

Any Bodies' Protest Novel: Challenging the Politics of Canon Formation in the works  
of Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, and James Baldwin.

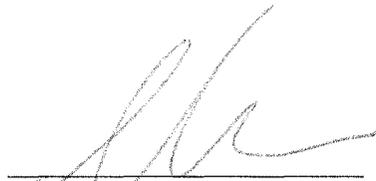
By  
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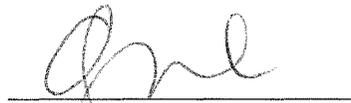
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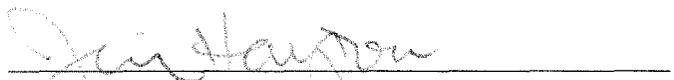
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For Donna

**Abstract:**

James Baldwin, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston are three authors who are very often read alongside one another in classrooms, book groups, and history. This grouping is often based on a system of seemingly arbitrary but identity-based categorical structures. Facets of the author's assigned social categories (African American, woman, queer) are read within a greater historical context to create stability, meaning, continuity, and mass-identification where it may or may not actually exist. However, a thorough examination of the aesthetic commonalities and connections between each of these authors' most well known works reveals not an engagement with the women's and civil rights' movements or a self-aware "Harlem Renaissance." No, the aesthetic techniques employed by all three authors fashion disparate yet searing critiques of the multitude of social, cultural, and economic forces driving the interpretations (past, present, and future) of their work. More than being male or female, black or white, gay or straight, rich or poor, these three authors seek to dismantle the boundaries of these seemingly well-established social categories. In compromising these boundaries, inclusion becomes based on one's own choice to identify instead of being identified through a process of reductive multiculturalism. Furthermore, because these critiques manifest themselves in stylistic choices instead of relying on standard tropes of social protest, future generations of radicals, artists, and those in between, have the ability to use similar techniques in their own works to further challenge notions of equality, diversity, and social movements as mechanisms for change.

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## Introduction

Houston Baker, Jr. complicates the process for evaluating and canonizing “ethnic” literature when he writes of the Harlem Renaissance, “‘movements’ are not made and parceled out in neat chronological packages; there was no ‘Harlem Renaissance’... until *after* the event” (xvii). Baker’s critique of literary critics’ handling of African American literature as following a historical period is useful for this project because it invites us to consider the political impulses driving canon formation. These impulses, which rely on and replicate rigid boundaries of race, sex, gender, and class, reduce complex, idiosyncratic representations of an interior hybrid psyche into something easily packaged, taught, and universalized. A consequence of these manipulations is that they retroactively recategorize artists’ creative output as being invested in protesting a cultural battle that hadn’t yet been fully realized at the time of publication.

This oppressive tendency, which manifests itself both in discourses of discrimination *and* liberal multiculturalism, is much more insidious because of its subtlety. Baker’s contestation of dominant literary evaluations of the Harlem Renaissance is useful in that it invites contemporary readers to interrogate evidence present in the works of Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, and Nella Larsen, that points to an engagement with the process of canon formation. Beyond this meta-awareness of canon formation, all three authors and their work are categorized and dealt with by readers and critics as part of a Harlem Renaissance, and the Civil Rights and Women’s movements. An aesthetic self-awareness and protestation of the use of

identity politics in canon formation emerges through various close readings of some of the most well known novels, critical essays, and works of short fiction written by Hurston, Larsen, and Baldwin. Their protest centers not so much on the existence of one, specific canon, but instead emphasizes the ways in which identity politics informs the ostensibly banal processes of canon formation in oppressive or dismissive ways. In particular, each author uses (in varying contexts and capacities) five formal techniques which, when considered alongside the critical work of Judith Butler, Lee Edelman, Michael Warner, and others, allow for Hurston's, Baldwin's, and Larsen's texts to be read outside of and against both the greater civil rights narrative (a narrative prone to self-congratulating impulses). Additionally, this reading of their texts outside of a sociohistorical focalization reveals a resistance to classification as existing on one side of a shift from literary modernism to postmodernism.

The five formal strategies each of these authors employ as a means to protest stable identity categories are: narrative simultaneity, self-commoditization, dark humor, queer desire, and narrative contradiction or paradox. By locating the operation of these strategies within *Passing*, *Notes of a Native Son*, *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, *Mules and Men*, and *Their Eyes were Watching God*, among others, we see the process by which literature can be used to construct a psychic space for hybrid identities. The politically unwieldy nature of hybrid identities, Megan Obourn notes, has the ability to "disrupt the possibility in which one is recognized as a member of multiple identity-based groups, with each group and member distinguishable on a level playing field" (163). This disruption is further complicated when dominant

political and identity discourses, in a collectively subconscious misrecognition of past events, adopt these texts as representative of a stable identity category, political project, or historical movement. This act of taking up an author's voice as advocating for one cause or another both muffles her idiosyncratic voice while also broadcasting it across a pre-existing, socially expectant public sphere. The process of canon formation acts as a positive feedback loop in this adoption process by ensuring that authorial personae and their works are read side by side. The use of these texts to further identity-based social and political movements also allows us to read authorial critiques about the greater, ahistorical machinations of oppression and hegemony.

In locating a radical, counterintuitive style in each of these novels, we can also position our critical gaze to more contemporary figures who also utilize the same aesthetic techniques. Lady Gaga, among many other contemporary musicians, performance artists, filmmakers, novelists, poets, and speakers, is an artistic persona who is seemingly invested in the same macro-level critiques that Baldwin, Hurston, and Larsen were. Through emphasizing such political and aesthetic connections between past and contemporary cultural producers, we are left with more questions than answers (which I assert is not necessarily a bad thing) about the processes by which critical discourses reshape both a text's initial broadcast and its future reception as one often dependent on reproducing- not reducing- hegemony.

*Passing*, *Mules and Men*, and *Their Eyes were Watching God* are, canonically speaking, obvious choices for the purposes of this argument (i.e. both authors are women, both authors are African American, and their work is often included in the

Harlem Renaissance canon). The presence of a chapter on Baldwin's much later *Go Tell it on the Mountain* and *Notes of a Native Son* in this argument is predicated on a particular understanding of what we consider the Harlem Renaissance to have been. Baker's description of the Harlem Renaissance's birth as having happened well after the fact, speaks to the impulse we have to see such a canon as another stop on the way to racial equality. This impulse, which capitalizes on a pre-existing body of African American work, allows certain historical moments to be transformed into a narrative of forward social movement. *Go Tell it on the Mountain* (1952) was published on the eve of the U.S. Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Montgomery bus boycotts. In assessing the aesthetic similarities between Baldwin's work and that of Larsen and Hurston, an anticipatory response seems to emerge. The twenty years between Baldwin's debut novel and the publishing of *Passing* (1929), *Mules and Men* (1935), and *Their Eyes were Watching God* (1937) allowed Baldwin and literary critics of the time a decade, at the least, to process Larsen's and Hurston's polemics.

This inquiry into the aesthetics of hybrid identities in each of these titles draws heavily on the theoretical work of Judith Butler, Michael Warner, and Lee Edelman. Each theorist provides an intellectual framework onto which we can transpose narrative portrayals of *any* identity into a psychosocial and political realm. These three theorists are practical choices because of their disciplinary interests in Queer Theory, Public Sphere Theory, and their grounding in a post-structuralist understanding of language. These critical lenses further allow the stylistics employed

by Hurston, Baldwin, and Larsen to be liberated from the confines of a Harlem Renaissance, Modernist, or feminist canon into an idiosyncratic aesthetic legacy noticeable in art created in a variety of historical moments and from a variety of identity subject positions. Each theorist, while contextualizing a specific aesthetic quality existing in each text, provides a system by which we can understand the greater social implications of that reading.

Judith Butler's book *Antigone's Claim* provides us a myriad of ways to articulate how Larsen's, Baldwin's, and Hurston's works could be used to complicate and critique the use of identity politics to determine a work's apparent societal aims, protests, and political point of view. Butler's equation of kinship with cultural intelligibility is useful because it addresses how gender and sexual orientation are linked to the structures of language and, by extension, politics. In her critique of Hegel and Lacan's reading of *Antigone*, Butler notes "the various ways in which kinship, social order, and the state are variously... figured in [Lacan's and Hegel's] texts" (12). Butler counters that her own reading of *Antigone* is one that "represents kinship not in its ideal form but its deformation and displacement" (24). For some of Hurston's, Larson's, and Baldwin's readers (probably most at the time of these novels' initial publication), the culturally constructed concept of race was considered to be a biologically determined fact. One could argue that raced bodies participating in heteronormative kinship patterns still maintain access to cultural intelligibility (a cultural intelligibility, Butler argues, that is denied to Antigone by Creon, and later, denied to non-normative family configurations). These racially othered bodies gain

(at least some) access to a majoritarian space through their reproduction of reproductive imperatives. In other words, kinship norms have the *possibility* to transcend racial categorization.

A racially hybrid subject position, however, throws a wrench into this simple equation of heterosexuality with cultural intelligibility. Through examining the ways in which a character simultaneously inhabits and rejects membership in multiple identity categories, intelligibility becomes something less easily obtained or sought after at all. Hurston, Baldwin, and Larsen write characters into their narratives that inhabit a culturally unintelligible space that deforms and displaces kinship *through their hybridity*. One way they accomplish this within each text is by separating and/or complicating lineages of race from the process of heterosexual procreation.

Both Baldwin and Larsen also write characters into their texts who exhibit ambiguous, non-normative sexual desire. The result of the presence of such characters is a deformation of kinship that Edelman reads to the extreme in his book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Butler's deconstruction of kinship is useful when reading narrative representations of gender and sexuality. Additionally, Butler's use of the idea of cultural intelligibility invites us to closely consider and question the ways language structures our identities and political spaces. As she writes "if the Symbolic is governed by the words of the father, and the Symbolic is structured by a kinship that has assumed the form of linguistic structure... is it [Antigone's] escape from those words [via vivisepture] that lead her into the unlivability of a desire outside cultural intelligibility?" (54). Butler's work on the

politics and linguistic imperatives inherent to kinship links directly to Edelman's work with futurism, a concept highly relevant to interrogating canon formation and queer politics.

