within African American middle class. In both novels, companionate marriage is dreamed of but not achieved by their heroines.

The third chapter analyzes the ways in which Zora Neale Hurston uses companionate marriage in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) to characterize her heroine's ideal marriage. When Hurston wrote *Their Eyes* in 1936, key ideas of companionate marriage were more widely shared, at least among whites, than they were in the late 20s. After 1930, the moral framework laid out by such reformers as Lindsey and Sanger was developed through the flourishing of sex advice literature, which encouraged readers to cultivate pleasure in marriage. Freed from the Comstock censorship, which had banned circulating "obscene" materials through the mail, much more sexually explicit marriage manuals intended for a lay audience flooded onto the market in the Depression years. An English translation of Van de Velde's *Ideal Marriage* (1926) and British birth controller Marie Stopes's *Married Love* (1918) were allowed into the United States in 1930 and 1931 respectively and sold remarkably well. Birth control advocate Mary Ware Dennett won a 1930 case against the post office banning of the sex education pamphlet she had written for her sons, and, in 1936, Sanger won the case *United States vs. One Package of Japanese Pessaries*, in which the court reinterpreted the Comstock law to allow an exemption for contraceptives prescribed by physicians. In this climate, claiming the importance of

pleasure within marriage seems to have not been as risky as it had been ten years ago for an African American female author. Like Larsen's *Passing*, *Their Eyes* critiques the idea of partnership marriage which solicited African Americans to use their sexuality for racial uplift, and yet, unlike *Passing*, Hurston's novel offers an African American example of companionate marriage as an alternative to the Du Boisian kind of race-minded marriage.

While Hurston's and Larsen's works limit their heroines' sexual pursuit to the confines of marriage, in *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), Wallace Thurman challenges existing representations of African American women by creating a heroine who explicitly pursues sexual pleasure not legitimated by marriage. As I will argue, reading Thurman's novel with contemporary marriage models in mind allows us to define intimacy differently than the ones tied to marriage. In the end, all the authors I discuss seem to share the modernized understanding of sexuality as a healthy human trait and construct their text around the same question: "Sex is pleasurable. Is marriage?"

## Chapter 1

### Partnership Marriage in W.E.B. Du Bois's *Dark Princess*

It has long been assumed that W. E. B. Du Bois was a sexual conservative, against whose repressive doctrines younger artists and authors of the Harlem Renaissance laid claims. In this chapter, I revisit Du Bois's ideas on sex and marriage and suggest that Du Bois became critical of respectability that had become the sexual norm of the black middle class by the 1920s. To invest in uplift politics did not necessarily mean remaining silent on sexual matters. As I will argue, Du Bois challenged some of the social conventions of the respectable culture of the black middle class, and promoted an eroticized version of the accepted mode of marriage.

When the long-held image of Du Bois as sex conservative is questioned, scholars have explained the conflicts found in his sex ideas as remnants of Victorian sexual mores, rather than as contradictions of sexual modernism. For example, Claudia Tate states that Du Bois was a "modern Victorian," not scientifically reasoned if viewed from today's point of view ("Introduction" xxvi). Drawing on Michel Foucault's dismantling of the repressive hypothesis, Michele Elam and Paul C. Taylor also suggest that Du Bois maintained "characteristically Victorian ambivalence about sex," constrained but obsessed to transform sex into discourse (Elam and Taylor 219).

Not considering the body of knowledge on sex being built in the Progressive era, these views fail to recognize the shift Du Bois made in the early twentieth century.

As I will demonstrate in this chapter, Du Bois's writings echo contemporary "scientific" discourse popularized through works of such sexual modernists as sexologist Havelock Ellis, Judge Ben B. Lindsey and Wainwright Evans, and physician/birth control advocate Margaret Sanger, all of whom fascinated many intellectuals and literati of the early twentieth century. Not considering the influence of the body of knowledge on sex being built in the Progressive era, then, scholars have failed to recognize the modernity of Du Bois's ideas on sex and marriage. Arguably, Du Bois was invested in promoting companionate marriage more positively than any other African American of the Harlem Renaissance, adjusting it in accordance with specific needs of racial uplift. At least since the 1920s, Du Bois claimed to reform elements of existing middle-class African American marriage, including excessive control over sexuality, strict patriarchal order, and lack of adequate sexual knowledge. Du Bois publicly supported the legalization of birth control and easier divorce for the realization of companionate marriage in which the sexual and spiritual bond is central.

One of the most prominent of Du Bois's writings where this support can be found is his 1928 novel, *Dark Princess*, which pushes forward the image of marriage as a source of sexual pleasure, resisting existing understandings of marriage purely as social commitment. While works of other Renaissance writers—particularly Nella Larsen, Wallace Thurman, and Zora Neale Hurston, as the following chapters suggest—present marriages and heterosexual relationships apart from idealized pictures of companionate marriage, Du Bois sought the possibility of companionate

marriage for the African American middle class informed by the modern “sciences” of human sexuality known as sexology and eugenics.

#### Companionate Marriage in Du Bois’s Nonfictional Writings

Du Bois has been known as one of the most influential promoters of the politics of respectability, which highly valued chastity and domesticity. His sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899), in spite of its claimed objectivity, barely hides his lament over “much sexual promiscuity and absence of a real home life” among “the lowest class of recent immigrants and other unfortunates” that threaten representations of African Americans as respectable people (192). And yet, by the 1920s, Du Bois evidently had become critical of strict sexual policing of the respectability of the black middle class, and called instead for a more liberal embracing of sexual expressions.

In fact, Du Bois recognized men and women’s sexual need and, to accommodate it, endorsed all three key social claims of companionate marriage—legalization of birth control, accessibility to divorce, and the need for sex education. Perhaps most fundamentally, he attempted to remove the reticence on sex by suggesting it not be considered an inappropriate topic. Compared to Anglo Saxons, according to the race leader, “advancing” African Americans were “behind” on this issue. As he wrote in *Crisis* in 1922:

Among colored people, especially the advancing groups, marriage and birth are still slightly improper subjects which cannot be discussed with plain sense.

The world has left us behind in this respect and we must needs (*sic*) rapidly catch up. (“Opinion” 247)

We can find in Du Bois’s writings from the 1920s his attempts to provide a more “plain” account of “marriage and birth” in order to encourage African Americans to “catch up” with companionate marriage. There is striking similarity between Du Bois’s statement and the ideas of Ben B. Lindsey, judge and influential marriage commentator who popularized the term “companionate marriage.” In *Companionate Marriage* (1927), which he co-authored with Evans, Lindsey states: “Sex is. . . a thing that badly needs to be talked about; and though I want to offend the reader’s sensibilities as little as possible, I propose to talk plainly” (Evans and Lindsey 19). As if to echo Lindsey, who proposed divorce for marriages that were not working and where children were not involved, Du Bois advocated acceptance of divorce as a solution to unhappy marriages. He wrote for *Crisis*, for example, that “If [marriage] fails, then it should be dissolved—quietly and decisively in divorce court. Any doctrine of marriage that conceives a quarrelling, unhappy, sordid and compulsory union of man, woman and children as better than peace and work even with poverty, is fundamentally wrong” (“Opinion” 248).

Du Bois also publicly supported the legalization of birth control. He made his position clear in the first of the three so-called “Negro numbers” of Margaret Sanger’s *Birth Control Review* as early as in 1919, stating, “I believe very firmly in birth control” (“A Word” 15). Later, in 1932, along with other prominent African Americans, such as sociologist Charles S. Johnson and author George S. Schuyler, Du Bois contributed to the second Negro number. Here he wrote that reliable birth control

information needed to be circulated widely among African Americans “so that the young people can marry, have companionship and natural health, and yet not have children until they are able to take care of them” (“Black Folk” 167).

In *Crisis*, too, Du Bois advocates birth control as necessary to his idea of racial progress:

Yesterday I saw a young man and woman and their three children. And I was told: Four of their children are dead. I said: “That is a crime! It is not simply a misfortune—it is a deliberate crime which deserves condign punishment. No woman can bear seven children in ten years and preserve her own health and theirs. No man who asks or permits this deserves to be a husband or father. Birth control is science and sense applied to the bringing of children into the world, and of all who need it we Negroes are first. We in America are becoming sharply divided in to the mass who have endless children and the class who through long postponement of marriage have few or none.

(“Opinion” 248)

It is important to note that Du Bois, even as he criticizes the young father’s behavior, does not advocate sexual abstinence; implied is a basic idea of companionate marriage that “[n]ormally sexed people will not practice continence in marriage” (Lindsey and Evans 229). Problematic here is not having sex but impregnating a woman without concern for her health or the children’s well being. Articulating the lack of birth control knowledge among African Americans, Du Bois simultaneously comments upon how husbands should act in modern times, when reliable birth control methods were becoming available to patients in urban centers.<sup>4</sup> In 1929, for example, the



Urban League and Margaret Sanger's Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau opened a birth control clinic in Harlem, which was endorsed by a local African American newspaper, the *Amsterdam News*, as well as by a few religious and political leaders including Du Bois. As the second so-called Negro number of *Birth Control Review*, published in 1932, which includes articles by Du Bois, George Schuyler, and Charles Johnson, suggests, it was a commonly understood among African American middle class that birth control was needed for their program of racial uplift which was based on their observation that poor, uneducated women in rural areas married early and had many children, while more educated women in urban centers had few or none.

#### Critiquing Respectability: *Dark Princess*

*Dark Princess* details Matthew Towns's heterosexual relationships with two women—Indian Princess Kautilya and African American political secretary Sara. This sexually-charged story also includes Matthew's brief encounter with a nameless blues singer. Before meeting any of these women, Matthew is a medical student in New York until a new dean from the South expels him. Having lost hope for his own and the country's future, he sails aimlessly off to Germany, where he meets a princess from India, Kautilya, and falls in love. Kautilya asks Matthew to be part of her transnational project to integrate peoples of color and to send her reports about blacks in America. Matthew agrees; he goes back to America and becomes a Pullman porter. Meddled by a worried aide of the princess, Matthew is unable to contact the princess. One day he discovers through a newspaper article that she has left for India and concludes that it is "the end of his great dream— his world romance" (61). He loses

his hopes and sleeps with a blues singer from a Harlem cabaret in desperate need of “warmth and company” (70).

Wanting to have a “home” and to stop dreaming about Kautilya (138), Matthew marries Sara, a secretary to an African American politician in Chicago. Their marriage, however, lacks sexual pleasure. As a result, Matthew recalls the blues singer again and again. He is now involved in the political scene himself, but remains much indifferent to his career due to his regretful feeling for Kautilya. Thus, Matthew abandons Sara without hesitation when Kautilya reappears to “save” him (209). Hand in hand, the two lovers walk to Matthew’s old apartment which he has kept even after marriage, and live together there for several months. In contrast to the couple’s satisfaction, however, people of the town condemn their extramarital relationship. The two soon separate, since Matthew needs to be officially divorced, and Kautilya has to return to India since she, as a princess of a kingdom, must procreate an heir. They do not know Kautilya is pregnant with Matthew’s son at this moment. Toward the end of the novel, as soon as Kautilya gives birth to their child and Matthew is divorced, the couple reunites and gets married in Matthew’s hometown in Virginia.

The centrality of the issue of sexuality in *Dark Princess* has confused its commentators, including Claudia Tate, who wrote an introduction to the novel’s 1995 edition. In her account of the contemporary reviews, Tate states that *Dark Princess* is “important work” (xxv), since his writings such as this one “emphatically express aspects of Du Bois’s personality that masculinist convention have censored and that embarrassed his contemporaries” (xxvi). But a close look at contemporary reviews, especially those written by African Americans, reveals otherwise. *Dark Princess* was

widely reviewed after its original publication. While reviews in the white press were mixed, reviewers in the black press “responded enthusiastically” as Aptheker Herbert has observed (26). George Schuyler states that “in this novel Dr Du Bois is at his best, which is a whole a lot better than the best of nine-tenth of the white and black writers of today” (qtd in Aptheker 26). Alice Dunbar-Nelson devoted most of her column in *Washington Eagle* to the novel, in which she describes reading the novel as “complete and eminently soul-satisfying” (213). In a review in *Crisis*, Allison Davis writes: “all those who have high faith in the destiny and the future of the Negro [...] ought to read it.” (Davis 340).

Tate directs attention away from these favorable reviews to Alain Locke’s comment that the novel “is not wholly successful” (Locke 12). Overlooking the historical fact that the book was praised among African Americans, Tate concludes that Du Bois’s contemporaries literati found *Dark Princess* “a dirty old man’s fantasy that should never have been published” (“Introduction” xxiv). Erasing what was present in the novel’s contemporary reviews, I argue, allows Tate to maintain her assumption that “unrestrained sensuality as well as explicit sexuality overwhelmed most of Du Bois’s first readers” (xxiii), a false assumption hardly unique to Tate. As I have suggested in the Introduction, there has been a belief among scholars that African Americans ignored modern sexual discourse in preference to reticence on the matter of sex in the 1920s and 30s. Many African American authors, including Dunbar-Nelson and Schuyler, actually were critical of sexual repression. Far from being “overwhelmed” by the novel’s treatment of sexuality, Du Bois’s African American contemporaries welcomed the modern marriage of color he envisioned.