Edelman's recognition of humankind's heterosexist investment in projecting a narrative of ourselves into the past and the future invites us to think about the various cultural objects around which we seek out "futurity's unquestioned value" (*No Future* 4). The establishment of a canon, in addition to the widespread adoption of Baldwin's, Larsen's, and Hurston's authorial voices in social movements, can act as a controlling imperative for understanding a text in the same way that, for Edelman, the Child-- with its anticipatorily pro-life, anti-gay, political directives-- are building blocks for the "structuring optimism of politics to which the order of meaning commits us, installing in it as it does the perpetual hope of reaching meaning through signification" (*No Future* 5). This recognition allows us to consider the psychoanalytic impulses shaping canon formation while equipping us with a vocabulary to read narrative textures and techniques. Edelman's two-part argument about the linguistic significance of queerness (or, as he describes it, an ascription of negativity to the queer) allows us to understand the significance of a formal invocation of a queer aesthetic, while also inviting us to critique the ways in which arbitrary concepts can quickly become equipped with coercive implications.

If Edelman and Butler provide a useful template for transforming the aesthetic approaches towards kinship and procreation within a text into linguistically significant political statements, Warner's work with the Habermasian Public Sphere

will allow me to work with each text as a tangible, space-creating, art object. In approaching a text as a space-creating object, we can superimpose the ways in which an organized Public negotiates and grants cultural intelligibility between a text's audience and a text's perceived message. Furthermore, Warner's definition of a Public as "self-creating and self-organized" invites us to examine the ways in which a Public can treat a text as a malleable and universally understood statement (Warner 52). Warner's classification of counterpublic discourse as being "far more than an expression of subaltern culture... counterpublics incorporate the personal/impersonal address and expansive estrangement of public speech as the condition of their own common world" extends the various readings provided by Butler and Edelman to a concretely recognizable environment of textual circulation (87). Whereas the former two shed light on the ways in which language is structured to always figure for the existence of a marginalized, negatively-ascribed other, Warner looks at the series of public and private mediations used to grant or deny access, power, and normative status.

Warner's exposition of the process by which text circulation designates one's voice as public, is useful for considering the real-world, political consequences of how literary critics dealt with these three authors. Just as I argue that the term "Harlem Renaissance" was used to name a canon that was both easily adopted by a civil rights movement and used to identify a work based on narrow standards of identity categorization, so too was the development of a modernist canon in the 1950s and 60s. The development of a normative tradition of modernism as located in texts

authored by Anglo males during the 20s and 30s was less concerned with illustrating a universal cultural condition of being modern, and instead more concerned with keeping the modernists' work separate from everyone else or, as Baker puts it, "their fawning reliance on an array of images and assumptions bequeathed by a *civilization* that, in its prototypical form, is exclusively Western, preeminently bourgeois, and optically white" (Baker 6). The chronological overlap of the circulation of Harlem Renaissance and Modernist texts draws attention to the different ways that each ostensibly separate canon is retroactively granted safe access to a Public. Reading these three authors as merely discriminated out of modernism diminishes the radical qualities of their texts-- qualities that simultaneously spoke to and created a counter public of hybrid subjects.

The goal of locating moments of identity deformation within a text is to create a space in which readers in can encounter, consider, and locate moments of contemporary ideological engagement in seemingly historically-bound texts. Furthermore, in locating a broad protest aesthetic, the words of these authors transcend traditional standards for inclusion in an identity category and/or movements associated with that identity. By opening of these texts beyond the confines of social history, as a means to show their respective persona's engagement with superstructural political issues, we renew our interest in why these texts were canonized and read as they were in the first place. What we are left with is not a template for how to author a text to be more culturally ineligible, legislatively

inclusive, or destructive to hegemony, but instead to reveal the long road ahead of us all in undoing the limitations of language itself.

Chapter 1: Mules and Marx: Gender and Capitalism in the Work of Zora Neale

Hurston

A thorough examination of race in American literature from the early-to-mid twentieth century requires a bit of intellectual juggling; the mind has to be in a few different places at one time. One must simultaneously consider the volatile racial and gendered structures of the time, displayed most disturbingly by public violence, within the context of larger, more abstract social and intellectual discourses on capitalism, modernism, and liberalism. Does modernism have anything to do with racial violence? How does gender or sexual orientation adjust one's economic or racial perspectives? Other contemporary texts managed to juggle these concepts while engaging in a critical social dialogue with varying degrees of outspokenness and acknowledged bias. In addition to engaging in discourses on race, civil rights, and artistic and intellectual styles, Hurston, Larsen, and Baldwin spoke to and about one another both in their fiction and critical essays. One particularly lively version of these debates occurred amongst a group of African American writers from 1930 to 1950, specifically Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, and James Baldwin. Their debate illuminates because it helps us to compare and examine the formal ways in which each author engaged with issues of race, protest, and aesthetics in a way that anticipates future identity-based social movements. I locate Hurston at the center of this debate in the early phases of this ideological trajectory; Wright criticizes Hurston for a perceived "folk Romanticism" (Higashida 396), apparently eliding the gritty plight of African Americans while, on the other side, Baldwin criticizes Wright for

the deafeningly loud portrayals of this plight in *Native Son*. This triangulated critique links Baldwin's and Hurston's work as somewhat opposed to the polemic present in the work of Richard Wright.

The cross-disciplinary focus of Hurston's work provides multiple jumping off points from which we can examine both her literary project and its enactment via her aesthetic. Her non-fiction work in the field of anthropology allowed Hurston to initially approach racist ideologies with a less inflammatory tone, a tone with which she is still able to address issues of racism without resorting to graphic depictions of the Jim Crow south. We hear this tone when she writes about dancing in "Characteristics of Negro Expression":

The difference in the two arts is: the white dancer attempts to express fully; the Negro is restrained, but succeeds in gripping the beholder by forcing him to finish the action the performer suggests. Since no art ever can express all the variation conceivable, the Negro must be considered the greater artist, his dancing is realistic in its suggestions, and that is about all a great artist can do. (65)

Hurston is clearly instigating here (the statement is a dangerously evaluative one for 1935), but she also writes a clear summary of what she believes is superior artistic expression: that is, art that grips the beholder but makes him work for clarity and understanding. This quote is a small example of how Hurston bridges academic fields and forms to craft a subversive polemic readable outside of an identity category, historical moment, or ideological context. A close reading of some passages from one

of Hurston's earliest works, *Mules and Men*, will establish what I argue to be Hurston's main thematic concerns, while a reading of her most famous novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, will show the formal novelistic ways in which Hurston expresses her engagement with a greater political project through a mass produced commodity. A reading of both texts will show how Hurston's project and her expression of it seem to anticipate and critique future social identity-based movements of the later twentieth century.

Much of the existing literary criticism discusses Hurston and Wright's texts together because both authors published fiction within the same decade and, more importantly, because both engaged in open criticism of the other in literary magazines. Through the inclusion of a handful of excerpts from both Hurston's and Wright's editorial reviews of each other's work, Werner Sollors notes, "One can imagine from the terms of the polarization [in the excerpts] that Wright and Hurston did not like each other's fictions. They said so freely in public" (35). Sollors also notices some fundamental thematic differences between the two authors' projects. He says:

... a microcosm of Richard Wright's enterprise as a writer... always places an individual occurrence into a larger social context through the use of socially charged imagery... [whereas]... Hurston defined herself openly against being a representative of millions. (Sollors 25)

The basis for Hurston's criticism of Wright's work as symptomatic of the "sobbing school of Negrohood" (Pfister 621) might well be rooted in some retaliation for first

badmouthing her work in the press, but this assumption overlooks the gender dynamics operating within Wright's work and the foundation of the two authors' dispute. In addition to Wright being critical of Hurston's work, Cheryl Higashida notes a recent trend in feminist criticism that "analyzes the painful limitations of Wright's representations of African American women, which continue to be associated with his Marxism" (396). If Wright's seemingly random criticism of Hurston in 1937 wasn't enough to prod her into the debate, Wright's publication of *Uncle Tom's Children* a year later (with its controversial portrayal of Sarah in "Long Black Song") must have pushed Hurston to engage.

Higashida's observation about the linkage between Wright's misogyny and his Marxism, coupled with her later realization that "the communist party undoubtedly constrained Wright's artistic career at times" act as unexpected points of contact between Hurston's and Wright's projects because it distances Wright's misogyny from his authorial persona and projects it onto a social movement. That is, both seemed to be earnestly crafting portrayals of modern African American subjectivity that were under siege by a larger, social-organized political projects. Furthermore, that this larger social project, which seemed so eager to capitalize on the creative output of African American writers, was staunchly anti-capitalist act as an aesthetic point of contact for both authors as well. William J. Maxwell notes that this similar engagement with a communist ideology that "declared that African Americans possessed 'a community of culture [and] formally accepted the possibility that this culture's stewards might choose statehood on the (fancied) model of Soviet Social

Republics,” (162) opens up a discussion for the greater similarities between each author’s work in light of their highly publicized differences.

Hurston published her collection of African American folklore, *Mules and Men*, in 1935 and her most commercially successful novel, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, two years later. Wright, like Hurston, published a collection of stories, *Uncle Tom’s Children*, in 1938, followed 2 years later by the publication of his most widely read novel *Native Son*. Also, just as Hurston describes what I am describing as a “guide-like” introduction in *Mules and Men* in which she directs the reader on *how* to read African American folklore, Wright similarly tries to direct his reader’s understanding of the character of Bigger in *Native Son*’s preface. Wright was undoubtedly aware of this chronological overlap between his work and Hurston’s and saw, in some small way, each of his books as opportunities to further distinguish his own social projects from Hurston’s. In his preface to *Native Son*, we can see Wright attempting to “correct” Hurston’s introduction in *Mules and Men*. We see this attempt most clearly when Wright writes in “How Bigger was Born”:

I also had to show what oppression had done to Bigger’s relationships with his own people, how it had split him off from them, how it had baffled him, how oppression seems to hinder and stifle in the victim those very qualities of character which are so essential for an effective struggle against the oppressor. (Wright xxvi)

If Wright is mimicking Hurston’s formal “explanation” in the introduction of *Mules and Men*, he only succeeds in drawing attention to his own misreading of Hurston’s

message by reducing it to an apology to her critics. Wright criticizes Hurston's work for not being outspoken enough in its protest of racism and for enacting minstrelsy through her use of the folk aesthetic. As a close reading of her work will reveal, Hurston's work looks different from Wright's in that it is pressuring the reader to perform a broader type of introspection. The similar pressures on both works again link Wright and Hurston's projects in a way that might have made the other uncomfortable, but a comparison of the 2 authors is a useful endeavor because it invites us to consider the gendered components of each author's project and the efficacy of their artistic execution of it.