Named “a romance with a message” by its author (qtd in Aptheker 19), *Dark Princess* foregrounds the affinity of the erotic and the political. Du Bois articulates the need to de-repress African American literature in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926). Written two years prior to the publication of *Dark Princess*, the essay not only declares “all Art is propaganda and ever must be” (782), but also problematizes the socialized censorship that displaces sexual contents from African American arts and letters proposed as such. Du Bois argues that reticence on sex keeps African American expressions “unfree” (783): “We are ashamed of sex and we lower our eyes when people talk of it. . . In all sorts of ways we are hemmed in and our new artists have got to fight their way to freedom” (783). In such a formula of sexual expression and liberation, sexual contents and unrestrained narrative are inseparably tied to each other. It can be said, then, that *Dark Princess*’s unrestrained mode, exemplified by its frequent use of exclamatory sentences and capitalized words, is an aesthetic practice in which amplification is itself imagined as politically libratory. When Kautilya saves him from being nominated to the legislature by interrupting the political dinner, Matthew ecstatically says to the princess after a kiss: “Your body is Beauty, and Beauty is your Soul, and Soul and Body spell Freedom to my tortured groping life!” (210). It is Kautilya’s sexual body, not just her ideas and beliefs, that Matthew claims liberates him from the respectable society’s culture of repression.

Assuming a sexual self that needs to be liberated from repression signals the underlying ideology of normal sexuality. Sexologists claimed that it was “normal” for humans to have sexual impulses, and that the ability to repress these has nothing to do one’s virtue. According to Havelock Ellis, for example, sexual abstinence “has

nothing to do with either asceticism or chastity. . . but merely with purely negative pressure on the sexual impulse, exerted, independently of the individual's wishes, by his religious and social environment" (Ellis 179). Critiquing sexual policing of African American respectability, *Dark Princess* accepts and utilizes the idea that sexual repression is fundamentally wrong. Matthew's educational background as medical student gives supposed validation to his position as the moral center of the text. The racist dean does not let him do "obstetrical work" required to complete the degree (4), but this past also possibly reveals the protagonist's familiarity with modern sexual science.

Matthew and Kautilya confront the policing gaze of the townspeople of Chicago, who used to be Matthew's voters:

Then came reaction—the social tribute of the half-submerged to standards of respectability. Here and there a woman sneered, a child yelled, and a policeman was gruff. As weeks went by, Sammy interfered, and active hostility was evident. Jibes multiplied from chance passers-by who recognized them; the sneers of policemen were open. (258)

According to Du Bois's own definition in his sociological study *Philadelphia Negro*, the submerged tenth is the "lowest class of criminals, prostitutes, and loafers" (311). "The half-submerged" in this passage might be translated as the black middle class, many of who were working poor yet resisting the class stratification in consciousness through mobilizing the concept of respectability. It was aspiration for respectability and upward mobility, rather than actual material conditions, that constituted the black middle class. As Jenkins emphasizes, "[e]conomic status has not historically been the

sole determinant of blacks' participation in uplift ideology"(14). Given the severe inequality in the labor market, Kevin Gaines suggests that we "discard our generally color-blind notion of middle-class, whose effect is to mask race and class inequalities through a reified category of the black middle class" (16).

The townspeople's hostility toward the extramarital relationship between Kautilya and Matthew signals the respectable African American society's appreciation of sexual purity as a moral trait or what Jenkins calls the salvific wish, "a longing to protect or save black women, and black communities more generally, from narratives of sexual and familial pathology, through embrace of bourgeois propriety in the arenas of sexuality and domesticity" (14). In Du Bois's representation of the salvific wish, Kautilya's race and ethnicity do not matter so much as Matthew's marital status. The guests, the majority of whom are upper class blacks, answer the question of Kautilya's identity—"who is this woman?"—by simply deciding that she is "a slut from the streets" who has an affair with the husband of a respectable lady (210). Articulated here is fearful reaction, which underlies the salvific wish, to the threat of the unmarried, unidentified woman and of the streets.

As Shane Vogel has suggested, Du Bois viewed the urban streets, cabarets, and dancehalls as space of alternative black sociality and public intimacy: "Though Du Bois is concerned about the potential for social disorganization posed by the dance floor, he also recognized it as a choreographic space of intimacy, modernity, and futurity" (159). *Dark Princess* indeed defends black men's cabaret-going. Matthew befriends a minister from the South who wants to visit a cabaret, and the minister confesses that he has condemned "ballrooms and 'haunts of hell'" without having seen

any himself (62). Importantly, the minister states that “The Church is Woman” (64), suggesting that his curiosity for urban amusement has been policed by female members of the church. Here, the text seems to make a reference to the women’s movement in the black Baptist church that developed from the late nineteenth century to the 1920s. As Evelyn Higginbotham explains, Baptist women viewed themselves as “sorely needed missionaries to America” (186). For Baptist women who promoted sexual purity, dancehalls signified the site of vice which the positive influence of the church and home aimed at counterbalancing.

The space of alternative intimacy, however, entails male consumption of the female body. The minister enjoys a night at a Harlem cabaret with Matthew as an usher, and declares that he will no longer preach against cabarets and dance halls. What he witnessed that night includes a performance of a mulatto blue singer:

She was pale cream, with black eyes and hair; and her body, which she was continuously raising her clothes to reveal, had a sinuous, writhing movement.

She danced with body and soul and sang her vulgar “blues” with a harsh, shrill voice that hardly seemed hers at all. She was an astonishing blend of beauty, rhythm, and ugliness. (66)

The heterosexual male audience values only the sexuality of her performance. Music is absent in this passage, for Matthew appreciates only the visual effects of this blues singing performance, that is, her body’s “movement” and the “rhythm” it keeps. What he associates with the singer’s innerness is her dancing body, and he dismisses her lyrics as vulgar and judges her voice as unreal.

Matthew later sleeps with the blues singer, whom he simply calls “prostitute” in place of a name. To Matthew’s eyes, the nameless singer embodies sexual availability and ability, represented in her remarks such as “Come on, baby” (66) and “Come and dance, Big Boy” (67). After dancing together, Matthew and the singer hurriedly leave the cabaret behind: “They whirled away in the taxi, and stumbled up long stairs, and then with a sigh he slipped his clothes off, and clasping arms around her curving form, fell into dreamless sleep” (70). Although the description is somewhat ambiguous about whether they actually have sex, there is a monetary exchange between them as Matthew starts calling the singer the prostitute. The morning after, the singer now called the prostitute tells Matthew, “You ain’t built for the sporting game” (70). The term “built” suggests the sexological logic of the novel that regards the aptitude for prostituting a physical trait. Through the singer/prostitute’s evaluation, the text implies that while it is normal for men to want nightly amusement, better men “naturally” do not fit there. By offering to be his “friend” to possibly help him improve sexually, she also assures Matthew of his masculine desirability.

The erotic experience with the blues singer impresses Matthew so intensely that he cannot forget about it during his marriage to his first wife, Sara. Upon marrying Sara, he imagines himself as “a reader of old books, a listener to sad and quiet music, a sleeper” (138). He agrees to marry Sara nonetheless, since marriage is a “normal” way to “[solve] the woman problem once and for all” (138). However, their marriage, in which they are “partners” (138) rather than lovers, soon disappoints Matthew; Sara “disliked being ‘mauled’ and disarranged, and she did not want any one



to be ‘mushy’ about her” (153). Sara, in short, does not act like the prostitute he knows:

Now if [Sara] had had the abandon, that inner comprehension, of the prostitute. . .but no, no, Sara was respectable. That meant she was a little below than average. She was desperately aware of the prevailing judgment of the people about her. She would never be great. She would always be, to him—unendurable. (192)

Even though Matthew recognizes the impact of social expectations on Sara’s sexuality, for him there exists no love without sexual enjoyment, indicating the extent to which he believes that romantic love emerges out of erotic fascination and not vice versa. The prostitute has become a standard for Matthew with which to measure his wife’s sexual ability and sensibility, an “error” that a contemporary influential marital advice author wrote that husbands often make. In the best-selling marital advice work of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Married Love* (1918), Marie Stopes warned a husband not to compare his wife with prostitutes: “[Men] argue that, because the prostitute showed physical excitement and pleasure in union, if the bride or wife does not do so, then she is ‘cold’ or ‘undersexed.’ They may not realize that often all the bodily movements of the prostitute are studied and simulated because her client enjoys his orgasm best when he imagines that the woman in his arms has one simultaneously” (34). In Matthew’s logic where the average means the availability of the sex worker, Sara’s dislike for sex is unnatural, abnormal, and, therefore, “unendurable.” Thus, Matthew concludes that “[Sara] did not repress passion--she had no passion to repress” (153).

Matthew's failed marriage with Sara reflects Du Bois's insistence that respectability and existing marriage norms that advocated it do not meet "normal" men's need for sexual satisfaction. The text in turn proposes a model of marriage for the African American middle class that accommodates "normal" desire through the path Kautilya and Matthew take. For Dunbar-Nelson, *Dark Princess* was especially successful in its depiction of Sara; she writes: "HE KNEW Sara; he envisioned Kautilya" (214). The idealized wife, Kautilya, serves as an embodiment of Du Bois's heteronormative conception of femininity, which he was unable to incorporate within the respectable image of African American women.

#### Normalizing African American Marriage

As Madhumita Lahiri has recently suggested, theosophist Annie Besant can be considered one of Kautilya's models. Not only did Besant once serve as President of the Indian National Congress, she also helped with the matchworkers's strike of 1888, "an interesting parallel to Kautilya's work with the Box-Makers' Union" (Lahiri 542). I would further add some of the biological facts about Besant's marriage. Besant married her husband when she was nineteen years old, which is also the age at which Kautilya's engagement takes place. She earned money by writing articles, stories and books, and yet married women did not have the legal right to own property. While Besant managed to legally separate from her husband, divorce was not possible in England. Given these historical facts, it is meaningful that Kautilya also has experienced a "divorce" before she meets Matthew; she manages to nullify her engagement to a British man at their wedding (245-46). Besant's book, *Marriage As It*

*Was, As It Is, and As It Should Be: A Plea for Reform* (1878) argues for the acceptance of divorce, while *The Law Of Population* (1877) proposes the legalization of birth control.

Modern Americans, including Du Bois, trusted in science's superiority over law; they believed that humans could change law but not the biological, "normal" need for sexual and spiritual satisfaction. In case spouses had not been not happy in their marriage, they argued, accessibility to divorce needed to be secured. Considering Du Bois's probable recognition of the inconvenience of existing divorce laws in England and to a lesser extent in the United States, it is not hard to understand why *Dark Princess* draws attention to the legal aspects of marriage and the decision-making processes regarding it. Giving birth to their son, Kautilya arranges to send for Matthew but not until after he is lawfully divorced. Matthew has waited for Sara's action, claiming that she has rights to decide what to do with the marriage. Since he abandons his duty as a husband by leaving Sara for another woman, Matthew maintains, he needs to accept whatever Sara proposes. As he tells Kautilya, "hers shall be the choice. She must ask divorce, not I" (260). If they had children, to be sure, the story surely would have been more complicated. As if their future divorce was anticipated, Sara declares she does not want a child when parenting is suggested by Matthew (153). Given Matthew's knowledge of female anatomy, it might even be inferred that the couple practices a reliable method of birth control. Legalization of contraception is also among Matthew's political agendas (146).

Having made mistakes in the past, Matthew and Kautilya are divorced and prepared for a happy marriage, a scenario companionate marriage discourse

theoretically allowed young people to follow. Sara, too, takes this path of “from an unhappy first marriage to a happy second and final.” After Matthew leaves Sara, her previous employer, Sammy, persuades her to marry him. After a conversation, she decides to accept his proposal—“She obeyed an impulse, a thing she had not done for ten years. She turned deliberately, walked over to Sammy, and kissed him” (277). Suggested in this scene is the change of Sara’s attitude toward her own sexuality; she may have turned a corner and be more open in the future to expressing her sexuality. Earlier in the story, she declares that “I’ve been fighting the thing men call love all my life” (138).

The story of *Dark Princess* ends with a scene where Kautilya and Matthew reunite and belatedly celebrate the birth of their one-month-old son, Madhu, who is expected to inherit Matthew’s brain and Kautilya’s royal blood, and is also expected to be the leader for people of color across nations, “Messenger and Messiah to all the Darker Worlds!” (311).<sup>1</sup> Thus, the idea of companionate marriage, which puts stress on the sexual desire of two individuals in love, and the purpose of racial progress, which solicited African Americans to sacrifice themselves for the betterment of the race as a whole, reconcile eugenically in *Dark Princess*.<sup>2</sup> But I would emphasize here that the celebration takes place at the couple’s wedding. The wedding marks the continuation of the companionate marriage ideal that allows the couple to become a symbol for both marital and racial progress. The couple is ecstatic not simply because they had a son, but because the son is a product of their love-making; Madhu is “our Love Incarnate,” to quote Matthew (308). Tellingly, at the wedding, they do not see anything but themselves— “Thus in the morning they were married, looking at neither

mother nor son, preacher nor shining morning, but deep into each other's hungry eyes" (309).

According to the novel's logic of racial progress, the sexual desire of women of color is a vehicle for romantic and spiritual connection with a proper man. Kautilya's desire for Matthew challenges the then-popular association of feminine sexuality with craving for maternity, relocating it within the context of heterosexual pleasure. Since sexual pleasure was now considered a pivotal element of marital life, expectations for wives changed, too. Passionless women were not idealized any more. Rather, a certain openness for sex was required to pursue mutual sexual satisfaction. Matthew goes so far as translating erotic ability into "the human sympathy" (192).