In the introduction section of her folk monograph *Mules and Men*, Hurston appears at first to be providing the reader with a straightforward account of her feelings prior to traveling south to collect black folklore. A closer reading of these few pages, however, reveals a restrained sarcasm operating just beneath the surface of Hurston's deferential tone, providing a sort of guide for the unfamiliar reader (of which I am sure there were plenty at the time of the book's 1935 publication) and subtly informing him of the formal choices made throughout the rest of the book. Consider the diction of Hurston's first sentence: "I was glad when somebody told me, "You *may* go and collect Negro Folklore" (*Mules and Men* 1, italics added). At first the sentence might not ring as overtly sarcastic, especially given that Hurston diverts our attention with a cryptic metaphor immediately following. However, Hurston invites further suspicion when she writes, "You see [Negroes] are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her

something that satisfies the white person because, knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing... the Negro offers a featherbed resistance" (*Mules* 2). While the "laughter and pleasantries" that Hurston bestows on her academic, white, northern cheerleaders Boas and Mason, might appear genuine, she quite blatantly undercuts them in the above-mentioned passage with the featherbed resistance remark. This is not to say that Hurston's tone is one born of some racially-driven misanthropic impulse; Hurston's motives seem to be much more direct. If we use the folktale included at the end of the introduction as a template for interpreting Hurston's project in the successive tales (indeed it is the only tale conveyed by Hurston's own, first-person narrative voice), the thematic interests revealed in the tale seem far less concerned with critiquing individual subjects and instead poises the monograph to address the entire racial system in which these subjects operate.

The introduction tales' invocation (via the Christ allegory) of the socialist underpinning inherent in Christian mythology (i.e. Christ as an equalizing figure, one who redistributes salvation independent of class or race hierarchies that might have previously prevented gentiles and the like from accessing salvation) unexpectedly directs Hurston's critical gaze to the economic system in which she lived. This implication becomes hard to avoid when Hurston writes "Way after while when [God] ketch dat Jew, He's goin' to 'vide things up more ekal" (*Mules* 4). Although this tale marks the beginning of what could be argued as an anti-capitalist thread that runs the entirety of Part 1, Hurston's anti-capitalist tendencies in *Mules and Men* are not wholly consistent throughout the book.

Even in the introduction itself, Hurston seems to be simultaneously critiquing the system by which her culture has been historically subjugated and, at times, inhabiting it for her personal gain and to draw attention to its' faults. A particularly emblematic passage that illustrates this duality occurs on page 3, when Hurston theorizes the function of "Negro deference": "[The White Man] can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song." Hurston distances herself, from this strategy by filtering it through a collective "our" statement, introducing the explanation as "the theory behind our tactics" but the effect is still the same. Through channeling the oral traditions of her culture in a commoditized form (the monograph), Hurston draws attention to how a capitalist system of exchange is both a site through which white men have accessed and contained African Americans in the past and present (now through intellectual fascination instead of abject repulsion), and as a system she can also use (and is using in *Mules and Men*) to placate and, at times, undermine the white man. This ideological wrangling occurs subtly throughout *Mules and Men*, but creates a decidedly modern-- in its rejection of idealism, its challenge of the relationship between form and content, and its historical context-- aesthetic. In locating Hurston's points of nuanced resistance in these texts, she invites the reader to consider the different guises of hegemony and the rhetorical and formal strategies available for resisting and dismantling it.

If Hurston is, as Franz Boas suggests in the *Mules and Men* preface, "...able to penetrate through the affected demeanor by which the Negro excludes the White

observer” during her expedition, considering her introduction to the novel, one is left questioning where her loyalty lies, given her ostensible role as white spy (*Mules* xiii). Hurston would have Boas believe that her reasons for “donning the stuffy chemise of her culture” are to allow his personal participation in the Negroes’ true inner life to which Boas would otherwise not have access. It is actually the stuffy chemise of white capitalism that prevents Hurston from genuinely accessing her culture and the sooner Hurston metaphorically sheds this chemise, the more radical we see the implications of her selected folk tales become.

The financial support of Boas and Mason forced Hurston into participating in a system she clearly critiques in *Mules and Men*. Hurston’s earlier stated intent of featuring selected tales as a “toy thing” for White academics is echoed throughout her narrative depictions of sites of market exchange. As Hurston drives into Eatonville, the town in which *Mules and Men* takes place, she sees a group on the store porch and “Hailed them as I went into neutral” (*Mules* 7). It is Ms. Mason’s Chevrolet (a purring symbol of laissez faire prosperity) that initially allows Hurston to both *geographically* penetrate the Negro inner life as White Spy while also interpolating the men on the porch. But, as we can see, Hurston immediately deflects this ascribed compulsion by shifting her narrative tone into a different gear. That she hails the men from a site of market exchange to her assistance is not a coincidence either. Her initial contact with the group on the porch is predicated on her ability to pull them away from the site of sharecropper production and consumption that is Eatonville’s town

store. This act of interpolation serves an aesthetic purpose and reads as a rhetorical sidestep for Hurston's narrative persona.

As Hurston explains to the group of men from the porch the reason for her visit, we learn from B. Moseley that the store porch is where "big old lies [are told] when we're jus' sittin' around here on the store porch doin' nothin'..." (*Mules* 8). It is the "lies" Hurston seeks, and again, her stated access to them is mitigated by her participation in a system that mirrors the labor exploitation witnessed throughout Part 1 of the collection. Nowhere in the entirety of this section does Hurston portray the unease with Negro culture she describes in the introduction as the stuffy chemise. We do, however, see plenty of unease caused by the signifying objects Hurston carries which evidence her superficial intentions: her dialect, her clothing, and her car. At some point in the narrative, Hurston alters/excuses all of the above-mentioned symbols as a means to improve her ability to later access certain cultural spaces.

On page eight Hurston says to the mayor of Eatonville, Hiram Lester, "Ah come to collect some old stories and tales and Ah know y'all know a plenty of 'em and that's why Ah headed straight for home." The voice used to speak Hurston's intent is radically different from the voice used in the novel's introduction, and while it is no less direct, the contrast highlights Hurston's need and ability to oscillate between cultural allegiances. Hurston's inability to perform this code switch would preclude her from gaining access to the tales in the same way it would prevent her from gaining funding and support in the opposite situation. Hurston worries that "the car made me look too prosperous," and later she "mentally curses the \$12.74 dress

from Macy's that I had on among the \$1.98 mail-order dresses [that she packed]" (*Mules* 61, 63). Hurston's stated anxiety over these signifiers of white patronage is an aesthetic technique that Hurston uses to draw attention to the ways in which class identity, when addressed alongside a "guide" to rural African American culture, is portrayed as lacking coherence or fixity.

Hurston's subtle conflation of her subjects' rural poverty with her own objectification in a system of exchange, in addition to her stated recognition of her own willing participation in it, further guides our understanding of Hurston's political project as focalized through her exploration of the relationship between money and gender. Upon Hurston's arrival in Eatonville, the narrative transitions to the aesthetic manifestation of Hurston's beliefs in her account of a "toe party" that comically reenacts the dominant system of economic exchange. During the toe party the women are hidden behind a sheet and the men proceed to buy the women based on their assessment of the women's shoes peaking out from behind the barrier. Once the men buy a woman, the men are forced to do whatever the woman wants for the rest of the party. Before being "herded behind the curtain," Hurston says to one of her fellow toe displayers, "they don't have 'em up North where Ah been and Ah just got back today" (*Mules* 14). So while this display might resemble dominant modes of economic exchange, Hurston identifies it as something structurally separate from the exploitive nature of her project's funders.

The selling of the toes also acts as a reclamation of sorts. The men's bidding on the women's shoed feet could resemble a slave auction but, in this version, it is the

labor capital who call the shots, and the buyer who suffers at the hands of chance. This version of the human auction, as riffed on by Hurston's subjects, focalized through the guise of an academic narrative, favors the objectified individuals and allows for no foreseeable benefit to the "investors." Hurston returns to this empowered aesthetic throughout the rest of the novel in many tales. It allows her to disrupt a singularly African American or Feminized perspective onto which the reader can cleave. Some examples include the key-wielding wife who forces her husband to "mortgage his strength to her to live" (*Mules* 34) and the Devil's daughter who courts Jack with a parade of life saving miracles (51). The empowered female narrative present in these tales is not a symptom, however, of some greater gender equality project, but is, instead, reflective of Hurston's aversion to the hierarchies that reduce expression of attitudes towards gender, capitalism, and other forces to a binary (with/against). We are reminded of this later in Part 1 when Hurston writes of going solo to the bar with her new gal pal Big Sweet instead of taking Cliffert as a date. She writes, "I didn't go with Cliffert because it would mean that I'd be considered his property more or less and the other men would keep away from me, and being let alone is no way to collect folklore" (*Mules* 34).

By the time Hurston's narrative arrives at the Saw Mill in Part 1, she has successfully placed her collection in opposition to the ideologies that drove her south. At this site of capitalist labor exploitation, Hurston notices, "it is a magnificent sight to watch the marvelous coordination between the handsome black torso and the twirling axes" (*Mules* 66). By now it is a characteristic contradiction that this

industrial location allows for Hurston to both subject the men to *her* gaze and provide herself access to the most memorable tales of Part I, all of which are possible owing to the lack of work and the men's ethic of laziness. It is at the Saw Mill where the reader finally sees Hurston's resentment of Boas and Mason that Hurston hinted at in the Introduction projected on to the subjects themselves; Jim Presley says "There's more work in de world than there is anything else, God made de world and de white folks made work." Joe Willard's response establishes this aggressive laziness when he says "Yeah, dey made work but they didn't make us do it..." (*Mules* 74). *Mules and Men* does not read as a direct attack upon any one person or system, but instead Hurston uses her narrative to structure an argument against an entire way of hierarchical thinking. This argument allows Hurston to manipulate a system that singles her out as an "other" worthy of dissection and, her to repossess her authorial voice to be self-commoditized as a distracting plaything for exploitive white benefactors.

If *Mules and Men* can be read as fleshing out Hurston's larger social project and establishing a tone with which she is able to criticize multiple ideologies, then her most well-known novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the canvas on which Hurston aesthetically and artistically renders this project. Hurston, unlike Wright, does not introduce her novel with an exculpatory preface, but instead allows the reader to refer to *Mules and Men* for a guiding template. Just as she does in *Mules and Men*, Hurston uses her novel to critique capitalism as a coercive force of compulsive identity stability, while also using her portrayal of capitalism to subvert

gender and race stereotypes. Hurston opts for a seeming reproduction of these stereotypes as a means to address the problem of racial oppression without bludgeoning the reader with graphic depictions of rape, murder, and pervasive hopelessness. In a way, Hurston is asking her reader to think more. Hurston achieves this request through her manipulation of the novel's narrative voice and focalization and by rendering her characters as contradictory and complex while using signifiers like dialect to superficially characterize them as simple. Through these formal strategies Hurston establishes an argumentative text that engages with her contemporaries while establishing a nuanced political aesthetic that ignores the demand that identity must always be coherent.