The idealized wife in *Dark Princess*, Kautilya, serves as an embodiment of Du Bois's heteronormative conception of femininity, which he was unable to incorporate with the respectable image of African American women. That is, given the consistent impact of respectability, it was probably easier for Du Bois to write about women's pleasure from his orientalist fantasy than based on the reality of African American women's lives. Conveniently exoticized, Kautilya is fully ready for an erotic experience in spite of her virginity. Naked or half-naked, Kautilya is laid down in Matthew's flat after their first intercourse:

The rain was falling steadily. One could hear its roar and drip and splash upon the roof. All the world was still. Kautilya listened dreamily. There was a sense of warmth and luxury about her. Silk touched and smoothed her skin. Her tired body rested on soft rugs that yielded beneath her and lay gently in every curve and crevice of her body. She heard the low music of the rain

above, and the crimson, yellow, and gold of a blazing fire threw its shadows all along the walls and ceiling. The shadows turned happily and secretly, revealing and hiding the wild hues of a great picture, the reflections of a mirror, the flowers and figures of the wall. In silence she lay in strange peace and happiness—not trying to think, but trying to sense the flood of the meaning of that happiness that spread above her. (217)

Nowhere in African American literature before *Dark Princess* is pleasure after intimacy narrated from a woman's point of view as straightforwardly as in this scene. Here, there is no conflicting feeling such as hesitation, confusion, fear, and shame but peace and happiness on Kautilya's mind, however strange or new the two are to her. Sensing—indeed not thinking about—the *meaning* of happiness, Kautilya is in harmony with the nature represented by rain and fire. What this passage claims is that Kautilya is naturally heterosexual as well as normally sexualized.

It is noteworthy that Kautilya at first characterizes her desire as yearning for a purely spiritual bond. As she recalls later, “Almost . . . I forgot you as a physical fact. You remained only as spirit which I recognized as part of me and part of the universe” (248). After they have sex, however, Kautilya is sure that they have become one being, or what Matthew calls “a complete blending” of “body, mind, and soul” (152). “Nothing, not even the high Majesty of Death, shall part us for a moment. There is a sense—a beautiful meaning—in which we two can never part. To all time, we are one wedded soul” (259). Their sexual union, for Kautilya, is stronger than the fact that Matthew is still married to Sara. Kautilya is confident, because Sara's dislike for sex

does not corroborate the companionate ideal that “the yielding of a woman to a man was a matter of body, mind, and soul—a complete blending” (*Dark Princess* 152).

To restate the historical background, the complete union of man and woman is an idea that emerged out of popular marriage manuals in the 1910s and 20s. As Julian Carter argues, heterosexuality described in marriage advice literature “combined the erotic desire for sexual difference with the evolutionary elaboration of that desire into love; this combination was absolutely essential both for status as a normal modern and for the existence of civilized social order” (98). Pursuing sexual pleasure was idealized in such a way that it could testify to one’s commitment to civilization.

With the complete blending of lovers that involves the African American male hero, *Dark Princess* redefines African American marriage as sexual and pleasurable, or, in short, “normal.” I would revise Roderick Ferguson’s interpretation of the scene where Matthew kisses Kautilya right before the wedding as the location of “gender and sexual fulfillment” and “a political vision for a more radical and just tomorrow” (285). As I have traced, the couple enacts “normal” sexuality through the commitment to, as well as the articulation of, the complete union of body and mind, rather than just one single act of kissing. In fact, their baby son, the product of the union, is in Kautilya’s arms when Matthew kisses her. Paying attention to kissing, a more respectable expression of intimacy, risks obscuring *Dark Princess*’s project to eroticize African American sexuality and encourages us to re-place the novel within the respectable genealogy of African American social realism, the very convention that Du Bois’s novel attempts to depart from.

My reading of Matthew's two contrasting marriages encourages an understanding of *Dark Princess* not as a narrative of Du Bois's personal fantasy but rather as an effort to engage in the complicated sexual and gender expectations of African American society in the 1920s which struggled with the tension between advancing the politics of respectability and engaging in modern discourse of sexual normality. Reflecting the tension between respectability and normality, the celebrated heterosexual relationship in *Dark Princess* takes the form of what Simmons calls African American partnership marriage in which the companionate ideal is shared but modified by the need to fit it within the context of racial uplift politics (*MMM* 150). The sexual union prepares a strong marriage, and that marriage provides a platform for the articulation of political hope, which was welcomed by the contemporary uplifters who, like Du Bois himself, participated in the promotion of partnership marriage.



## Chapter 2

### Unhappiness in Marriage in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and *Passing*

From 1916 to 1919, before she became a librarian at the Harlem Branch of the New York Public Library and then started her writing career, Nella Larsen worked as a nurse at the New York Health Department, the “cutting edge” institution of the “cutting edge” field of public health, as her biographer George Hutchinson calls it (114).<sup>1</sup> Hutchinson goes on to describe how progressive the future writer's job was:

Just as Larsen entered the service, with masses of military men passing through New York, her department took on the battle against venereal disease. Nurses went into the community and met with families to speak frankly about sex and about syphilis and gonorrhea as “diseases common to adult life.” They taught women and girls, especially, about sexual anatomy so they could “discuss sex problems freely,” as the New York nurses' manual put it. (118)

Hutchinson's delineation of the role of public health nurses helps us picture a clear image of Larsen the nurse: a young woman with exceptionally advanced knowledge of sex and the female body, educating women and girls to pay attention to their sexuality. It is not surprising, then, that Larsen's two major works, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), both deal with sex and female sexuality as their central concern. It is

not surprising, either, that both of her novels, where the heroines are laywomen without adequate sex education, end tragically.

This chapter situates Nella Larsen's literary work within the context of the early twentieth-century modernization of sex and marriage, proposing that the former-nurse novelist of the Harlem Renaissance was well informed by the discourse of sexual modernism. I will read Nella Larsen's two novels, both written and published in the late 1920s, against the historical context of sexual modernism, which allows us to recognize the extent to which Larsen engaged in the modern marriage discourse. First, I will examine how *Quicksand* depicts the main character Helga Crane's religious marital life, which persistently centers on reproduction. Helga's preacher-husband Pleasant Green, a striking representative of the traditional sexual and gender norms of the rural South, gives her no choice but to procreate, even after her health declines ostensibly due to repeated childbearing. Helga's tragedy of marital entrapment suggests that Larsen acknowledged the need for sex education and birth control practice. I will then turn to *Passing*, where Larsen explored what it means for an African American middle-class woman to conform to the white-conceived companionate marriage ideology. The main character Irene Redfield's idea of a marital bond is inspired by the norm of companionate sexual intimacy, but in reality, Irene experiences no sexual pleasure. As I will suggest, this disparity between the idea and the experience does not simply indicate Irene's personal failure, but points to black middle-class women's unsettling relationship with the idealized white middle-class marriage.

### “A Truly Spiritual Union”: Helga’s Ordeal in a Traditional Marriage

Marriage. This sacred thing of which parsons and other Christian folk ranted so sanctimoniously, how immoral—according to their own standards—it could be! (*Quicksand* 134)

Becoming the wife of an Alabama preacher, Reverend Pleasant Green, Helga insists that bodies do not matter: her marriage to Green is, “she declared to herself, a truly spiritual union” (118). The consequence of this “truly spiritual union” is for Helga to bear three children “in the short space of twenty months” (123), and to give birth to a fourth one, “born of such futile torture and lingering torment,” who dies shortly thereafter (131). At the end of the novel, Helga “began to have her fifth child,” having “hardly [...] left her bed and become able to walk again without pain” from her last childbearing, while her children had “hardly [...] returned from the homes of the neighbors” (135). Larsen’s text, in short, warns that marriage can be a health-risking, life-threatening space for women. Helga is stuck in this “bog” (134), because she has been concerned about her appearance and not her health: Helga “never thought of her body save as something on which to hang lovely fabrics,” but “had now constantly to think of it” as she loses her health (123). Evidently, Helga has not received the sexual health education that the New York public nurses provided during her time.

Larsen’s call for sex education and marriage reformation in *Quicksand* reflects the currency of sexual modernism in a fairly faithful way. To reiterate the contents of the idea of modern marriage, marriage reformers agreed on the importance of sex and psychological intimacy, recognized women’s sexual need, and relied on science rather than religion. In *Quicksand*, Larsen unsparingly denounces Helga’s marriage

according to all three of these criteria. There is no psychological bond between Helga and her husband sustained by sexual intimacy; their marriage is strictly patriarchal and Helga is subjected to her husband's demands and needs; even when faced with Helga's dramatically declining health, her preacher-husband justifies his repeated impregnation of Helga in the name of God. It can be said, then, that Helga's "truly spiritual union" is imagined as quintessentially Victorian, as that which is to be reformed. Notably, at one point Larsen describes Helga's marriage in terms of companionship, only to reveal Helga's abandonment of the ability to think rationally and thus highlight her subjection to the patriarchal system: "Surely their two lives were one, and the companionship in the Lord's grace so perfect that to think about it would be tempting providence" (121). The repressiveness of Victorianism is thus performatively constructed, to the extent that Larsen gestures toward the modern companionate marriage.

Discussions of marriage reform in the early twentieth century were often linked to arguments for the need of birth control, which supported all of the three elements of the modern marriage, that is, attention to sex, women, and science. During the 1920s, substantial discourse on birth control was produced not only by whites but by African American intellectuals, including W. E. B. Du Bois.<sup>3</sup> In the October 1922 issue of *Crisis*, the major publication of the NAACP, Du Bois proclaimed that, while "marriage and birth are still slightly improper subjects" among the black bourgeoisie, now was the time to discuss sex openly: "Birth control is science and sense applied to the bringing of children into the world, and of all who need it we Negroes are first" ("Opinion" 247-248). Famous birth control advocate Margaret Sanger also appeared in African American public venues. The August 1922 issue of *Crisis* carried an

advertisement for Sanger's 1917 book *What Every Girl Should Know*, which discusses issues of the female body and the sexuality of young females. Her *Birth Control Review*, in turn, dedicated three issues to the discussion of African American birth control in 1919, 1932, and 1938. Though not pursued ultimately, the possibility of a "Marriage Advice Bureau" at the Harlem branch of Sanger's Birth Control Clinical Research Bureau was raised in 1932 (Simmons, *MMM* 185). Furthermore, in 1923, Sanger gave a talk at the 135th Street Branch of the New York Public Library, where Larsen was working as a librarian at the time.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the prominence of marriage reform discussion in the 1920s Harlem, Helga's dramatically declined health due to recurring childbearing evinces Larsen's endorsement of the legalization of birth control.<sup>5</sup> In her project to modernize reproduction, Larsen opposes the religion that leads people to believe that reproduction is inviolable, that they simply "must accept what God sends" (124). Except for Helga, women of the town fully accept this myth; as Martin Favor puts it, in *Quicksand*, "[w]omen are the ones most visibly and audibly giving themselves to the Lord" (108). When Helga reaches out to the women to share her growing concerns about health and childbearing, all they do is try to pacify her: "Jes' remembah et's natu'al fo' a 'oman to hab chilluns an' don' fret so" (125). This statement not only silences Helga but also naturalizes the suffering that repeated childbearing inflicts on women's bodies. Mutual support among women is radically questioned here and is seen instead as a means for imposing obedience to patriarchal control over women's bodies and reproduction,

Indeed, it is not women of the village but a nurse who helps Helga recover. Miss Hartley, “a brusquely efficient woman who produced order out of chaos and quiet out of bedlam” (134), serves to deliver the benefits of modern science to the superstitious Green household. To Miss Hartley, any discussion about God is altogether absurd: the anti-Christ story “The Procurator of Judea,” which Helga asks her to read, is “dull” and “silly” (132). The nurse is, instead, concerned about “her patient’s pulse” (134). In Larsen’s text, even temporarily, it is only Miss Hartley’s language of medical care that can “protect” Helga from her husband and challenge patriarchal oppression (130). Having been ill from her fourth childbirth, Helga finally manages to get out of bed one evening. Then, approached and touched by her husband, Helga definitively realizes that “she hate[s] this man” (129) but cannot get rid of him. “[A]ll-seeing and instantly aware of the situation,” the nurse assumes the voice of authority: she says “firmly,” “I think it might be better if you didn’t try to talk to her now. She’s terribly sick and weak yet. She’s still got some fever and we mustn’t excite her or she’s liable to slip back. And we don’t want that, do we?” (129). Unable to oppose the nurse’s rational reasoning, the preacher-husband reluctantly leaves Helga alone.

A woman of letters, Larsen was apprehensive of old-fashioned marriage’s impact on the mind as well as the body. The narrative in *Quicksand* carefully traces the repressive state of Helga’s mind. On the night of her first meeting with Green, Helga wonders if she has “missed the supreme secret of life,” observing that he desires her (116):

After all, there was nothing to hold her back. Nobody to care. She stopped sharply, shocked at what she was on the verge of considering. Appalled at where it might lead her.

The man—what was his name?—thinking that she was almost about to fall again, had reached out his arms to her. Helga Crane had deliberately stopped thinking. She had only smiled, a faint provocative smile, and pressed her fingers deep into his arms until a wild look had come into his slightly bloodshot eyes.

The next morning she lay for a long while, scarcely breathing, while she reviewed the happenings of the night before. Curious. She couldn't be sure that it wasn't religion that had made her feel so utterly different from dreadful yesterday. (116)

Helga does not allow herself to admit her shocking thought and the act of seducing the preacher; they are kept beneath the surface of her consciousness. The text does not reveal what comes after the preacher's "wild look" appeared, though Helga's "utterly different" mentality in the morning does imply that they have had sex. Helga represses "the happenings" between Reverend Green and herself, and, more importantly, almost recognizes that it is the repressed, not the religious, that has brought about the change in her mind. The last sentence is soon repeated in a slightly different manner, showing that her stream of consciousness circles around, but never probes into, the unreligious implications of her experience of the night before: Helga is "[s]till confused and not so sure that it wasn't the fact that she was 'saved' that had contributed to this after feeling of well-being" (117). Larsen's use of the negative skillfully represents Helga's

conflicting mind—the idea that the unreligious or physical contact with the preacher may be the cause of her peace of mind is present and yet being denied at the same time.<sup>4</sup>

*Quicksand* thus reveals that Larsen envisioned marriage without birth control and love as a site of physical pain and psychological repression for women. Helga's ordeal in the traditional, reproduction-centered mode of marriage is a springboard for Larsen's project to address problems of modernizing African American middle-class sexuality, which she further pursues in her next novel. But before I move to my analysis of *Passing*, I would like to note the way uplift politics prevents Helga from pursuing the ideal of companionate marriage in *Quicksand*. It can be said that the cause that turns Helga to religion and the minister is the impossibility of a companionate marriage to Dr. Anderson, who she has long desired secretly and with whom she has wanted "something special" (108). Also the husband of Helga's friend, Dr. Anderson utterly denies his desire toward her in spite of having kissing her at a party, blaming it on alcohol. An outsider to the uplift community, Helga does not understand until this moment that Dr. Anderson, immersed in uplift politics, "was not the sort of man who would for any reason give up one particle of his own good opinion of himself" (108), unlike, for example, Matthew in *Dark Princess*, who willingly leaves his wife for his true love. Helga responds with a slap on his face. Brokenhearted, she then submits herself to the traditional, reproduction-centered form of marriage, becoming the minister's wife and then the mother of his six children, since she "[has] forfeited [something special]" (108) and the possibility of a companionate marriage is gone. Helga's submission to this marriage is quite ironic,



for she has avoided Dr. Anderson as well as her former fiancé James Vayle precisely because she has not intended to have children, as she says to Vayle: “Marriage—that means children, to me. . . Why add any more unwanted, tortured Negroes to America?” (103). Yet in the end, Helga finds herself in the very quicksand of the reproduction imperative she has moved away from.

“The Bond of Flesh and Spirit”: Irene’s Trouble in a Partnership Marriage

In *Passing*, Larsen explores the devastating effect of the companionate marriage ideology on African American women, through her representation of Irene’s marital commitment to Brian Redfield. During the 1920s, scientific modern marital sex discourse was popularized through marriage manuals, voluminously produced and widely read in the United States during the early twentieth century in the context of an increased divorce rate. Departing from the Victorian morality that described sex for women as a duty, modern manuals stressed the centrality of sexual intimacy in marital life and encouraged men and women to be sexually sensible. As Julian Carter aptly summarizes, “[m]ost manuals [of the 1920s] concurred that the sexual love of husbands and wives was the apogee of individual and cultural development” (97). With the frequently used rhetoric of heterosexual coupling as perfection of self, heterosexual erotic sensibility was legitimated as a basis for the bond of marriage. In *Happiness in Marriage*, published in 1926, Margaret Sanger warns that “until husband and wife have come to a realization of the necessity for complete union of body and spirit, happiness cannot grow out of the marriage relation” (176).

I suggest that Irene is confused and frightened by such discourse that promotes sexual pleasure and denotes ignorance on sex, because she, as an African American woman of the middle class, is expected to be “wrapped up in [her] boys and the running of the house” (210) and to run about for the cause of “[u]plifting the brother”(186), in her husband’s words. Christina Simmons captures such race-sensitive situation by coining the subcategory of partnership marriage. Racial uplifters such as Du Bois challenged the Victorian model of marriage where sex was primarily a duty for women, but they continued to consider marriage as social responsibility rather than personal pursuit of happiness, an idea crystalized in the mode of African American partnership marriage, in which the wife and the husband were considered political, not simply sexual, partners. To recall my argument in the previous chapter, Du Bois’s *Dark Princess* describes mutual sexual pleasure as bringing happiness to the main character’s wife-to-be, and yet this happiness is outshined by the celebration of the birth of the son by the end of the novel. In Du Boisian partnership marriage, that is to say, the ultimate goal of having sex is to establish black political agency rather than experience pleasure.

Scholars who discuss *Passing* have been more interested in exploring such situation specific to black sexual and gender politics than pointing out the commonality between black and white experiences of sex modernization. Candice M. Jenkins, for example, analyzes *Passing* in terms of what she calls “the salvific wish,” that is, the black middle class ideology to politicize private lives in order to construct a black womanhood of respectability and propriety that approaches white middle-class ideals established in the Victorian era. To the present day, Jenkins argues, the

Victorian white sexual ideal has continued to play a significant role in policing black bourgeois women's sexuality. For Jenkins, Irene in *Passing* is the textual embodiment of the salvific wish, and Clare Kendry's death "ostensibly at Irene's hands" (31) demonstrates the violence inherent in the ideology that polices transgressive sexual practices.

Jenkins's argument is well-taken, but I would take the influence from white culture into consideration as well. As Simmons observes, when the white middle-class sex ideals were drastically changing in the early twentieth century, African Americans of this period also engaged in marriage reform, familiarizing themselves with modern ideas about sex and marriage through visiting white clinics and reading advice manuals by whites (Simmons, *MMM* 186). In this cultural climate, it is quite imaginable that, while deeply immersed in the salvific wish, Irene nevertheless strives to form and maintain her marriage according to the companionate marriage ideology, where the importance of sexual intimacy is emphasized.

Irene considers sexual intimacy the key to a successful marriage, although, I have to add, great sex is only imagined rather than experienced. Irene insists on the married couple's psychological closeness; she claims that she has "a special talent for understanding him," and that it is "the one thing that had been the basis of the success which had made of a marriage that had threatened to fail" (187), yet her ability to read his mind, of course, is acquired or cultivated through the course of their marriage.

Irene explains that their sexual intimacy has helped her develop this ability:

[B]ecause, so she insisted, the bond of flesh and spirit between them was so strong, she knew, had always known, that his dissatisfaction had

continued, as had his dislike and disgust for his profession and country.

(187)

Irene's inclusion of "flesh" in this statement points to her acknowledgement of the importance of sex within marriage. However, Irene is deprived of pleasure in life--the Redfields do not sleep together any longer. In a conversation about what Irene considers "dreadful jokes" their son has learned at school, Brian states that "the sooner and the more he [their son] learns about sex, the better for him" because "it'll keep him from lots of disappointments later on" (189). Larsen highlights this gap between Irene's vision and reality by inserting the clause "so she insisted" in the passage quoted above where she describes her connection with Brian. Residing within the sexual conservatism of African American middle class, Irene is unable to seek or, even, talk, pleasure.

Since Deborah McDowell's groundbreaking reading of *Passing* as an obliquely lesbian text, Irene's erotic sensibility, especially toward Clare, has been widely acknowledged. For McDowell as well as for many others, Irene's suspicion of Brian and Clare's affair exposes her own desire for Clare (xxvi). However, when scholars such as McDowell and David Blackmore interpret the understated sexlessness of Irene and Brian's marriage as evidence of the text's homoerotic implication (McDowell xxiii; Blackmore 475), they are, in fact, uncritically following the modern ideology that sexual intimacy is central to a successful, "normal" marital life. Similarly, Judith Butler states that a queer reading of the text "is not to discount the possibility that Irene also desires Brian, but there is very little evidence of a passionate attachment to him in the text" (179). By not specifying the "very little evidence" of Irene's

attachment to her husband, Butler, too, leaves invisible what constitutes “normal” marriage. Queer readings of *Passing*, that is, tend to direct attention away from the fact that Irene is not simply heterosexually committed to Brian but legally married to him.

Regardless of whether or not Irene is deluded by her own homoerotic jealousy, however, “Clare would be *capable* of such betrayal,” as Jenkins reminds us (30). From her first appearance in the novel, Clare is represented as a dangerous figure who gives illicit “pleasure” to men (148). Apparently Clare has maintained this character throughout her youth. After Clare disappeared twelve years ago, Irene remembers, there were rumors about her new “job” (153):

There was the one about Clare Kendry’s having been seen at the dinner hour in a fashionable hotel in company with another woman and two men, all of them white. And dressed! And there was another which told of her driving in Lincoln Park with a man, unmistakably white, and evidently rich. Packard limousine, chauffeur in livery, and all that.

There had been others whose context Irene could no longer recollect, but all pointing in the same glamorous direction. (152-153)

The implication is that the girls, including Irene, were certain that Clare was passing for white, but the ironical language here provokes prostitution as well: “Working indeed!” (153). Adding to such history, now that her husband understands her racial identity, Clare can “risk anything” (236).

For Irene, then, Clare represents a double threat to her “normal” life; Clare invokes homoerotic desire *and* may seduce Brian out of marriage. Irene’s denial of

her own same-sex desire toward Clare, then, should be read not simply as repression, but more specifically as part of her commitment to the partnership marriage to her physician husband. The plot of *Passing* suggests Larsen's awareness that the ideal of partnership marriage is made possible through the denial of other kinds of erotic experience including lesbianism. When Irene thinks of "happiness, love, or some wild ecstasy," they are perceived as the "sacrifice" she has had to make to maintain stable marital life (235). Historically speaking, normalization of heterosexuality in the form of modern marriage was a (hetero)sexist and patriarchal reaction against the growing visibility of lesbianism, which represented the autonomy of women; authorized by science, marriage reform was believed to bring "harmony between the sexes" (Simmons, "Companionate Marriage and the Lesbian Threat" 54).

Julian Carter complicates such a feminist interpretation of the normalization of heterosexuality in the early twentieth century by incorporating race analysis, arguing that the flourishing of marriage advice publications was a response to the white middle-class fear that their privileged status might be threatened by changing social conditions. Polarized sexual difference, which had long served as a trait of white civilization, was revised through the great transformation in gender politics, exemplified by women's admission to suffrage in 1920. Marriage advice provided a dubious remedy to such anxiety by suggesting other axes of difference would dissipate once sexual difference was overcome. Heterosexuality thus became a token for liberty, marriage a basis for citizenship. At the same time, descriptions of modern marriage normalized whiteness as a condition of love experiences by avoiding explicitly racial language. Modern companionate marriage thus "represented a new

racial and sexual credential for membership in the imagined community of the nation” (Carter 115).

Queer of color critiques have also attempted to explain marginalized people’s insistence on the “normal” sexuality symbolized by the marriage ideal. Roderick Ferguson calls American citizenship “a technology of race” (14), with which the state effectively regulated nonwhite gender and sexual practices and produced discourses that pathologized racialized groups. Marriage’s imagined status as a basis for full citizenship was especially firmly established among African Americans, who have historically been excluded from the white norm since slavery time. The contradictory situation where Irene might be banned from spending her money through exclusion from white-owned establishments likewise points to what Ferguson calls “the discursivity of capital” (18). While capital encourages subjects to transgress the boundaries of race, gender, class, and sexuality in order to reproduce itself, it may also come around to support the interests of the state and protect such boundaries. Thus, though the growth of capital made the emergence of an African American middle class possible in the early twentieth century, they were excluded from the rights and privileges of citizenship that wealth promised to proffer. At one point Clare says to Irene “my dollar’s as good as anyone’s” (199) for the uplift organization, but in the white-dominating space outside Harlem, theirs is not. In the face of the contradictions of capitalism and racism in the United States, it is understandable why a black subject like Irene might feel compelled to prove her citizenship by conforming to the universality that whites historically embody.

Irene does so by pursuing “normal” sexuality that the companionate marriage ideology described, which means that she has internalized the cultural demand to sexually satisfy her husband and seek sexual satisfaction herself in marriage. When she convinces herself that he is having an affair, Irene reveals this internalization. Irene has long known that Brian is “unhappy” in their marriage (214), but comes to realize now for the first time his sexual dissatisfaction. She thinks, “He was her husband and the father of her sons. But was he anything more? Had she ever wanted or tried for more? In that hour she thought not” (235). This idea of a married couple having to be “more” than parents is something traditional African American marriage did not encourage, if we recall Helga’s marriage to the preacher in *Quicksand*, for instance. As my analysis of W.E.B Du Bois’s vision indicates, reproduction was a necessary, yet not sufficient, condition of the ideal wife within uplift politics. The idealized wife in *Dark Princess* is sexually satisfying and satisfied, in addition to being able to give birth to a son. The discourse of sexual normality allowed men to explore pleasurable experiences including prostitution, and women were now solicited to keep up with their husband’s (often unrealistic) expectation.

Irene’s apparent murder of Clare, then, is no less a result of the sexualization of African American marriage of this period than an example of sexual policing the African American middle class has traditionally performed as Jenkins argues. That is, Clare is closely associated with erotic and, even, illicit pleasure, yet her pleurability becomes intimidation only if a woman’s sexual appeal has any relation to what is socially and culturally expected of marriage. *Passing* thus comments from African American women’s point of view on the message of the companionate marriage



ideology that women are to sexually satisfy and be satisfied by their husband in order to be happy in marriage and that no man wanted a sexually incompatible wife, a message so destructive for African American women of middle class whose agency largely depended on their role as race mother.