The narrative voice in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a tricky thing to untangle. The novel begins with a deceptively straightforward third person omniscient voice but, not surprisingly, Hurston begins overlapping perspectives early on page two. The narrator depicts Janie walking back into Eatonville as she approaches a group of women on the porch. The narrator, describing the gossip of the women, portrays their "mass cruelty" using a long list of questions in quotation marks, which obscure both the number and identity of the questioners:

What she doin coming back here in dem overalls? Can't she find no dress to put on?—Where's dat blue satin dress she left here in?—What dat ole forty year old 'oman doin' wid her hair swing' down her back lack some young gal?—Where she left dat young lad of a boy she went off here wid?—Where he left her?—What he done wid all her

money?—Betcha he off wid some gal so young she ain't even got no hairs—why she don't stay in her class?— . (*Their Eyes Were Watching God* 2)

The last question is an interesting one in that it joins the narrator's omniscience of the mob mentality with an evaluative statement about class; Janie is a character set apart by the narrative voice and from the masses by her apparent unwillingness to adhere to class norms. The tension between the group, the individual, and the stability of class hierarchy does not last long, though, as Hurston sets out to disorient our understanding of the narrative voice further. She accomplishes this by alternating and obscuring the focalization of the narrator in the second chapter. Chapter two begins with the previous chapter's omniscient narrative voice ("Janie saw her life like a great tree...") but is overtaken by Janie's dialogue when she says "Ah know exactly what ah got to tell yuh, but it's hard to know where to start at" (*Their Eyes* 8). So while the omniscient voice returns on page ten with Pheoby's "hungry listening," and Janie's decision that "her conscious life had commenced at Nanny's gate," we aren't entirely certain (and cannot be for the rest of the novel) whether this is the omniscient voice of the first chapter or Janie's pronounced "telling" from the second.

In the novel's conclusions Hurston further fractures the narrative voice when Janie, harkening back to the novel's first pages, says to Pheoby at the closure of her tale "Ah know all dem sitters-and-talkers gointuh worry they guts into fiddle strings till dey find out whut we been talkin' 'bout. Dat's all right, Pheoby, tell 'em" (*Their Eyes* 191). This charge from Janie to Pheoby to tell the "cruel mass" her tale

interpolates the character of Pheoby into the novel's project while at the same time interpolating the faceless mob. We are uncertain whether the questioners from page two are an omniscient narrator or Janie-via-Pheoby. Further complicating this chain of potential narrators is the inclusion of Nanny's telling of her history to Janie, who then tells it to Pheoby, who then tells it to the "cruel mass," who is also inhabited by the suspected omniscient narrator of the first few pages of the novel. Janie's story is told by everyone to everyone. This formal choice, while disorienting to sort out, enacts in a way the same thing that Hurston does in *Mules and Men*. Firstly, by making it impossible to determine the specific identity of the teller of Janie's tale, Hurston makes it difficult for her narrative to be hijacked for the purposes of "representing the millions." Secondly, Hurston's narrator (whoever it may be) elicits sympathy from the reader on behalf of Janie who the cruel mass characterizes as a class-subverting harlot. But, just as in *Mules and Men*, it is impossible to be certain whether Hurston is critiquing 1) the masses themselves or 2) the mass's criticism of Janie's class indiscretions. If anything, Hurston seems to be criticizing both simultaneously.

As complicated and contradictory as Hurston's use of voice and narrative perspective is in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, her treatment of the male characters in the novel is equally puzzling. Most instances of violence occur not as the result of race tensions but as a result of gender issues. Hurston presents us with three extended models of masculinity in the novel in the characters of Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake. Interestingly, Hurston seems to correlate each character's performed

masculinity to his cultural adherence to whiteness, with Logan being the most “white” and Tea Cake the most masculine and “black” and Joe occupying this neither/nor, hybrid space in between. This correlation acts as a way for Hurston to illustrate the complex ways in which gender, race and class are connected without risking being categorized as protesting on behalf of any one group. Peter Powers’ examination of masculinity in the religious imagery of Hurston’s short fiction notices that in Hurston’s body of work “the way men behave, tend to be seen as the oppressive forces that women must resist and refuse... with black men as insidious surrogates of white power” (231). Powers’ observation applies to *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, but the men’s behavior is not consistently oppressive nor do the women consistently resist or refuse it. Hurston’s portrayal depends on the incorporation of more complex issues of race and class. Hurston’s portrayal of these three characters also allows the reader to consider the implications of her use of folklore, especially in the case of Joe’s interaction with Matt Bonner’s mule in chapter six.

The character of Logan Killicks, although only present for a very short portion of the overall narrative, acts as both an extremely important plot catalyst and symbol of masculinity. Hurston equates Logan with whiteness subtly at first, through Janie’s reaction who says he “looks like some ole skullhead in de grave yard” (*Their Eyes* 13), and through Nanny’s narration of Janie’s origins. Logan’s property ownership makes Nanny believe he holds the key to providing a corrective to the long line of sexual violence and abandonment that plagued Nanny and Janie’s mother. What

Nanny does not realize is that Logan's property ownership and his feelings of entitlement to marry Janie reproduce the same model of oppression. Hurston's equation of Logan's masculinity with his aspirations to whiteness is mostly expressed through his devotion to the capitalist belief that hard work equates to class ascension and power. Just before Janie leaves him he sobs to her "Ah'm too honest and hard-workin' for anybody in yo' family, dat's de reason you don't want me!" (*Their Eyes* 32). Hurston shows through Janie's first marriage how its economic basis brings the relationship back to a dynamic of slavery. Logan spends most of his marriage to Janie trying to force her into manual labor. The linkage between Logan, Nanny and the traumatic history of slavery is a quiet one and Hurston seems quick to obscure it and move the plot in a different direction. Nanny represents a depressing, violent reminder of this traumatic past and Hurston removes her from the narrative abruptly when, after encouraging Janie to "leave things de way dey is," Nanny "scuffled up from her knees and fell heavily across the bed. A month later she was dead" (24). The avoidance exhibited in Hurston's brief portrayal of Logan is a formal example of her aversion to the "sobbing school of Negrohood" but still indicates the interconnected nature of masculinity, the history of slavery and both identity positions' complicity in the history of slavery.

Hurston uses the character of Joe Starks to illustrate many of the projects outlined in *Mules and Men*. Although Joe is the most aspirationally "white" man of Janie's three husbands, his portrayal is a more dynamic one than Logan's and displays the complexity and simultaneity that Hurston values. Whereas Logan seems

to motion to the violent history of racial oppression, Joe Starks is a way for Hurston to critique white values from a more objective distance. Hurston often uses a folk dialect to create a space of African American cultural expression, but in the case of Joe Starks-- because of his earnest pursuit of successful white affect-- the use of dialect here seems to be for comic effect. Joe Starks' repetition of "I god" and Hurston's description of him as being "a cityfield, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts" (27) are noticeably minstrel-like but, whereas Wright might argue that Hurston is pandering to a white audience, given what we have seen Hurston do in her other work, it is more likely that this minstrelsy (if that's what it is) is employed to subvert gender, race and class hierarchies. Hurston uses her folk aesthetic to malign Joe Starks in a way similar to the way that she does to Boaz in her introduction to *Mules and Men*. Janie is able to use the money earned from Joe's capitalist ventures to access a fulfilling relationship with Tea Cake (and, ironically, a more collectivist lifestyle in the Everglades). Hurston's illustration of machismo as a form of white minstrelsy (as in a hyper stereotype of cultural Whiteness) is shown in Joe Stark's inability to relate to his own ascribed community in the story of Matt Bonner's mule in chapter six.

The chapter on Matt Bonner's yellow mule illustrates an aspect of Hurston's folk aesthetic and further characterizes Joe Starks as a hybrid figure both complicit in and victimized by the mandate requiring stable expressions of race, gender, and class. The taunts that the citizens of Eatonville subject Matt Bonner to on account of his mule resemble what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. defines as signifyin(g) when he writes,

“to Signify is to be engaged in a highly motivated rhetorical act, aimed at figurative, ritual insult” (Gates 68). Most of the signifyin(g) occurs at the expense of the mule which culminates in a beating of the animal in front of Joe Stark’s store. We see Joe vacillate from signifyin(g) to “a serious misreading” (Gates 70) when Joe joins in the laughter at first but changes his tune after Janie complains of the cruelty. Hurston’s use of Janie’s voice to propel Joe into the role of the Lion is disconcerting at first, but given the exchange between the two characters pages earlier, seems more likely a retaliation than genuine concern. Janie notes that Joe “didn’t talk to the Mule himself, [but] sat and laughed at it.” Janie then complains that the “the store itself kept her with a sick headache” and that Joe insisted that “her hair was NOT going to show in the store” and forces Janie to wear a head-rag (55). Obviously fed up with Joe’s hypocrisy and abuse, Janie, upon seeing Joe laughing at Lum beating on the Mule mutters “They oughta be shamed uh theyselves” (*Their Eyes* 56), prompting Joe to buy the mule, effectively disrupting the town-wide game of signifyin(g). This disruption of the game by Joe indicates the instability of his identity and illustrates the motivators for abandoning one identity over the other. Hurston shows that Janie has the ability to force Joe Starks from cultural blackness to whiteness, a fact corroborated by Joe’s death shortly after Janie humiliates him in front of Sam Watson saying, “When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life” (*Their Eyes* 79). Janie remains with Joe as he exploits her and the residents of Eatonville but uses his death as a ticket to a more uniformly black, collective existence in the Everglades.

The character of Tea Cake provides Janie with the most fulfillment and the greatest heartbreak. Hurston's portrayal of Tea Cake is the *least* oppressive of the three men and yet still contains moments in which Tea Cake robs, beats, and attempts to murder Janie. The portrayal of Tea Cake completes Hurston's rendering of African American masculinity as it relates to capitalism and gender/power structures by showing the contradictory nature in which these arguments appear. In addition to providing this formal contrast to the characters of Logan and Joe, the character of Tea Cake forces Janie (through his contraction of rabies and attempted murder of Janie) into a courtroom with a white judge and jury. Leif Sorensen aptly notes the tense racial and gender dynamics operating in this scene shown both in the segregated court room and the judge's admonishment of Tea Cake's friends' outburst. Sorensen notes, and I agree, an "emerging affective connection between the white women in the audience and Janie... as bearers of equal privilege" (20). Sorensen's observation, although counterintuitive, is congruent with Hurston's decentering of identity through her narrative voice and spectral exploration of race, gender and class throughout the rest of the novel. Sorensen sees this relationship between identity discourses and form when he makes the assumption that the above mentioned connection is "the result of a comparison between the power structures of black and white identitarian discourses, which are based on perceived crises of black masculinity and white femininity" (20). These "perceived crises" help us to understand how and why Hurston's depictions of gender and race are at times contradictory and confusing; they are reflective of an actual emotional turmoil occurring within the collective conscious of a nation.