### Chapter 3

#### Black Marriage on Trial in Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Watching God*

In her essay “Fiction, Anthropology, and the Folk: Zora Neale Hurston,” cultural and literary critic Hazel V. Carby denounces “Hurston’s discursive displacement of contemporary social crises” (76) through “a utopian reconstruction of the historical moment of her childhood” in her writing (Carby 77). Hurston’s novels, including *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), Carby argues, privilege her nostalgic visions of her hometown Eatonville and fail to engage with the historical cultural transformation of migration, creating the folk that exists only outside of history.

A closer look at the novel’s historical context, however, reveals that setting her story in the rural Florida allowed Hurston to offer an alternative to the narrative of urban black pathology, a contemporary cultural “crisis” brought by the very transformation following the Great Migration of African Americans to Northern cities. Indeed, I will argue in this chapter that the representation of marriage in *Their Eyes* comments upon the sociopolitical climate in which African Americans were placed in the early decades of the twentieth century, characterized by the social hygiene movement, a government-led urban reform and sex education campaign to stop the spread of venereal disease. Urban reformers and criminal justice administrators of this era focused on regulating the behavior of heterosexual working-class women, and,

because of white perceptions of black women's supposed innate promiscuity and criminality, black women were especially targeted. In order to counter the discourse of black urban immorality, Hurston's text, I will argue, utilizes the framework of companionate marriage and normalizes her heroine's sexual development. Notably, it is a strategy that also challenges the respectability demand of the African American middle class in that it focuses on personal pleasure instead of commitment to the advancement of the race, a form of marriage which Christina Simmons categorizes as African American partnership marriage.

While *Passing* and *Dark Princess* are concerned with the modernization of black middle-class marriage, *Their Eyes* specifically counters stereotypes about African American working-class sexuality which ideologically sustained social hygienists' actions. Targets of white and middle-class black reformers, black working women in urban centers like New York were subject to a disproportionate amount of police interference and public scrutiny. As I will suggest, Hurston's novel responds to such a social climate by offering an alternative narrative about black sexuality from that which was associated with urban immorality by the white public.

Hurston's novel needs to be read against the context of the social hygiene movement. Recent studies suggest this campaign was deeply racialized to preserve the health of white middle-class families. Venereal disease was considered "most destructive of the white race. . . without doubt the very worst foes of sound family life, and thence of civilization," as Charles W. Eliot, president emeritus of Harvard and president of the newly formed American Social Hygiene Association described it in

1914 (qtd. in Carter 128). Theoretically, venereal disease was simply incompatible with “normal” American family life.

In the form of pamphlets, lectures, or classes, sex education in elementary or junior high schools in the late 1920s and 30s tended to focus on what reformers called nature study. Through nature study, students learned how small animals, such as birds, frogs, and fish, and some plants, such as flowers, reproduce. This trend of sex education emerged out of the concerns for the counterproductive effects of negative information circulated in the 1910s that centered on the tragedy of venereal infection. Negative education had been useful to promote premarital self-control, but not likely to encourage understanding of heterosexual consummation as the foundation of modern marriage. By promoting positive education about “normal” development instead, sex educators hoped to teach young people that reproductive marital heterosexuality was not only normal but also superior to all other forms of sexual practice, emotional connection, or family structure that had ever existed (Carter 140).

Despite the racist implications of some of the social hygiene literature, African American reformers and educators employed the same approach based on the same moral framework. For instance, in “New Opportunities for Schools” (1926), Franklin O. Nichols, black social worker and the head of an ASHA preventive program for African Americans, argued that the purpose of sex education was not only to explain the mechanism of sexual organs but to teach that “social experience has developed monogamy as offering the best institution so far discovered for a social adjustment of sex and reproduction” (“New Opportunities” 287). African American schools were thus encouraged to teach black children bourgeois white marriage ideals through

systematic nature study. For Nichols, while struggling through the “difficult and hazardous history” since slavery, African Americans were gradually learning “the significance of sex and reproduction in individual and racial health,” as he argues in another essay titled “Social Hygiene and the Negro” (409). Nichols claimed that African American leaders believed black citizens were “of the warp and woof of the American civilization,” and regarded the conventions of common-law marriages and illegitimacy among African Americans as a threat to “the general family life of the nation” (“Social Hygiene” 410). Here, the particular purpose of preservation of the white race, which often was taken for granted in white social hygienists’ writing, is reinscribed as the “general” state of American civilization. Based on such white-centered assumptions about ideal family life, African American schools taught children to marry, have sex, and procreate but not necessarily to experience sexual pleasure.

Indeed, evidence suggests that the non-pleasure guideline was more rigidly kept within African American sexual politics. Whites were interested in cultivating pleasure in marriage, as can be seen in the popularization of marital sex advice literature from the late 1920s to the 40s. After 1930, the moral framework laid out by such reformers as Ben Lindsey and Margaret Sanger was developed through the flourishing of marital sex advice which encouraged readers to cultivate pleasure in marriage. Freed from the Comstock censorship, which had banned circulating “obscene” materials through the mail, much more sexually explicit manuals intended for a lay audience flooded onto the market in the Depression years. Contrastingly, within the African American community, longing to save its members from persistent

narratives of pathology, African American professionals remained reticent about pleasure though acknowledging intimacy as an important aspect of marital life, thus supporting causes such as the legalization of birth control. While the concept of companionate marriage was advocated by African American authors including W.E.B. Du Bois, George Schuyler, and Alice Dunbar-Nelson at least since the late 1920s, marital sex advice literature was authored by white reformers only, indicating black society's reluctance to discuss sexual pleasure more openly.<sup>1</sup>

The representation of the heroine's third and last marriage in Hurston's novel addresses such reticence. As I will argue, Janie's narrative foregrounds marital intimacy in *Their Eyes* and thus challenges the black middle-class's emphasis on racial, social responsibility over personal, sexual pleasure. Whereas Larsen's works concern the negative impact of repression and Du Bois's *Dark Princess* includes a description of happiness after sex, in Hurston's text the role of pleasure is much more central—it defines the happiness and success of marriage.

### The Contemporary Reception of *Their Eyes*

The centrality of pleasure in *Their Eyes* seems to have caused mixed feelings among African American readers of the time. When *Their Eyes* was first published in 1937, the differences of opinion about the novel centered around whether Hurston had succeeded in avoiding stereotypes of black sexuality. Most famously, Alain Locke and Richard Wright criticized *Their Eyes* on similar grounds. Since they considered masculine confrontation with the white world as an indispensable subject for African American literature, Hurston's apparent indifference to such confrontation

disappointed them. Hurston's work was accused of entertaining whites through its representation of "pseudo-primitives" (Locke, rpt. in Gates and Appiah 18), or, in Wright's words, working-class African Americans with "facile sensuality" (Wright 17).

On the other hand, scholars have not paid much attention to commentaries made by white reviewers. In the chapter on *Their Eyes* included in his acclaimed biography of Hurston, for instance, Robert Hemenway states that "[t]he white establishment failed to recognize that her subject was purposefully chosen; they liked the story, but usually for the wrong reasons" (241). Hemenway's argument draws attention away from white reviews to the aforementioned ones by Wright and Locke, a gesture of mapping an exclusively black context for *Their Eyes*. In order to understand the complex expectations Hurston had to negotiate, however, it is equally important to pay attention to reasons why whites liked the novel.

White contemporaries were pleased with Hurston's novel precisely because they believed it avoided stereotypical portrayal of African Americans. Ralph Thompson of the *New York Times*, for example, favorably stated that *Their Eyes* is not the stereotypical "comedy" that whites may expect to see of African Americans, but rather it portrays "the normal life of Negroes in the South today" (Thompson 23). Sheila Hibben also expressed her admiration for the story of "a swarming, passionate life" (rpt. in Gates and Appiah 22) as opposed to "the current fetish of the primitive" (21). For the white reviewers, simply put, the novel's success largely relied on its use of companionate marriage ideals as an underlying principle of Janie's sexual pursuit. Apparently considering Janie's relationship with Tea Cake a successful example of

companionate marriage, Hibben goes so far as to call it “the perfect relationship of a man and a woman, whether they be black or white” (22).

Hurston was still complaining thirteen years later that the most of white America could not envision normal love of African Americans, even though she had provided the example of *Their Eyes*. In “What White Publishers Won’t Print” (1950), Hurston writes about the fictional archive of stereotypes she calls “THE AMERICAN MUSEUM OF UNNATURAL HISTORY” (951). In this “intangible,” Hurston argues, racialized minorities like Native Americans, Jews, and African Americans are reduced to “uncomplicated stereotypes” (951), and only two types of African Americans are assumed to exist: one is the minstrel-like, entertaining comedian, and the other is “a Negro ‘intellectual,’ who protests racial injustice (952). Such stereotyping, Hurston argues, is problematic because it makes it difficult to see that minorities are “very human and internally, according to natural endowment, just like everybody else” (952). As a result, “it will remain impossible for the majority to conceive of a Negro expressing a deep and abiding love and not just the passion of sex” (953).

Hurston’s argument may explain why *Their Eyes* did not become a commercial success until much later—in fact, the novel was not widely read until the canonization of Hurston’s work in the 1970s. To be fair, though, contemporary white critics do seem to have welcomed *Their Eyes* for the very reason that they felt it avoided stereotypical assumption about African American intimate life. One critic writing in the *New York Times Book Review* said that “it is about Negroes. . . but really it is about every one” (Tompkins 18), pointing to the success of Hurston’s strategy in *Their Eyes*



to suggest that the “normal” combination of sex and love does not happen to white people only. Hurston’s novel, as perceived by white reviewers, is populated not with primitives who indulged in sex but with “normal” people who *happened* to be black and were capable of love as realized in modern, companionate marriage. According to this logic, racial difference, maintained through constant retelling of the narratives of black primitivism and white civilization, presumably disappears on the horizon of sexual normality.

#### How the Text Normalizes Black Sexuality

The primary way in which the text normalizes Janie’s sexuality is by using the framework of companionate marriage, as the white critics seem to have noted. The text opposes marriage out of necessity, which is represented by Janie’s first two marriages, and favors modern marriage based on love and pleasure, represented by her last marriage to Tea Cake, or, as Janie puts it, “uh love game” (114).

If Tea Cake represents Janie’s own choice, the first two marriages are “Grandma’s way” (114). This dichotomy foregrounds the modernity of the relationship which values pleasure rather than socio-economical necessity. Janie’s grandmother, or Nanny, has internalized bourgeois respectability, as Carol Batker suggests (205-6). Nanny has been impregnated by her master with her daughter during slavery, and determines that she “wouldn’t marry nobody . . . cause Ah didn’t want nobody mistreating mah baby” (19). In spite of such precautions, ironically, her daughter gets raped by a schoolteacher when she is seventeen. As a reaction to deprivation of her own and her daughter’s sexual autonomy, Nanny wants Janie “to

marry decent like,” not to “hug and kiss and feel around with first one man and then another” (13). Believing that a husband can serve as “protection” she and her daughter did not have (15), Nanny forces Janie into marriage to Logan Killicks. But Janie, who looks for sexual love, is not happy with Killicks who does not attract her physically: she says, “Ah wants to want him sometimes. Ah don’t want him to do all de wantin’” (23). For Nanny, marriage concerns the question of survival, and such a conversation on sexual wanting is nothing but “foolishness” (23). However, the conversation with Janie secretly puts Nanny in the “infinity of conscious pain” (24). Nanny comes to doubt her own belief in respectability though not necessarily recognizing this: the narrator says that “there is a depth of thought untouched by words, and deeper still a gulf of formless feelings untouched by thought” as if to suggest Nanny’s real feelings are different from what she would actually admit (24). The text links Nanny’s conception of marriage as economical and societal necessity for black women to the Freudian concept of repression. Soon thereafter she dies, as if to refuse to face the “truth” that Janie will not be happy in this marriage. Nanny’s death symbolically indicates the end of the heritage of slavery and marriage as a means of survival.

Janie marries three times in pursuit of a sexually and emotionally fulfilling relationship, which indicates that she is motivated by the ideals of companionate marriage. The text makes clear that she considers physical attraction sustained by the idea of companionship between wife and husband important. About her first husband, Janie complains that she doesn’t want him physically: she says, “Ah hates de way his head is so long one way and so flat on de sides and dat pone uh fat back uh his neck” (24). In spite of the dissatisfaction due to lack of attraction, Janie has no choice but to

stay in this marriage for economical reasons until finally she leaves Logan for her second husband, Joe Starks. As her second marriage demonstrates more vividly, physical attraction is an indicator of companionship between wife and husband. However, Janie stops sleeping with Joe, or, as the text puts it, “the spirit of marriage [leaves] the bedroom” (71), due to Joe’s patriarchal view of women as not intelligent enough to have their own opinion. “Somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows,” says Joe, “I god, they sho don’t think none their selves” (71). Janie objects to this by saying, “Ah knows uh few thing, and women folks thinks sometimes too!” (71). Janie “wasn’t petal-open anymore with him” (71) from then on, and thus feels liberated when Joe dies.

By contrast, Tea Cake shares pleasure with Janie by treating her as an equal from the first encounter, in which he shows her how to play checkers, something Joe has banned her from long ago. As Janie narrates, “Somebody wanted her to play. Somebody thought it natural for her to play. That was even nice” (96). Janie and Tea Cake “both laughed” (95) several times, anticipating the mutual pleasure they are going to experience. This laughter indeed leads to another, more sexual one: “They went inside and their laughter rang out first from the kitchen and all over the house,” including the bedroom (107). When he combs Janie’s hair, he insists that it is “mine [my comfortable]” as well as Janie’s (103). Such a pleasure-sharing habit makes Janie call Tea Cake “a bee to a blossom” (106), her metaphor of the ideal sexual consummation.

In the famous scene, Hurston links Janie’s sexual awakening with an erotic description of a pear blossom.

She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid. (11)

This manifestation of the modern marriage ideal, where sexual pleasure and the vision of marriage happen simultaneously, foreshadows Janie's experience of ecstasy brought by Tea Cake's act of reaffirmation of his loyalty to his wife later in their marriage. In that scene, Janie becomes "jealous" (136) upon seeing a girl named Nunkie attempt to catch Tea Cake's attention, and the couple gets into an argument. Tea Cake resorts to sex to make Janie believe that he is not interested in Nunkie: "They wrested on until their clothes had been torn away; till he hurled her to the floor and held her there melting her resistance with the heat of his body, doing things with their bodies to express the inexpressible" (138). Replaying the arching of the calyxes, Janie identifies with the pear tree again but this time experiences, not just beholds, the ecstasy. The text is telling us, then, that sex feels best when you are in love and in an exclusive, monogamous relationship where men and women are equal partners invested in cultivating each other's pleasure.

While most scholars cite this pear tree imagery as central to Hurston's characterization of Janie, they tend to downplay the significance of sexual pleasure in Janie's idea of marriage. Houston A. Baker considers it "a deceptively prominent construct" which "leads away from the more significant economic dimensions of the

novel so resonantly summed up by Nanny” (36). Carla Kaplan suggests that it is Janie’s “mistake” to think that marriage brings such orgasmic pleasure and conclude that Tea Cake is the bee to her blossom. For Kaplan, “[t]he meaning of Janie’s pear tree ‘revelation’ . . . is not marriage or a husband or sex, but talk itself, the experience of conversation, the act of storytelling and self-narration” (Kaplan 116). Janie is erotically fulfilled not in the three marriages but through the talk she engages with Pheoby at the end of the story, hence the title of Kaplan’s essay, “The Erotics of Talk.” This reading, which regards Pheoby as the true bee, however, overlooks the heterosexual connotation of the passage and ignores the pleasure Janie experiences with Tea Cake which the passage foreshadows.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, one time when they have sex, we are told that Janie “arches her body to meet him” and “they fell asleep in sweet exhaustion” (138), images that clearly overlap with the pear tree pollination. In a similarly desexualizing reading, Robert Hemenway argues that the metaphor of blossoming “refers to her discovery of self and ultimately to her meaningful participation in black tradition (239). Gurleen Grewal also maintains that the passage is “the key to understanding the spiritual nature of Janie’s, and Hurston’s, vision” (104).

The description involves imagery such as the pollen and the flower which are usually associated with reproduction, and because of the invisibility of normalized sexual practices, arguments like Kaplan’s, Hemenway’s and Grewal’s fail to acknowledge that the bee-and-flower passage privileges Janie’s sexual pleasure. It is no coincidence that the imagery used to describe Janie’s sexuality is taken from botany; it signals Hurston’s concern about the discourse of normal sexual development

circulated by reformers. Responding to the urbanization and industrialization of the turn of the century, the social hygiene movement set out to teach young Americans that heterosexual relations sanctioned by marriage were natural. Sex education in elementary or junior high schools in the late 1920s and 30s tended to focus on what they called nature study, through which students learned how small lives reproduce as well as how different human sexuality is. As Julian Carter observes, the point of this study was “not a good grounding in botany”: “It was indoctrination with the idea that, even among relatively primitive life forms, ‘sex’ was synonymous with reproductive activity and emotional interdependence between women (egg-producers) and men (fertilizers)” (142). Promoting positive education about “normal” development, social hygienists hoped to teach young people that reproductive marital heterosexuality was not only natural but also superior to all other forms of sexual practice, emotional connection, or family structure; marrying and reproducing are “the most wonderful and the most beautiful part of the story of how we grow and are born and grow up” (de Schweintz 104).

Thus, Janie’s “normal” development, completed when she becomes the pear tree in sex with her bee, Tea Cake, is in conversation with the emerging sexual norms of the early decades of the twentieth century, which, on one hand, recognized the importance of sexual pleasure, and, on the other hand, still considered reproduction as the ultimate purpose of heterosexual intercourse. Havelock Ellis, the sexologist whose influence appears to be omnipresent in sex discourses of this era, by no means belittles the reproductive goal of marriage, even though legitimating pleasure: “the normal marriage cannot fail to involve children, as. . . its chief and most desirable end”

(617). Hurston's pear tree passage appropriates the normative picture of sex in which a male fertilizer pollinates a female flower, yet the focus is placed on the pleasure of that activity instead of on how they form a seed. Not coincidentally, Janie's marriage to Tea Cake which the passage foreshadows also produces no children. Hurston delineates marital sex as love-making rather than child-making, deliberately excluding the normative implication that heterosexual intercourse is most complete when it produces children. Naturalizing Janie's sexuality, then, the text not only counters the underlying assumption of social hygiene which connects white people with natural superiority and people of color and the working class with urban immorality, but also offers a critique of sex education which situates pleasure in the context of normalized heterosexual reproduction.

To be sure, African American reformers also recognized the significance of pleasure within marriage, and the birth control discussions that took place beginning in the late 1910s certainly did not recommend abstinence. Nonetheless, reproduction continued to be the central goal of marriage. W.E.B. Du Bois is among those who envisioned marital sex as such. As I have argued in the first chapter, his *Dark Princess* describes mutual sexual pleasure as bringing happiness to the main character's wife-to-be, and yet this happiness is outshined by the celebration of the birth of the son by the end of the novel. To restate, in Du Boisian partnership marriage, the ultimate goal of having sex is to establish black political agency, which is symbolized in the potential of the couple's son to be a leader of people of color.

Hurston makes clear such contrast between partnership marriage and her interpretation of companionate marriage. When Mrs. Turner, Janie and Tea Cake's

neighbor, insists that lighter-skinned African Americans like herself and Janie “oughta lighten up de race” (140) by marrying the same kind, she shares a vision of using sex to uplift the race. Based on the belief that “If it wuzn’t for so many black folks it wouldn’t be no race problem” (141), Mrs. Turner even suggests Janie leave Tea Cake, a poor black-skinned man, for her own lighter-skinned, protest-minded brother. Janie defends her husband by stating, “Ah loves ’im” (141) and dismisses Mrs. Turner’s argument by stating, “Ah reckon Ah ain’t got no real head fur thinkin’” (142). For Janie, marriage is not a matter of race, but of love.

#### Love on Trial

The representation of “normal” African American pleasure in *Their Eyes* opposes itself to narratives of pathology. Harlem Renaissance novelists were aware that white fascination with the primitive can easily be turned into aversion for the pathological. In *Infants of the Spring* (1932), for instance, Wallace Thurman dramatizes precisely that. When Stephen, a white European, moves to Harlem to be among newly acquainted black artists and writers, an American white friend warns against black women’s “peculiar problem” (52). But Stephen confidently replies: “most of their peculiar problems exist in the minds of people like yourself” (52). After discovering he has syphilis, however, Stephen develops Negrophobia and leaves Harlem, believing “with no definite evidence” that the two black women he sleeps with are “unclean” and have given him the disease (191). Stephen enjoys the company of his primitive friends only so long as he is safely amused. Thurman’s female characters are not given chance to speak back on this matter.



If the white public projected promiscuity and irresponsibility signified by venereal disease onto African Americans, Hurston in *Their Eyes* uses another contagious disease, rabies, first to highlight the mutual care of Janie and Tea Cake, and, second, to show how Janie's citizenship is conditioned. What we witness in *Their Eyes* is the mutual care of the black married couple--Tea Cake becoming ill through the act of protecting Janie as well as Janie's refusal to confine her infected husband. Janie refuses their doctor's suggestion "to put him in the County Hospital," insisting that "[Tea Cake] don't like no hospital at all. He'd think Ah wuz tired uh doin' fuh 'im, when God knows Ah ain't. Ah can't stand de idea us tyin' Tea Cake lak he wuz uh mad dawg" (177).

While Phillip Joseph reads rabies as a metaphor for life's incomprehensibility (457), I offer a more race-sensitive reading of the novel's plot development that ties it to the ideology of companionate marriage. The court scene, where Janie's innocence must be recognized by "twelve strange men who didn't know a thing about people like Tea Cake and her" (185), dramatizes the condition black subjects lived under at the time the story takes place. As the judge describes, juries are set to determine whether Janie is "a wanton killer" or "a devoted wife trapped by unfortunate circumstances" (188). Janie will face the death penalty if convicted; if not, she will be free. The judge sets up the dichotomy by declaring, "There is no middle course" (188). In effect, Janie's life now depends on whether she is a good wife rather than good person, which underlines the significance of marital status in the field of criminal justice. For the plot of the novel, then, the legalized status of their marriage is crucial. Had their relationship only been common law, Janie would not be acquitted given the hostility of

the social hygiene movement era to single or unmarried African American women. Without a marriage license, the Janie-Tea Cake relationship could have been considered uncivilized and disorderly, and it is likely that the white authority would have determined that Janie was a wanton killer rather than a good wife. As if anticipating such anxiety around black women's sexual subjectivity and criminality, the text carefully mentions earlier in the story Tea Cake's intention to "marry her right off the train" and that he "haul[s] her off to a preacher's house" when Janie arrives at Jacksonville (117).

It should be also noted here that Janie's love is legitimated by a white physician. Dr. Simmons, the only defense witness, testifies "how dangerous it was to Janie and thought to have Tea Cake locked up in the jail, but seeing Janie's care he neglected to do it" (186). Through the court scene, then, Hurston not only "calls into question the absolute authority they [the court] claim and the legitimacy of their method" (Joseph 466), but, more specifically, demonstrates how a black defendant's situation is determined by the extent to which she conforms to the companionate marriage ideals regardless of what she has to say. What takes place is a negotiation among the multiple narratives provided by whites rather than a confession or telling of her own story. The voicelessness of Janie in the court scene indicates, as Janie keenly observes, "First thing she had to remember was she was not home" (187). I doubt, therefore, Rachel Blau Duplessis's argument that "the power of Janie's own testimony" forces the whites to acknowledge the humanity of African Americans (103). That Janie is ruled not guilty by no means suggests depathologization and decriminalization of black sexuality in general; rather, the court's decision in favor of

Janie represents the working of normalization through which the white public sorts the good blacks from the bad while preserving the idea of protecting “normal” Americans, which also constitutes the underlying logic of social hygiene.

Mad dog disease, in this regard, might be read as a narrative device which enables Hurston to comment on the normalization of companionate marriage and the criminalization of black sexuality simultaneously, without alluding to venereal disease and urban cultures associated with it. That is, Hurston puts Janie in a situation where she might catch a disease from Tea Cake yet one quite differently from a sexually transmitted disease. In this case, every action that Tea Cake and Janie take has a clear moral or ethical purpose to it, a purpose of survival but also of love and caring for the well-being of the other, the very values companionate marriage advocates. Such a process of infection and nursing is in clear contrast to the logic of immorality people think of when they imagine venereal diseases and how they are spread.

Even though the story is set in rural Florida, *Their Eyes* thus engages in the discourse of social hygiene regarding African American sexuality and citizenship that was circulated in northern cities including, but not limited to, New York. Hurston’s text comments on these issues primarily through utilizing the framework of companionate marriage and naturalizing Janie’s sexual development. The racist assumption that blacks were incapable of “deep and abiding love” is subverted by Janie and Tea Cake’s mutual care. In the process, Hurston’s text also resists African American society’s demand for “partnership marriage,” or marriage for the race, calling for more pleasurable practices of heterosexuality.

## Chapter 4

### Stolen Pleasure in Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry*

In the opening scene of Part 2 (entitled “Harlem”) of Wallace Thurman's *The Blacker the Berry* (1929), the female protagonist Emma Lou contentedly watches a man leave her room after spending two nights together. Correcting “the sensuous disorder of her hair” (39), Emma Lou wonders why “one's physical properties always [should] insist upon appearing awry after a night of stolen or forbidden pleasure” (39). She is going to apply for a job later that day and thus needs to look decent or “pert” (40), to borrow from her. Foregrounded in this scene is the conflict between Emma Lou's experience and memory of “mutual ecstasy” (40) and the social expectation for women that forbids intimacies outside of marriage. In order to be accepted in African American middle-class society, unmarried women must keep the appearance of sexual purity, that is, they cannot show any trace of pleasurable experiences. Defying the literary convention that situates female sexual subjectivity within marriage, Thurman's narrative about Emma Lou's intimate life seems to be aimed at recovering pleasure lost in existing representations of African American women.

A contributor to *The Messenger* and *The New Republic* as well as the editor of the short-lived two magazines *Fire!!* and *Harlem: A Forum of Negro Life*, Wallace Thurman was one of the younger writers of the Harlem Renaissance, who vocally

resisted uplift ideology that valued middle-class respectability. As Amritjit Singh, one of the co-editors of *The Collected Writings of Wallace Thurman*, observes, Thurman has been “more often treated as a lens through which to view the movement than as an artist and public intellectual in his own right” (14). His second novel, *Infants of the Spring*, has gained some critical attention largely due to its vivid depiction of the rebellious younger authors and artists such as Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Bruce Richard Nugent, and yet *Blacker*, Thurman’s first novel, has been largely neglected, though several scholarly essays have been published in recent years.