Earlier in this chapter I mentioned that James Baldwin's debate with Richard Wright in a collection of essays entitled *Notes of a Native Son* paralleled Hurston's criticism and that, in a way, both authors enacted similar political and literary politics. Considering that Hurston's novel is very much engaged with protesting both gender and class oppression it would be helpful to think of it in terms of Baldwin's criticism in "Everybody's Protest Novel." In Baldwin's essay, which harshly criticizes and conflates the work of Harriet Beecher Stowe and Richard Wright, he argues that Stowe and Wright are guilty of reducing racial oppression to an issue of sentimentality, calling for a redefinition of what "real" protest fiction should do. Baldwin writes:

Our passion for categorization, life neatly fitted into pegs, has led to an unforeseen, paradoxical distress; confusion, a breakdown of meaning. The "protest" novel, so far from being disturbing, is an accepted and comforting aspect of the American scene, ramifying that framework we believe to be so necessary. (*Notes of a Native Son* 19)

Janie's tale of woe in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* might initially appear to "ramify that framework" which Baldwin criticizes, but given what we read in *Mules and Men*, the novel seems to be more invested in a "breakdown of meaning" than a reaffirmation of it. Hurston continually resorts to multi-layered expressions of identity and voice to portray her characters and liberate her protest. Geraldine Murphy cites modernism as the formal strategy of choice for Baldwin to navigate protest fiction away from sentimentalism. She writes "Baldwin's efforts to secure the

full rights of a complex, contradictory consciousness for the black artist in the early fifties” as one way he expressed this modernist literary aesthetic (1038). Baldwin’s criticism of Wright is important because it occurs just prior to *Brown v. Board of Education* and the Civil Rights movement and his affirmation of Hurston’s criticism of Wright positions her fiction as anticipating this eventual shift.

The writings of Zora Neale Hurston published during the 1930’s fashioned an aesthetic that anticipated the civil rights and identity politics movements. Hurston was an innovator whose project predicted the move 15 years later from reductive sentimentalism to decentered subjectivity and from white supremacy to the legal affirmation of racial equality. Hurston’s use of form in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* to translate the political concerns she expressed in *Mules and Men* into artistic terms is a complex strategy that may make her work seem deceptively simple at first. Her simultaneous criticism and wielding of capitalism in *Mules and Men*, combined with her deferential tone, establish a guide by which we can read Hurston’s fiction and interrogate how she confronts oppression and identity stability. Hurston’s project invites us to look at contemporary texts that seek to engage in the debate between how one uses art to initiate change without reducing complex identity associations to one-dimensional picket signs. Hurston resists being categorized as the voice of millions. She resists this, and provides a template for others who seek to do the same, by simultaneously critiquing and participating in the system she protests. That the character of Janie never gives birth, that Hurston includes darkly comical depictions of mass cruelty, that Hurston uses so much ideological and linguistic contradiction

and conflation, including her engagement with capitalism in *Mules and Men* and the confounding plot circularity of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, are all techniques that other personae have emulated to mirror or expand on Hurston's larger arguments about politics and identity in general.

Chapter 2: Can't Read Her Passing Face: Deforming Identity in Nella Larsen's

*Passing*

Nella Larsen and Lady Gaga might at first seem as unrelated as two cultural figures can be; Larsen published novels during the 1920's and died a relative unknown in 1964 (McDowell 364), while the other tops album charts, all while donning an award show gown made entirely of raw beef (complete with matching stilettos and clutch). What links these two women, however, becomes clearer when we turn a critical eye towards the responses to the creative output of each artist. I am not alone in noticing that both figures, with their widely circulated literary and performance texts, elicited gasps of shock and cries for censorship from contemporary audiences. In her novel *Passing*, Larsen boldly deconstructed the idea of race when she wrote the torrid narrative of two light-skinned African American women who pass in 1920s Harlem as "white." Larsen's play with the seemingly fixed boundaries of race surely scandalized many readers who viewed such fixity, as W.E.B. Du Bois notes in his review of the novel, "as a matter of tremendous moral import" (Larsen, 97). Similarly, critical discourses have recognized the work of Gaga as sending dangerous messages to young women about sex and objectification, the result of her "kind of deconstruction of femininity, not to mention celebrity" (Bauer). What both of these responses emphasize is the need for singular, stable categories of identification sought out by a work of art's audiences (past, present and future). We see this need manifested in the presence of such canons as "The Harlem

Renaissance,” “modernism” and “pop music.” But how does one separate Larsen’s (or Gaga’s) statements about race from possible statements about gender, class or sex? This chapter seeks, through establishing an aesthetic connection between Larsen and Gaga, the techniques used in art to work against easily grasped identity representation and categorization.

What makes literature a radical object? If it is to assert as straightforwardly as possible a space figured as oppositional to contemporary normativity, then both Larsen and Gaga succeed at the outset. But the passage of time and the expansion of social values will ultimately turn these “once radical” pieces of art into relics used merely to display the “backward” traditions of the past. We see this often when one generation’s antiauthoritarian anthem becomes another’s TV commercial theme song. In short, this figuration merely reproduces the same cycle of misrecognition and deferral that radical art attempts to protest. For a text’s message to resonate with a public it must adhere to certain political and ideological qualities. These qualities ensure the reception of the message’s supposed intended meaning. Both Larsen’s novel and Gaga’s music are addresses received by a public via each figures’ capitulation to norms of stable identity representation. While components of their texts may be scandalous, each text’s apparent singularity of message ensures their mass consumption. Each text’s deforming characteristics, however, also address a counterpublic *at the same time and place* that it addresses the public. What results is a text with simultaneously constructive and subversive capabilities.

The list of formal techniques I trace encapsulate all of the rhetorical moves

outlined in the previous paragraphs. Each equips *Passing* with the ability to not only portray a hybrid subject space, but to force its audience to inhabit and embrace that space's inherent unintelligibility. These techniques accomplish this feat solely in their existence as culturally cherished pieces of art adopted by various "movements" to represent of a universal psychic subjectivity. In defying the very notion of stability and identity fixity, my reading of Larsen's *Passing* and Lady Gaga reveals the subtle ways in which art achieves political radicalism. When read against stable identity representation, these texts resist and critique the politics of literary canon formation. Through Larsen and Gaga's use of narrative simultaneity, humor, queer desire, paradox and self-conscious self-commoditization I hope to establish a genealogy of protest that transcends neatly packaged historical movements.

Nella Larsen's novel *Passing*, read in its simplest form, is a cautionary tale about the dangers of subverting racial categories. In this simplified reading the tragic end of Clare Kendry, who spends most of the novel as an interloper in black middle-class Harlem with Irene Redfield as her guide, positions Clare and Irene on either side of a race binary. But what about this "cautionary message" changes if, in addition to blurring the lines between blackness and whiteness, Larsen also seeks to deconstruct gender, class, and sexuality? I argue that in employing aesthetic techniques that depict these identity positions as conflicting and contradictory Larsen critiques far more than contemporary ideas about racial division. In critiquing the very notion of universalized identity categories themselves, Larsen advances her novel from one that protests racial prejudice to one that protests the objectification of *any* identity

category. The political consequence of this rhetorical move is that it allows her novel to be read as a psychic template for a hybrid space that resists easy canonization or adoption by identity-based movements.

My layering begins in an examination of Larsen's use of narrative focalization as a technique that allows her to manipulate the way an audience is forced to experience a text. Narrative perspective is the structuring device for a novel that a reader cannot escape-- and what a labyrinth Larsen constructs for her readers. Larsen's use of this particular technique is a deliberate and obfuscating choice by which the reader is never able to confidently differentiate between reality, readability of perception and the distinct thoughts of characters.

*Passing* is told through an omnisciently biased third-person narrator who at times inhabits the thoughts and beliefs of Irene Redfield, while at other times appearing to be a strictly objective recap of events. Part two of "Encounter" begins with the statement "This is what Irene remembered" (7), and proceeds to describe in block prose the details of an August afternoon in Chicago. The maneuver is subtle but unmistakable; Larsen focalizes the novel's inciting event through a third-person retelling of the main character's internal memory of the event. So while for the next 25 pages events unfold in an apparent objective manner with occasional slippage into Irene's interior thoughts and judgments, what we *actually* read for the remainder of Part One is Irene narrating a past event. Furthermore, this remembering is prefaced with the qualifier that we are receiving only details through Irene's potentially unreliable memory, retold from the perspective of an omniscient voice that has only

the details of Irene's subjective perception of the past to select from. What then do we make of Clare's supposed "caressing smile... just a shade too provocative for a waiter" or Irene's account of Clare's recognition of her, "'why of course, I know you!' the *other* exclaimed" (Larsen 10, 11)? It is hard to be certain of much other than that the perceptions of Irene are unreliable and fractured.

This questionably knowledgeable and questionably objective narrative voice disrupts a reading that frames Clare's actions as sexually and racially reckless. Given this after-the-fact, vaguely omniscient narrative voice, I instead read Clare's actions as Irene's psychological projections. Further complicating this pluralistic focus is the fact that within the seemingly objective retelling of the past through Irene's subjective memory, Larsen also includes a narration of Clare's childhood told through the narrator's access to Irene's memory during the characters' conversation atop the Drake Hotel. But that is not entirely right either; what we are actually reading is not Irene's memory of Clare's story of origin, but in fact, Irene's memory of remembering her memory of Clare's childhood, told to us through a narrator who only has access to Irene's memory of the childhood memories' recollection, *not* the memory or the actual event itself. Through this narrative mind-fuckery Larsen presents the reader with a set of facts while simultaneously preventing the reader from ever truly knowing their validity within the confines of the text (Larsen 19). What results is a pervasive sense of ambiguity that defies certainty at every page right up until Clare's deadly fall. Read from a place of strict racial "black or white" subject position, Irene (who at least *appears* as the voice of racial reason) is a character who

manifests the *actual* uncertainty inherent in these distinctions because the narrative and the reader can never locate Irene's thoughts within a stable perspective. Instead, Irene's characterized self-understanding and the racial identities of those around her are constantly thrown into doubt.

Another effect of Larsen's use of simultaneous focalization is that it forces the reader to, for a short time, psychically inhabit a hybrid mentality. For a contemporary white reader it may have been possible to *imagine* what it would be like to inhabit a hybrid space but Larsen pushes the reader's imagination further by forcing him to physically negotiate between past and present, objectivity and subjectivity, fact, fiction and fictional fact. While this may not appear to be at first directly linked to racial hybridity, it requires the same mental stamina. Narrative simultaneity's real-life correlate is the juggling of expectations, abilities, personal realities and social mandates. Larsen secretly elicits empathy for the hybrid condition from her reader through focalizing her novel's plot through this contradictory, obfuscating and duplicitous narrative technique.

Although I argue that Larsen's text can be read as concerned with issues beyond those of black/white identity politics, I do not believe that these are ignorable components of the text. For one, Larsen herself was a racially hybrid subject. Her father, who died shortly after Larsen was born, was West Indian and her mother Danish. After Larsen's birth her mother married a white man who treated Larsen poorly for the remainder of the time he was in Larsen's life (McDowell 365). Larsen herself must have been acutely aware of the social implications of being categorized

as part of one race or the other (or both). These biographical facts encourage an anti-identity politics reading, bolstered by the introduction to the Norton Critical edition of *Passing* in which Carla Kaplan reveals that “Larsen came to prominence as the Harlem Renaissance was waning, at the apex of a cultural craze for Harlem that imbued blackness with a specific cultural capital” (Kaplan x). The content of *Passing* can be read as an extension of its author’s particular life experience, sure, but because Larsen is dead, this reading prevents us from extending its political potential beyond the confines of the text or its author’s life. Kaplan’s revelation that Larsen was aware of the marketability of her “blackness” adds a new level of subversion to the text itself beyond the confines of its narrative machinations. This move, which I define as self-conscious self-commoditization has narrative correlates that are empowered by their biographical antecedents.

Larsen’s recognition of and benefit from this “vogue” for blackness has the immediate effect of implying that identity is something rooted in rigid, unrealistic boundaries of identity formation. The marketability of identity is contingent upon its mass appeal; its consumption depends on its peaceful reception by the public. Larsen winks at these characteristics in dedicating her novel to the “honorary negroes” Carl Van Vechten and Fania Marinoff (Larsen 3). These white patrons of African American art were undoubtedly valuable financial and social components of Larsen’s literary success. There is also a sense of veiled hostility in her dedicating a novel about racial categorization to two figures known for initiating African American art into a system of exchange somewhat dependent on those categories. Larsen’s

portrayal of “negroes who pass” would not have been possible without the friendship of “passing” whites who, through the aesthetic content of the book, are implicitly criticized for having a choice. Larsen dedicating her novel to these figures of access gestures towards a pronounced narrative self-awareness operating within the novel. Furthermore, the dedication establishes a tone of both sincerity and sarcasm that predicts the narrative simultaneity we see in the novel’s opening pages. Larsen commoditized fragments of herself, therefore, as a means to critique the structures responsible for her literary success. What then of characters that are shown using a similar sale of self to subvert, protest, and deform?

In reading Clare’s desire to attend the Negro Welfare League ball we can see a deeper critique of the “honorary negroes” to whom Larsen dedicates the novel. Furthermore, I locate a critique of the use of “vogued” identities for mass market consumption. Irene’s initial reaction to Clare’s suggestion about the ball-- “suppose I come too!”-- is to “[regard] her through narrowed eyelids... [as] just a shade too good-looking” (Larsen 50). Irene fires a rapid list of reasons why it would be inappropriate for Claire to attend, saving the most insulting reason for last, “Oh, no. You couldn’t possibly go there alone. It’s a public thing. All sorts of people go, anyone who can pay a dollar, even ladies of easy virtue looking for trade. If you were to go there alone, you might be mistaken for one of them.” Interestingly, Clare doesn’t miss a beat and responds with “I suppose, my dollar’s as good as anyone’s” (Larsen 51). This exchange registers as far more than a petty fight. In conflating the figure of one woman, socially ordained as “white,” who attends “negro” functions

with that of a whore, Larsen provides an extra-textual critique of white patrons of Harlem Renaissance art. Reading Van Vechten and Marinoff as whorish, though, is not defamatory as much as it is deformative. This conflation in the dialogue of prostitute and racial interloper blurs the line between subject and object, patron and artist. I read Clare's use of her raced and gendered body through her passing and marriage to Jack Bellew as a means for her to negotiate class ascension as merely another mode of prostitution. This use of one's self as commodity parallels Larsen's use of her raced identity and aesthetically categorized art to negotiate career mobility as well. Clare's retort about the value of her own dollar reads as recognition of the equalizing effect money is alleged to have in a capitalist economy. Irene's response "Oh, the dollar!" disregards Clare's comfort with being assumed a whore, simply accepting it as fact (Larsen 51). This acceptance situates the characters of *Passing* in a critique of capitalism and the way it forces idiosyncratic renderings of identity in art.

More than illuminating the connections between Larsen and her characters, the parallels above show Larsen's awareness of the use of her art in a system of identity politics. Larsen's dedication of the novel, her characterization of Irene and Clare in the scene before the Welfare League Ball and the biographical facts we know about Larsen, all point to this awareness. Larsen's self-commoditization and her use of narrative simultaneity force us to consider two things in addition to the racial deconstruction performed in the novel. First, it reveals the multiplicity occurring in the text. Secondly, it invites us to question what other components of identity Larsen

includes that are lost when we read *Passing* as solely a novel about leaving one identity category for another.

Writing queer desire in the early twentieth century was a delicate task. Writing African American's women's desire was even more delicate. The peculiar desires operating within *Passing* between the characters of Irene and Clare (and their respective husbands) reiterate the struggle between a reading public's desire for an exoticized black female subject and the hyper self-aware black middle class' need for respectable portrayals of black femininity. These demands were, as Deborah McDowell notes, a very real challenge for Larsen as a Harlem Renaissance figure and one that she confronted "in attempting to hold these two virtually contradictory impulses in the same novel" (McDowell 371). Larsen employs queer desire in her characterization as a formal means to hold these impulses at the same time. In writing queer desire into the novel Larsen provides sexual agency to each character without capitulating to norms of exoticized black female sexuality. In a sense, Larsen's use of queer desire allows the sexual undercurrents of her novel to pass as something other than stereotypical, further destabilizing identity subject positions as operating equally. Secondly, Larsen's use of queer desire allows her to critique canon formation and identity politics by gesturing (through use of aesthetic techniques) towards queerness' inherent anti-relationality. The effect of which is, Edelman notes, "queerness can never define an identity; it can only ever disturb one... the burden of queerness is to be located less in the assertion of an oppositional political identity than in opposition to politics as the governing fantasy of realizing, in an always indefinite future"

(Edelman 17). Larsen, in evoking queer desire, disrupts racial stereotyping as well as future critical identity categorization.

The narrative focalization of *Passing* only ever allows the reader to deduce the sexual desires of Clare as they are re-remembered through Irene. This deductive constructing of black female desire allows Larsen to accomplish the juggling act mentioned by McDowell. The novel's opening scene is laden with yonic imagery; the reader's introduction to Clare via Irene's opening of a letter is one that connotes an action that gives birth to the plot and is felt by Irene as "dangerous," "alien," and "slightly furtive" (Larsen 5). Larsen uses Irene's simultaneous revulsion and attraction to Clare's racial passing as a masquerade for the inchoate sexual desire Irene feels for Clare (one Irene notes as uncanny). This masquerade is most obvious (aside, of course, from all the caressing smiles, blushing cheeks, and seductive greetings) in Clare's silent arrival in Irene's bedroom the day of the N.W.L. dance. After "dropping a kiss on [Irene's] dark curls," Clare proceeds to badger Irene for not responding to her letter, making Clare look as if she'd "been carrying on an illicit love affair and that the man had thrown [her] over" (Larsen 46). Clare's anxiety can be superficially equated to the potential consequences of Jack Bellew's discovery of her passing, although Larsen writes him as having a womanish mouth "set in an unhealthy looking dough-colored face"-- hardly a terrifying depiction (Larsen 28). This reading, however, portrays each character as acting on either side of a racial binary. In having the characters' desire instead register as queer, Larsen situates the racial politics of the novel as secondary to the foregrounded desires of her characters.

What results is a three dimensional depiction of an idiosyncratic space, unfolding through a narrative, within a historical context.

Larsen's employment of queer desire is not apparent solely through vaguely suggestive characterization. To critique identity politics and canon formation Larsen uses techniques that gesture towards political investment in a future made possible through heterosexual reproduction. Edelman argues that this possible future is deferred onto the figure of the Child and its heteronormative associations. What then do we make of Clare's detachment from her daughter or Irene's desire to shelter her son from the older boys' crass jokes (so as to keep him a perpetual "boy")? Furthermore, Larsen blurs the lines separating race, genealogy and heterosexual reproduction when Clare says "I nearly died of terror the whole nine months before Margery was born for fear that she might be dark. Thank goodness, she turned out alright. But I'll never risk it again. Never! The strain is simply too-too hellish" (Larsen 26). The terror ostensibly refers to Clare's being found out by Jack, but the hellish strain- with its inherent risk, also reads as a critique of the present-future and its heterosexual imperatives. In forsaking these imperatives to instead pursue a desire that ultimately ends in Clare's death, Larsen writes a character who "refuses...to grasp futurity in the form of the Child" (Edelman 49). The consequence of this formal choice is a defiance of social intelligibility (what mother would abandon her child for a pseudo-lesbian relationship that can only end in death?) and a rejection of not just specific norms of race, gender or sex, but of existence itself. This move pushes Larsen's text beyond the boundaries of historical race politics so as to speak directly

to future discourses about her work.

Another way Larsen liberates *Passing* from the bounds of identity dichotomy into a realm of chaotic multiplicity is through her use of humor. *Passing*, though not an overtly comic novel, has moments of humor that reveal themselves after multiple reads. What registers as tragic or horrifying the first time around reads as absurd or campy the second, third, and fourth. In constructing a slowly realized sense of comedy into her narrative, Larsen situates *Passing* to speak to multiple audiences who, at the time of the messages' reception, are unaware of the other, subaltern audiences' presence. The result is public speech that functions as a counterpublic address at the same time it functions as an address to a public.