Appreciative assessment of *Blacker* often depends on Thurman’s choice of a woman as his protagonist. For example, Granville Ganter notes the possibility that “a female persona heightened the sense of marginality he wished to explore in his characters” (89). In an essay titled “A Female Face,” Thadious M. Davis emphasizes the parallels between Emma Lou and Thurman himself, who was, like Emma Lou, “dark-skinned and sensitive to color hierarchy within the race,” making a claim that Thurman employed “the textual strategy of responding to racial separation and oppression by assuming a female face” (114). Daniel M. Scott III, who is also a co-editor of the Thurman anthology, argues in his essay on *Blacker* that Thurman’s attempt to transcend his own gender becomes “an exploration of non-essentialized, de-natured constructions of the self” (329). These scholars positively read Thurman’s choice of a female protagonist as exemplifying the male author’s non-masculinist stance, which Stephen Knadler also calls “post-identity” and/or “queer” (912).

None of the existing studies adequately addresses the heterosexual norms Thurman’s female protagonist has to negotiate and recognizes her deviation from

them. Davis states, for example, that “a female’s conventional engagements with men” allowed Thurman to “represent his own homoerotic attractions” (115).

However, Emma Lou’s sexual practice is far from “conventional” if we compare it to what contemporary racial uplifters and white marriage reformers promoted. Indeed, I would argue that she belongs to the genealogy of “many dykes, transmen, butches, disabled people, and queer, straight, and trans-women,” who “have ventured outside the sphere of fantasy” and “have bravely entered, or stealthily crept, into the available male domains of public sexual exploration and have found pleasure there” (Rodriguez 341). Acknowledging Emma Lou’s sexual unconventionality, I would suggest, allows us to better understand the complexity of Thurman’s project in *Blacker* to call into question the rigid sexual politics of racial uplift.

This chapter, then, demonstrates Emma Lou’s deviation from the marital and sexual norms of her time, a deviation that is produced as a result of colorism and sexism within the black community as well as racism within the white. Thurman’s novel becomes a critique of both partnership and companionate marriage on the grounds that racial and sexual oppression make it impossible for someone like Emma Lou to enter either. Her forced disenfranchisement from both types of marriages could have led her to withdraw from intimate relations completely, but instead she determines to pursue such relations when and where she can, thus embracing black female sexuality and blurring the lines between proper/improper and public/private. Ultimately, Thurman’s novel provides a trenchant critique of modern marriage as liberatory for black women---and even for black men.

## Exclusion from Modern Marriages

Through the struggle of the dark-skinned female protagonist, Emma Lou, *Blacker* critiques color prejudice within the African American community, offering an analysis of how it works in tandem with the idea of partnership marriage, or marriage for uplifting the race. Living in the racist society where “[t]he nearer white you are the more white people will respect you” (Thurman, *Blacker* 13), light-skinned African Americans of this time aspire to produce even lighter-skinned children. As the narrator bluntly puts it, “all of the Negro leaders and members of the Negro upper class” are “either light skinned themselves or else had light-skinned wives” (30). A wife with dark skin is considered “a handicap” (30), unless she has something to “compensate” (31) for her darkness such as wealth, intelligence, fame, beauty, and/or special talent. In such a society, Emma Lou, not only dark-skinned but also “commonplace and poor, ugly and undistinguished” (122), surely has a hard time finding her match. Emma Lou first seeks the possibility of partnership marriage, attending college in Los Angeles to make friends with those whom she calls “the right sort of people” (30). Yet she soon finds out that young African American men and women of upper class on campus are more color-conscious than she has imagined. Boys make a fool of Emma Lou behind her back, stating “[s]he’s hottentot enough to take something” (21), and girls will not pledge dark-skinned new students into their sorority nor look for friendship with them, knowing very well that the boys, “their future husbands,” (31) do not want them. Disappointed, Emma Lou leaves for Harlem as soon as she saves enough money.

Unlike Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, however, *Blacker* does not turn to companionate marriage, or marriage between two equals in love, and provide an African American example of it. Rather, Thurman is invested in exposing that color hierarchy is persistent also among those who do not value respectability and racial progress and demonstrating that dark-skinned women like Emma Lou are considered inferior. In the Harlem street, men make fun of Emma Lou with misogynistic remarks such as "I don't haul no coal" (58). As far as color prejudice is concerned, the college boys and those men in the streets are discriminative, and the only difference between them is whether they insult Emma Lou to her face or behind her back. Emma Lou later falls for a working-class man Alva, but he courts her initially "to show [his friends] just how little he minded their kidding" (82) and from sexual curiosity as indicated in his remark that "[t]he blacker the berry, sweeter the juice" (84). Constantly considered an inferior who does not deserve respect, Emma Lou cannot fulfill the ideal of companionate marriage, which, ironically, was imagined as bringing more freedom especially for women.

Thurman's novel thus resists the idealization of modern marriage. Exposing sexism and racism embedded within both types of modern marriage, companionate and partnership marriages, *Blacker* instead turns towards the possibility of imagining African American heterosexual intimacy unregulated by racial politics.

Before I move to the discussion of Thurman's call for attention to transient intimacies, I would like to note that Thurman's critique of companionate marriage can also be seen in his representation of the Alva-Geraldine relationship. Abandoning Emma Lou, Alva starts cohabitating with Geraldine, "who of all the people he



pretended to love, really inspired him emotionally as well as physically, the one person he conquered (*sic*) without thought of monetary gain”(86). As the woman who lives in the next room recognizes Geraldine to be his “wife” (134), the couple’s domestic, exclusive form of intimacy is equivalent to modern, companionate marriage. After giving birth to a baby with “a shrunken left arm and a deformed left foot” (124), however, Geraldine runs away from him in fear of the possibility that “she alone would have the burden of their misshapen child” in case alcoholism takes Alva’s life (133). In spite of the companionate marriage idealization of sexual compatibility as the foundation for parenting, then, what this supposedly “normal” relation reveals is the lack of parental commitment.

To be sure, such a negative representation of African Americans may have run the risk of being read as evidence of the innate inferiority of blacks by the dominant society. In fact, Candice Jenkins counts Thurman, along with Claude McKay, as two of the Renaissance authors who “espoused the romanticized and stereotypical view of the black urban proletariat as primitive and ‘closer to nature’” (Jenkins 26). However, the multiple points of view the text presents seem to resist the stereotyping of the black working class. Regarding the couple’s parenthood, Thurman inserts the criticism made by two women, Geraldine’s mother and the woman living in the next room who is paid to babysit the child in the absence of Geraldine. “People shouldn’t have children unless they intended taking care of them” (134), the neighbor says to herself, disapproving the couple’s negligence. Her gossiping with others provides a materialist interpretation of what happens in Alva’s household, which later helps Emma Lou see

that “Alva had used her,” a realization that leads to her determination to finally leave him (138-9).

The other “critic,” Geraldine’s mother, denounces the young couple for engaging in a sexual relation without marriage and claims that it is God’s punishment for not “liv[ing] respectably” (125) that the child is born disabled: “According to her,” the narrator tells us, “the mere possession of a marriage license and an official religious sanction of their mating would have assured them a bouncing, healthy, normal child” (125). As Thurman’s ridiculing tone makes clear, this traditional view of sex and marriage is dismissed as absurd, and does not contribute to the plot development that evolves around Emma Lou’s quest for finding a physical and spiritual partner.

I hope that it is clear by now that *Blacker* contains critiques of an array of marriage ideas through various characters, which suggests the depth of Thurman’s investment in unraveling African American heterosexual politics. Without taking these critiques into consideration, Thurman’s project could not be fully understood.

#### Toward the Alternative: Emma Lou’s Sexual Subjectivity

Emma Lou’s forced disenfranchisement from both types of modern marriages could have led her to withdraw from intimate relations completely, but she chooses to pursue them when and where she can. Emma Lou embraces her sexuality in spite of living in the era when the public was hostile to black women’s sexual expression, and, in doing so, blurs the lines between proper/improper and public/private.

When realizing toward the end of the novel that Alva has taken advantage of her, Emma Lou determines to choose an alternative of “govern[ing] herself” rather than seeking acceptance of others including Alva (142). Though the novel ends before it shows what her choice actually looks like, one thing is certain—she will remain in Harlem. She is tempted to go home to her family, but stops, thinking: “She had once fled to Los Angeles to escape Boise, then fled to Harlem to escape Los Angeles, but these mere geographical flights had not solved her problems in the past, and a further flight back to where her life had begun, although facile of accomplishment, was too futile to merit consideration” (141-2). We might also recall her hatred toward her “semi-white” hometown (3): Emma Lou once states mockingly, “Home? It had never been a home” (41).

Emma Lou’s determination to stay in Harlem is in stark contrast to Helga Crane’s conversion to a traditional marriage in Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*.<sup>1</sup> In a review, Thurman criticized Larsen’s representation of Helga “doing such an unexpected and unexplainable thing” (“High, Low” 219), which is to say, to “get blown into the gutter” and “let herself be carried away by a religious frenzy to the point where she marries a Southern minister and spends the rest of her life having babies” (220). That is, Thurman finds it unrealistic that Helga suddenly turns to religion and marries the minister after her unspoken hope to be the wife of Anderson is thwarted. Rather than staying there and trying to change the situation, Thurman argues, Helga always “runs away from certain situations and straddles? the fence” (220). Now that the possibility of a companionate marriage diminishes, Helga submits herself to the traditional, reproduction-centered form of marriage, which she has

refused until that point, becoming the minister's wife and subsequently the mother of his six children. Though I would argue that Larsen's victimization of Helga toward the end of the novel makes sense if it is taken into consideration that *Quicksand* was possibly written in part to support the legalization of birth control as I have suggested in the chapter two, Thurman's point is well-taken; where is Helga's resistance in turning her sexual desire deceptively into a yearning for motherhood? Claiming their sexuality is certainly difficult for African American women, but does that mean novels about them must follow the marriage plot?

Thurman seems to explore such questions through the rebellious character of Emma Lou, who strolls the streets, goes to a movie house and dance hall without an escort, and meets men. She finds pleasure in intimacies not legitimated by marriage without feeling the sense of guilt related to the notion of respectability. The text repeatedly makes clear that Emma Lou is not affected by such guilt and shame that motivates Helga to marry and convert her sexual desire into the yearning for reproduction. From her first sexual contact with a man in Boise, Emma Lou never "consider[s] regretting the loss of her virtue" or lets "her conscience . . . plague her" remembering her family's warnings (33). She knows what is socially expected of women, and yet lets her sexual desire win over the notion of respectability. When a stranger catches her attention by touching her leg in the darkness of a movie theater, for instance, Emma Lou notices "a pleasant, warm, fleshy feeling" (78) of his hand, and her mental reaction expresses the conflict between respectability and desire. "*Slap him in the face. Change your seat. Don't be an idiot,*" she says to herself, only to

immediately be charmed by the man: “*He has a nice smile. Look at him again*” (78). She then starts to converse with him, and the two have a one-night stand.

The text underlines that Emma Lou’s embracement of her sexuality is her awareness of her own physical need. “Lying in bed late every morning, semi-conscious, body burning, mind disturbed by thoughts of sex. Never before had she experienced such physical longing” (75). By representing female sexual need as a physical one, Thurman’s text places it outside of the context of marriage. The social demand to marry and the physical need for sex are clearly differentiated here, which was an exceptional description of female sexuality by an African American author.

Among racial uplifters of Thurman’s time, sexual desire was talked about exclusively within the context of male sexuality, and, even though female desire was recognized, it was often rendered indistinguishable from what they considered maternal instinct. In defense of men’s infidelity, for example, the editor of the *Messenger* Chandler Owen claims that

Man is a veritable Vesuvius, whose molten lava of sex passion, burning and boiling and seething with unrest, drives him to seek satisfaction. Like a volcano he must throw it off. Woman, periodically affected, poised by long eras of modesty, has little to control, and that is easier controlled when necessary. She enjoys a large sex satisfaction from maternal love and the suckling of children. Nevertheless, man has but one outlet, the woman. He, therefore, makes promiscuity supply him the satisfaction which woman secures from suckling of the young. (Owen 602)

Thurman's representation of female promiscuity, then, opposes companionate marriage ideology which, though recognizing female sexual desire, persistently ties it with marriage and reproduction. Within African American society, this ideology had an indissoluble connection with the uplift demand for eugenic reproduction that involved the communal preference to lighter-skinned women.

Emma Lou is not only excluded from such a cause because of her skin color, but she is also, just as importantly, indifferent to the reproductive possibilities of her sexual contacts with men. Not once does she mention a possibility of becoming a mother throughout the novel, and the text seems to emphasize that what motivates her into intimate relations at a given moment is sexual desire at that moment, rather than plans for the future to have children. Just before approaching Alva at a casino, Emma Lou says to herself that "It was terrible to be so alone, terrible to stand here and see other girls contentedly curled up in men's arms" (80). In Emma Lou's case, there is no such maternal instinct that uplift ideologues presumed to exist in relation to women's sexual longing. Emma Lou's promiscuity, then, is a form of sexual practice that the dominant culture of racial uplift considers improper, scandalous or, even, criminal.