One scene from the narrative that embodies this humorous and subversive simultaneity is the interrupted tea party of Clare, Irene and Gertrude. Jack Bellew's tonally ironic declaration of racism in which he says to Clare "I know you're no nigger, so it's all right. You can get as black as you please as far as I'm concerned, since I know you're no nigger. I draw the line at that. No niggers in my family. Never have been and never will be" (Larsen 29), registers immediately as despicable and dangerous. Larsen validates this superficial reading outside of Clare's apartment as Irene "tried a tiny laugh and was annoyed to find that it was close to tears" (Larsen 33). It is indisputable that an encounter with such virulent hatred is traumatic, and for Larsen's audience desiring a tale of racial trespassing, this reading satisfies. The humorous aspects of the encounter, however, emerge in re-reading this scene from a perspective that seeks to locate a counterpublic address. Consider first Larsen's

characterization of Gertrude who “looked as if her husband might be a butcher,” and whose “plump hands were newly and not too competently manicured” (Larsen 25). Later, Gertrude waves her “heavy hands about” and “jumps as if she had been shot at” after learning of Irene’s dark skinned children (Larsen 28). Gertrude is, for lack of a better term, a poorly made-up drag figure. She passes, but does so ineptly when situated between Clare and Irene. Jack’s “womanish mouth” and his “latent power” only push the scene further into camp. Camp, or humor derived from taking one’s self too seriously, can only be intercepted in this scene if both the “serious” and “absurd” are read simultaneously. In subverting tragedy by making it humorous, Larsen ensures an enduring readership beyond the text’s initial publication (as each subsequent read changes in tone), while addressing a specifically hybrid audience.

Larsen’s use of paradox, which is embodied in the novel’s climactic scene, functions as an aesthetic technique summarizing Larsen’s attitude towards identity politics and canon formation. In obscuring from the reader whether or not Clare jumped or was pushed by Irene, Larsen forces us to accept that both narrative possibilities could exist at the same time. Irene pushed Clare out the window *and* Clare jumped on her own. This reading gestures towards Larsen’s simultaneous self-commodification and critique of identity politics. The novel does both at the same time it similarly addresses multiple groups of readers. Aesthetically, this psychological simultaneity could register as literary modernism; however, this again encapsulates Larsen’s artistic voice within a canonized movement. Through connecting Larsen’s use of form, and my own inclusion of James Baldwin and Zora

Neale Hurston, and the politics behind each authors' use with Lady Gaga (a figure defined by Bedard as "postmodern"), a transcendent genealogy emerges that connotes new utility for Larsen's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's art.

Chapter 3: The Problem of John Grimes: Religious and Sexual Subjectivity in James

Baldwin's *Go Tell it on the Mountain*

James Baldwin functions as a figure who bridges an aesthetic strategy employed by both Larsen and Hurston and projects that strategy in a way that allows future artists to adopt each of their cause. Baldwin's debut novel *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is a text that, through its invocation of five particular narrative strategies, illustrates its intertextual linkage and political affinity. Baldwin's novel adopts both earlier authors' political projects of working against stable identity categorization with its reductive capitalization in a way that characterizes all three authors as anticipating ideological developments long before they occurred. Chronologically, Baldwin's novel is situated at a time when the work of Larsen, Hurston and other "Harlem Renaissance" figures had been thoroughly processed by scholars and consumers alike. *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, which was published in 1953-- one year prior to the landmark Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*-- sits on a philosophical precipice. The novel adopts the criticisms outlined earlier leveled by Hurston at identity politics, the commercialization of identity, and the expectations of the supposed majority, while challenging us to read his portrayals of minority subjects (and ones that have preceded them) against a greater Civil Rights narrative. This counterintuitive reading leads us to a deeper understanding of Baldwin's own political views and the ways that some readers have attempted to "hijack" Baldwin's art for exclusive purposes. Baldwin employs narrative fragmentation, queer desire, paradoxical plot moves, dark humor, and a consciousness of one's own self as

currency to engage an earlier generation's literary productions and political criticism in a highly specific and collective end: one that ultimately critiques and destabilizes the reductive approach inherent to both literary canon formation and larger identity-based political movements.

Baldwin's use of narrative fragmentation in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* is similar to both Larsen's and Hurston's in many ways. I read *Go Tell it on the Mountain* as, ostensibly, the story of John Grime's religious conversion split into three parts, with the second part containing the origin stories of his mother, (step) aunt, and (step) father; the novel ends and begins with an omniscient 3rd person narration focused predominantly on the inner thoughts of John Grimes. Between the first and third chapters Baldwin further fragments perspectival focalization by having his 3rd person narrative voice weave "The Prayers of the Saints"- Florence's prayer, Gabriel's prayer and Elizabeth's prayer, culminating in John's conversion in the third part, "The Threshing-Floor." What the reader receives in terms of character development, theme, motif, and singularity of plot momentum is a temporally back and forward shifted portrayal of John Grimes who, as quasi central character, Baldwin develops with equal parts psychic interiority and the re-told past experiences and thoughts of John's present cast of relatives. Baldwin writes not one central character comprised of separate and distinct thoughts, and actions carried through a singular plot arc, but instead one character's interiority, described mostly through a focalization of his relatives' past lives. In its simplest form, the novel's structure illustrates a decentered centrality, an experience of one queer, African American

male's subjectivity that materializes literally on the novel's margins (i.e. pages 1-65 and 225-263) while the centralized narratives of his elders physically fills the gap for the reader. Phillip Brian Harper recognizes the "oxymoronic" position of the postmodern subject that we identify as "socially marginal." Harper notes, "On the one hand, the idea of "marginality" depends on the notion of a fixed "center" in relation to which it derives its meaning; on the other hand, it is precisely one of the lessons of postmodernity... that the disposition of various subjects... is anything but fixed" (Harper 12). I argue that Baldwin's seemingly simple structure achieves a highly specific type of narrative simultaneity: one that gestures towards an aesthetic and political legacy started by Larsen and Hurston while directly engaging and critiquing specific contemporary identity-based social movements.

Baldwin uses the separation of each family member's narrative to ultimately construct a cohesive portrait of John Grime's individual experience. Although the novel could very easily be read as a braiding of four distinct stories, this reading ignores the aesthetic and political traditions in which I attempt to locate Baldwin's work. Baldwin achieves a sense of cohesion through a subtle merging of separate threads, both thematic and genetic, into one singular narrative at strategic points throughout the novel. We see this most obviously in Baldwin's inclusion of "Florence's Prayer" following Part One. Baldwin writes John and Florence as psychically similar characters when, following John's brother Roy's injury in a knife fight, John wishes Roy dead as a means to "bring his father low" (*Go Tell* 43). Florence, pages later, broadcasts John's contempt for Gabriel when, after assaulting

Elizabeth and moving on to Roy, Florence catches Gabriel's belt mid-strike and says to him "you was born wild, and you's going to die wild. But ain't no use to try to take the whole world with you. You can't change nothing, Gabriel. You ought to know that by now" (*Go Tell* 50). Through her verbal emasculation of Gabriel in front of his family, Florence reads, at the very least, as a mouthpiece for Gabriel's entire family's hatred for him, but as Baldwin reveals in Florence's prayer and "The Threshing Floor," this trauma-borne hatred most thematically links her with John. "Florence's Prayer" begins just as John, Elisha and Sisters McCandless and Price commence the Saturday night church service. Baldwin prefaces the novel's second chapter by equating, through John, Florence's presence at the church service (and later conversion) as both catalyzed by trauma and as being traumatic itself when Baldwin writes "she seemed to have been summoned to witness a bloody act... and [John's] heart grew cold" (*Go Tell* 65). Florence's conversion, and John's later, are born of a shared past of pain, trauma and secrecy in which "[Florence] felt that everything in existence... was part of a mighty plan for her humiliation" (*Go Tell* 96). But Baldwin chooses not to provide us with both characters' pasts in complete form, instead introducing John in the first chapter and using "Florence's Prayer" to further define his psychic interiority. Baldwin conflates this aspect of John's characterization through Florence's own conversion ("her song revealed that she was suffering." 69) when, in "The Threshing Floor," John experiences his conversion as "bewildered terror... a sickness in his bowels, a tightening in his loin strings" (*Go Tell* 228). Florence's past of pain and humiliation is John's, not because Florence is his (step)

aunt, but because the same traumatic experiences (that of secrecy, humiliation and pain) drive them to the same end. It is this shared end, established only in the novel's final chapter, that the reader can then reinterpret the previous chapters' contents as an integral part of John's particular subjectivity.

If John's narrative is one thematically linked to the bitterness, trauma and humiliation of Florence's, then it is "genetically" linked to the violence and sadness experienced by his birth parents. This is an obvious connection that Baldwin allows the reader to make, although my reading of it establishes a connection to an earlier aesthetic technique and political project. John's father was driven to suicide and his mother Elizabeth would "find herself staring at [John] darkly..." remembering his father, Richard "helplessly, bitterly... as she carried John through the busy, summer, Sunday streets" (*Go Tell* 210). John's physical existence in the novel's world-as-it-is is one predicated on loneliness and death (Richard's, Elizabeth's, Deborah's, Florence's and Gabriel's). But what is gained by reading John's psychic interiority as constructed through the retelling of his relative's traumatic past? One might be tempted to read a general statement about the "plight of the African American" (or any marginalized group in general) through this formal move. A move Baldwin makes earlier in the novel, however, destabilizes this seemingly easy correlation. For his birthday, John ventures into Manhattan and ends up buying a ticket to a movie. What follows is a meta narrative during which John connects with a brazen screen diva. At first John recognizes this diva as "most evil," but soon finds all his sympathy "given to this violent and unhappy woman" (*Go Tell* 37-8). John's reaction to the

diva's abuse shifts quickly from sympathy to a deep emotional connection. Soon John ...understood her when she raged... saying to the whole world: "You can kiss my ass." Nothing tamed or broke her, nothing touched her, neither kindness, nor scorn, nor hatred, nor love. She had never thought of a prayer. It was unimaginable that she would ever bend her knees and come crawling along a dusty floor to anybody's altar, weeping for forgiveness. Perhaps her sin was so extreme that it could not be forgiven; perhaps pride was so great that she did not need forgiveness. She had fallen from that high estate which God had intended for men and women, and she made her fall glorious because it was so complete. John could not have found in his heart, had he dared to search it, and wish for her redemption. *He wanted to be like her*, only more powerful, more thorough and more cruel; to make those around him, all who hurt him, suffer as she made the student suffer, and laugh in their faces when they asked pity for their pain. *He* would have asked no pity, and his pain was greater than theirs. Go on, girl, he whispered, as the student, facing her implacable ill will, sighed and wept. Go on, girl. (*Go Tell* 37)

In doing so, Baldwin is potentially glorifying his own artistic predecessors that created characters who appeared to embrace what many saw as nonsense, evil and instability. Outside the context of the novel, perhaps one could imagine a young

Baldwin reading *Passing* or *Mules and Men* and feeling the same thing about Larsen and Hurston. Although impossible to prove, I believe Baldwin's use of specific narrative focalization techniques where one character's plot trajectory overlaps and, at times, is compressed with another through a non-linear and thematic process, heightens the likelihood of this subtle tipping of his hat to those before him. In aligning *Go Tell It on the Mountain* with prior literary figures whose work has been shown to protest the reductivism of identity-based social movements, Baldwin equips his novel to critique contemporary social movements' desire for a coherent, unifying narrative of identity experience.