Thurman's focus on promiscuity, rather than normalized marital relations, seems to be in line with the theory of sex in public laid by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, who positively interpret the potential of criminalized intimacies to transform the desexualized public sphere founded on the privatization of sex and the sexualization of personhood. According to these queer thinkers of the present day, criminal intimacies "bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to kinship, to the

couple form, to property, or to the nation” yet “*do* bear a necessary relation to a counterpublic –an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation” (Berlant and Warner 322). I would add, though, race and class to Berlant and Warner’s catalog of examples of belonging which criminal intimacies counter, as what Emma Lou’s sexual practice is countering is not (only) the state at large but more specifically African American middle-class society that alienates her on account of her skin color and yet nonetheless requires sexual purity and the appearance of “pert” in public (40)—Emma Lou’s own term to describe the opposite state of sensual disorder, as I have suggested in the introduction of this chapter.

Berlant suggests that we may rethink the established division of public and private by looking at more mobile processes of attachment. She states, “[w]hile the fantasies associated with intimacy usually end up occupying the space of convention, in practice the drive toward it is a kind of wild thing that is not necessarily organized that way, or any way. It can be portable, unattached to a concrete space: a drive that creates spaces around it through practices” (Berlant 4). If we accept that Thurman is advocating this kind of alternative approach to intimacies in *Blacker*, we might read Emma Lou’s relationship with Alva differently.

In normative understandings of sexual relations, this urban affair is nothing but a fake or a failure at best. Making Emma Lou believe that he loves her, Alva takes money from her so slyly that he “hadn’t asked her for it” (100); he later lives with Geraldine, who is pregnant with his baby; when the baby is born and Geraldine runs away, Alva does not hesitate to use Emma Lou as a nanny. The text ends as Emma Lou leaves his room, which, though occasionally and temporarily, establishes the

privacy of their relationship until this point,<sup>2</sup> yet is now occupied by four of Alva's male friends including a boy named Bobbie, whom Alva enfolds. Measured by such conventional ideas as longevity, permanence, commitment, and/or teleology, this ending signifies a failure to establish and sustain a long-term, domestic form of sexual relation that leads to a marriage. However, if we phrase intimacy as that which "forms subjectivity in its articulation" rather than "two coherent selves coming together or the sharing of discrete subjectivities" (Vogel 22) as Shane Vogel, discussing the alternative kind of sociality cabaret goers of Harlem shaped, maintains, then we can certainly say that Thurman is invested in documenting intimacy and its fragility in *Blacker*. The example of conversations quoted below that Alva and Emma Lou have after sex exhibits Thurman's attention to interrelational subjectivity that comes into being unexpectedly:

With enough gin for stimulation, Alva could tell many tales of his life and hold her spellbound with vivid descriptions of the various situations he had found himself in. He loved to reminisce, when he found a good listener, and Emma Lou loved to listen when she found a good talker. Alva often said that he wished some one would write a story of his life. Maybe that was why he cultivated an acquaintance with these writer people. . . .Then it seemed as if this one-sided conversational communion strengthened their physical bond. It made Emma Lou more palatable to Alva, and it made Alva a more glamorous figure to Emma Lou. (102)

Thurman underlines the mobility of this mutual attachment by noting that these conversations take place "in City College Park or in Alva's room" (102), both of



which spaces secure privacy only temporarily and/or in darkness. Alva's alcohol consumption adds the instability of this feeling. Such moments of mutual attachment do not last, nor are they tangible in any official sense that values concrete evidence. These moments do not alter the fact that the two are not, at least from Alva's point of view, a couple, either. That is, the dominant culture would not recognize the legitimacy of this belonging to each other. Nonetheless, as long as Alva relates his stories and Emma Lou listens to them, the two are remaking themselves as the talker and the listener and in need of each other.

In this context of rethinking what constitutes a proper relation, it is highly suitable that the content of Alva's talks cited above is a radical critique of the inviolable status of the institution of marriage. Alva has been married twice before, and has not obtained a divorce from his first wife, since, as he tells Emma Lou, "I married [my second wife] when I was drunk" (101). He has never seen this wife since the day he came sober and left her. Called into question here is the imagined effect of the marriage license, which has no holding power in actual relationships yet disavows and illegitimizes intimacies outside marriage, including same-sex relations. Alva himself is seen "embracing an effeminate boy" in the last few pages of the novel (144), revealing his homoerotic desire long hidden from readers as well as Emma Lou until that moment, and there is even a possibility that Alva engages in relationships with women in order to cover or camouflage his same-sex desire. His talks, then, become a critique of institutional marriage that continues to marginalize such desire as perverse and abnormal. Emma Lou admits that Alva's claim is "logical, if illegal" (101), signaling the author's endorsement of Alva's critique of the discrimination of the

institution of marriage that contradicts the reality of African American men and women's intimate lives, which consists of a variety of sexual contacts and connections including same-sex relations.

Thurman's novel thus offers a trenchant critique of the idea of modern marriage as liberatory for black women and men. Even if modernized and pleasurable to some, marriage nonetheless was a powerful institution of exclusion, for it required a certain body, lifestyle, as well as sexual practice. Rather than imagining a "better" or less objectionable mode of marriage, Thurman's text invites us to look at more emergent intimate relations that can produce pleasure and connections unexpectedly.

### Conclusion:

The texts I have discussed share a move from respectability to pleasure; that is, they are premised on the idea that sexual pleasure is fundamentally good and should be recognized as healthy trait of human sexuality. While the pleasure of sex was agreed on by the four authors I have examined, at the same time, each text takes different approaches to what the pleasure of sexual relations consists of. For Du Bois, it is inseparable from the political aim of racial progress, and, as a result, what Simmons has termed partnership marriage emerges. Sexual intimacy is represented as the foundation for a strong marriage, and that marriage provides a platform for the articulation of political hope. My analysis of *Dark Princess* also indicates that Du Bois critiques uplift ideology for allowing men to explore pleasurable experiences including prostitution but restricting women's sexuality by ultimately reducing it to reproductivity as a vehicle of racial progress and belittling their pleasure.

This double standard was critically taken up by feminist authors Larsen and Hurston. My reading of *Passing* suggests African American women of the middle-class faced a conflict between two modern marriage norms—the intraracial norm of partnership marriage that valued eugenic, uplift-minded reproduction over women's pleasure and companionate marriage that appealed for Americans to be “normal,” or sexually pleasurable within marriage. For Larsen, pleasure is almost always illicit,

and/or sex and marriage are fundamentally incompatible with each other. This is precisely a conflict *Dark Princess* avoids dealing with by substituting the ideal wife with a foreign or “oriental” woman; it seems that Du Bois, knowing so well the power of respectability on middle-class African American women, was not even able to imagine an African American woman who has both qualities.

Hurston responded to the idealization of partnership marriage with a representation of erotic marriage that involves an African American woman, calling for more pleasurable practices of heterosexuality within marriage. For Hurston, marriage is pleasurable as long as the husband treats the wife as an equal and physically and emotionally satisfies her. That Alain Locke disliked her novel suggests that uplift politics did not essentially change its attitude toward women’s sexual expression in the decade from 1928, when Du Bois wrote *Dark Princess*, to 1938, when Locke wrote his review for *Their Eyes*.

Even if modernized and pleasurable to some, however, marriage nonetheless was a powerful institution of exclusion, as it required a certain body, lifestyle, and sexual practice. Thurman's novel offers a radical critique of the idea of modern marriage as liberatory for black women and men on such grounds. Rather than imagining a “better” or less objectionable form of marriage, Thurman’s text invites us to embrace more emergent intimate relations that can produce pleasure and connections unexpectedly.

To lay their claims about pleasurable relations, these authors simultaneously negotiated the respectability requirement of African American society and scientific racism of (white) American society. Scholars of African American literature and

culture have believed that pleasure, especially women's, was a topic that a significant body of Harlem Renaissance literature avoided or at least had difficulty with, although scholars have also long recognized that the blues songs of the same era often chose to depict a wide variety of sexual desires and pleasures of African Americans. My analysis of the literary works examined in this dissertation suggests their authors' full investment in the shift from respectable to pleasurable, thus laying the ground for a reconsideration of this assumed division of cultural work between the two genres of African American literature and music.

Angela Davis points out that since slaves had been legally defined as whites' properties, experiences of autonomously chosen intimate relationships became available to African Americans only after emancipation. As opposed to the spirituals and work songs which articulated a collective desire of African Americans for an end to slavery, the blues gave voice to such personal experiences of intimacy and registered sexuality as an expression of freedom, linking sexual love and the possibilities of social freedom. Often using striking sexual metaphors, blues songs explored supposedly non-respectable themes including female desire, extramarital and/or short-term relations, and same-sex attractions (Davis, *Blues Legacies* 3-40).

The ideological shift from respectable to pleasurable in Renaissance literature thus presents a parallel, rather than a contrast, to the sexual expressiveness of the blues culture. Literary authors and blues singers may be taking different approaches to and placing an emphasis on different aspects of the topic of pleasure, but their goals are the same: to portray the full range of African American sexual desires and practices in spite of (white) stereotypes that would attempt to redirect the meaning of

those desires and practices into something “primitive,” “abnormal,” and/or shameful. Within literature, at least some prominent authors were invested in this sexual modernist project to address the need of pleasure as a primary component of African American men’s and women’s sexual wellness.

## Notes

### Introduction

<sup>1</sup> For examples of this approach, see Hazel Carby's *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987), Ann duCille's *The Coupling Convention: Sex, Text, and Tradition in Black Women's Fiction* (1993), and Deborah McDowell's "'The Changing the Same': Black Women's Literature, Criticism, and Theory" (1995). More recently, Candice Jenkins, in her *Private Lives, Proper Relations: Regulating Black Intimacy* (2007), argues that the embracement of respectability remained a strategy African Americans used to present themselves as a political subject throughout the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> In his 1919 essay "The Damnation of Women," Du Bois states a woman "must have knowledge. She must have the right of motherhood at her own discretion" (767).

<sup>3</sup> The sexual cultural climate of the early twentieth century may have affected Du Bois's concept of sex and marriage. Still, I am less interested in tracing the change Du Bois experienced than in drawing attention to the common ground on which all the four authors I discuss stood at the particular moment.

### Chapter 1

<sup>1</sup> Analyzing the novel's rendering of the child as solution to imperialism and colonialism, Alys Weinbaum states that "Du Bois glosses over historic Brahmin caste prejudice against blacks, shrugs off criticism of the unrelenting elitism of his imagery, and posits heterosexuality and reproductivity as twinned motors of black internationalist anti-imperialist politics" (116).

<sup>2</sup> For an analysis of *Dark Princess* as a eugenic text, see Daylanne English, chapter 1 "W.E.B. Du Bois's Family Crisis."

## Chapter 2

<sup>1</sup> For an extensive study on Larsen's work as a librarian, see Roffman.

<sup>2</sup> While Ann duCille argues that marriage allows Helga "sexual [...] fulfillment," as sex is "freely enjoyed and frequently engaged in" (111), I insist that Helga has sex with her husband out of duty and not for pleasure. DuCille's argument falsely applies to Helga's Victorian marriage the modern ideology of marital sex as pleasure-producing, thereby concluding that her desire is fulfilled within marriage. It should be noted that Helga does not welcome sexual excitement even when she experiences it; her narrative links it to "rank weeds" to be removed (112).

<sup>3</sup> Daylanne English observes that Du Bois's idea of birth control is eugenicist, while Larsen opposed eugenics. See especially chapter 1, "W. E. B. Du Bois's Family Crisis."

<sup>4</sup> See Hutchinson 149-150.

<sup>5</sup> Critics have missed this point. For Ann duCille, Helga becomes pregnant with "endless children," as one of the "consequences for women of passion and sexual



intimacy” (170 n. 2). DuCille uses the expression “sexual intimacy” not as the modernist basis for a psychological bond, but to mean sexual engagement in a broader sense. Terminology aside, notice that there is a leap in this statement: being (hetero)sexually active does not necessarily result in pregnancy. We may say that duCille, relating Helga’s “passion” and her “endless children,” falsely assumes that Larsen’s text offers no alternative vision for female sexual pursuit. More recently, Joanne Scheper has argued that Helga is trapped by “compulsory heteronormativity, which places women’s sexual expression within the confines of marriage and reproduction” (Scheper 681). Again, even “within the confines of marriage and reproduction,” it is possible for a woman not to have five children almost successively and to stay in good health, if she and her partner practice contraception.

### Chapter 3

<sup>1</sup> Simmons notes that she has “found no published works of marital sexual advice by black authors” (186).

<sup>2</sup> A notable exception to this tendency is Bealer, who sees in this scene “polymorphous perversity” into “a genitally centered heterosexuality” (314). In addition, Ann duCille states that “The use of such imagery links *Their Eyes* to a long-standing tradition of women’s writing in which bees, birds, and blossoms are standard tropes used to signify both sexuality and the inherent inequality of heterosexual relations” (duCille 116). Citing early nineteenth-century white journalist Margaret Fuller and feminist critic Elaine Showalter, who analyzes Fuller’s text, duCille suggests that the image of the woman as the waiting flower and the man as the traveling bee is “a decoy” (116) that

lures women such as Janie into the slavery-like institution of marriage from which they cannot escape.

#### Chapter 4

<sup>1</sup> Granville Ganter also recognizes the close relationship between *Blacker* and *Quicksand*, but not in terms of the issue of sexuality. He writes, “[b]oth heroines experience the tragic recognition that even the most noble human actions cannot provide unalloyed satisfaction” (Ganter 100).

<sup>2</sup> I was inspired by a recent article on *Journal of The History of Sexuality* written by Stephen Robertson et al, in which they discuss the residential aspect of the 1920s Harlem, as opposed to the often held image of vice district.

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