John Grime's life as a young, queer, African-American male in Harlem is as much Florence's, Elizabeth's and Gabriel's past narratives as it is John's own, identity-independent experience. It is the moments in which Baldwin physically separates each character's story into separate parts, chapters and prayers that we see him working against stable identity narratives. Baldwin writes the story in such a way that we can only ever approximate what it was like to be Florence or Elizabeth or John in 1930's Harlem. Baldwin deliberately uses narrative fragmentation and moments of thematic linkages to make such reductivism a difficult task. Instead, the reader gains an understanding in the ways in which seemingly unrelated experiences can contribute to a shared psychic interiority. Baldwin does not use this shared interiority, however, to construct a stable narrative of identity. Baldwin's decision to fracture the narrative of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* reflects both the psychic dissociation resulting from traumatic experience while also displaying the affective

correlate of postmodern subjectivity. It is this linked individuality that allows for us to link Baldwin's work with earlier writers while locating a critique of identity-based social movements and canon formation. Narrative fragmentation, however, is not the sole way in which the reader can sense Baldwin's legacy. Baldwin's controversial portrayal of queer desire within John Grimes, as well as other characters, further defines the aesthetic contours of art that protests simple identity categorization.

Baldwin's vague invocation of queer desire throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain* has been read by many queer critics as a troubling silence with political repercussions. Bryan Washington characterizes contemporary gay critical approaches to this novel as ones in which "irritation and frustration predominate" (Washington 78). While Washington identifies critics' supposed preoccupation with race instead of sexuality as being a reason for *Go Tell It on the Mountain's* "questionable [gay] canonical status," his ultimate conclusion that "*Go Tell It on the Mountain* is a comment on the difficulty of coming to terms with homosexuality in a repressed environment" deprives the presence of queer desire operating within the novel of its political potential (Washington 84). John's erotically charged wrestling match with Elisha can be read many different ways, especially in the context of the novel's other, less "affectively queer" moments. I read John's wrestling match with Elisha and his relationship with his infant sister Ruth as resisting a narrative that could easily be adopted as a stock characterization of one particular racial or sexual identity category. In doing so, Baldwin illuminates for the reader the fact that "we simply lack the schema appropriate for adequately encountering the profundity of [Baldwin] whom

Jack and Bobby Kennedy used to refer to as “Martin Luther Queen”” (Lombardo 41). What Baldwin writes through his invocation of queer desire is a portrayal of life in which one can “never fit so easily into the names that others call us or we call ourselves” (Lombardo 41).

John’s wrestling match with Elisha is, without a doubt, an erotically charged moment within the novel and one that leaves John “filled with a wild delight” (*Go Tell* 51). John’s flirtation and obsession with Elisha reads as an easily identifiable moment in which one character grapples with the simplest manifestations of his non-normative sexual desires, and one John recognizes as “sinful.” Similarly, John’s fantasizing about the older boys’ bets in the school lavatory over “whose urine could arch higher” leaves John feeling that “he had watched in himself a transformation of which he would never dare to speak” (*Go Tell* 13). John’s unwillingness to name his desire as homosexual does not, however, ultimately characterize that desire as *uniformly* shameful and traumatic. John’s horror following his fantasy on the morning of his fourteenth birthday and his wrestling match with Elisha does not indicate a capitulation to sexual norms, as Washington argues, “defined in terms of conventional heterosexual equations: power is male; powerlessness is female” (87). Such a definition would imbue the function of queer desire within the novel with a model for affecting identity belonging (thus equipping certain subjects with an imperative to belong, while excluding others who do not comply with this equation). Neither is the presence of John’s queer desire a means to simply invert this “heterosexual equation” as a means for Baldwin to “lament the absence of models for

young men who depart from the masculinist norm” (Washington 89). Instead of reading John’s identification with the screen diva, his desire for Elisha and his imagination of the yellow stain on his ceiling as a naked woman as characterizing queerness as neatly situated at the opposite pole of heteronormativity, I read these moments as a further intimation of Baldwin’s merging of identity as set-out through his narrative structure. John’s wrestling match with Elisha is as much about John’s desire to wrestle with Elisha in bed as it is John wrestling with the mandates of both men’s religious ideology. Just as Elisha’s rendezvous with Ellie-Mae was read by the congregation as a symbolically queer act, redeemable only through religious purification, so too are John’s desires. The plot move is queer, yes, because it disrupts the norms of a given community, but not because it stands perfectly opposed to the norms of that community.

The aesthetic linkage established through Baldwin’s use of queer desire throughout his narrative is evident in more subtle ways than blatant same-sex desire. John’s reaction to the cultural connotations of procreation, illustrated via his relationship with his infant sister Ruth, also establishes this linkage. John’s conception of child-rearing is prefaced by a geographical positioning of the church and the hospital where each child was born as “four blocks up Lenox Avenue [from the church]” (*G● Tell* 1). Just as the church symbolizes a structure of mandated normativization, so too does the hospital. John characterizes the pregnancies of his mother as filling a similar symbolic function as the church, “he remembered only enough to be afraid every time her belly began to swell, knowing that each time the

swelling began it would not end until she was taken from him, to come back with a stranger. Each time this happened she became a little more of a stranger herself” (*Go Tell* 2). Gabriel’s impregnation of Elizabeth very clearly fulfills the role Edelman assigns to the Child, as he prays before Ruth’s birth for the “little voyager soon to be among the,” a voyager who, once actually on her voyage outside the womb, would be subjected to poverty, domestic violence, and racial persecution (*Go Tell* 2).

Conversely, John’s relationship with Ruth is one less constrained by the norms of the symbolic. During the scene in which Gabriel and Elizabeth argue over Roy’s knife wound, John picks up Ruth, saying “Now, you let your big brother tell you something, baby. Just as soon as you’s able to stand on your feet, run away from *this* house, run far away ” (*Go Tell* 43-4). Unlike Gabriel’s bestowing of a sojourner’s narrative onto the baby, John deals with Ruth as an individual capable of writing her own, idiosyncratic narrative. Baldwin’s juxtaposition of John’s philosophy of procreation against Gabriel’s establishes a correlating template for queerness as it operates throughout *Go Tell It on the Mountain*; not subversive because of its oppositional qualities, but subversive because it destabilizes the intelligibility of identity positions in general. John’s queerness is not one that can be easily mapped onto any kind of canonizable narrative.

The deeply personal human drama unfolding within the pages of *Go Tell It on the Mountain* makes locating critiques of certain ideologies easier than others. Baldwin, however, still uses his novel to make a statement about the role that economic systems play in negotiating which subjects gain access to what identity and

how this process plays out in the real world. Consider the scene in which John uses his birthday money to go to the movies. The chain of exchange, which actually begins in the kitchen with his mother, follows an interesting trajectory. John watches the neighborhood boys play stickball outside his window and grows “terrified of his thoughts. He wanted to be with these boys, in the street, heedless and thoughtless, wearing out his treacherous and bewildering body” (*Go Tell* 27). John is interpolated from the window-- and his fantasy-- by his mother who plans to give him money for this birthday, but prefaces the gift with the encouragement “Everything works together for good for them that love the lord” (*Go Tell* 29). John feels as if this encouragement signals towards a shared knowledge of John’s identity in which “this trouble was also her own” and which causes Elizabeth to look at John “as though she were looking far beyond him at a long, dark road, and seeing on that road a traveler in perpetual danger” (*Go Tell* 29-30). While this moment between mother and son may register superficially as one of maternal sentimentality, it ultimately leads to a bestowing of cash which, when John pays the cashier at the theater for his ticket, is recognized as “charged with the power to open doors” (*Go Tell* 36). If it were not for the transformation that occurs inside the theater, this chain of exchange might just reproduce models of labor exploitation and subjugation and might, in fact, not do much of anything but simply illustrate the nature of capitalism.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain*’s specific historical position in relation to the release of *Passing* and *Mules and Men* as well as the birth of the American civil rights movement forces readers to reconsider Baldwin’s chain of exchange illustrated in the

novel's first part. Baldwin had witnessed the formation of a Harlem Renaissance canon in the years after the demand for such ethnically stylized work subsided. That both Hurston and Larsen faded into anonymity after their initial success undoubtedly played a role in Baldwin's understanding of how his own work was to circulate within a capitalist publishing industry. Perhaps John's birthday gift is less discussed because Baldwin seems to be crafting a neutral portrayal instead of an evaluative one. What I mean is that Baldwin recognized, like Hurston and Larsen before him, the necessity of engaging a system that depended on subjects occupying stable roles and identities in order to critique that system. James Baldwin did not necessarily have something new to say about identity and the politics of canon formation and social movements in *Go Tell It on the Mountain*, nor did he say it in a particularly new way; he did, however, recognize the ease with which vogueish critiques of art can easily fall by the way side. As a literary and cultural figure, Baldwin recognized the necessity of engaging mainstream modes of publicity without necessarily capitulating to mainstream norms of identity.

Of the five aesthetic techniques I see as illustrating postmodernism, while also protesting identity politics within canon formation, I struggle the most with locating moments of humor within *Go Tell It on the Mountain*. The novel is, as a whole, kind of a downer. There is one moment of smile-eliciting cattiness that I feel is relevant to my greater argument about the novel's aesthetic politics. The entrance of Sisters Price and McCandless into the sanctuary following Elisha and John's romp does have a comedic tone-- even if it flows immediately into the cringe-inducing "Florence's

Prayer.” John’s description of Sister McCandless gestures towards Larsen’s characterization of Gertrude from the scene in *Passing* in Clare Kendry’s parlor. Baldwin describes McCandless through John as a woman who, when “the Lord had shown His favor by working through her... whatever [she] said sounded like a threat” (*Go Tell* 60). Baldwin takes it a step further, describing Sister McCandless as “an enormous woman, one of the biggest and blackest God had ever made.” The description is, at the very least, out of place given its location between scenes of domestic violence and personal failure. It is a scene that almost paints Sister McCandless as a minstrel figure. Given John’s reaction, however, of “a smile that, despite the shy gratitude it was meant to convey, did not escape being ironic, or even malicious” the character functions as subtly comical (*Go Tell* 61). I read Sister McCandless as a character hopelessly duped by the redemption and sense of belonging that the Temple of the Fire Baptized provided her. If Baldwin is even hinting that John is an autobiographical character, I cannot help but locate some kind of a critique within this particularly random moment of characterization. For every subject who feels maimed and marginalized by the categories of belonging set out before him, there are plenty others who dive in with an enthusiasm that elicits pity, but also a sense of solace and entertainment. This fun at the expense of others is, in a way, a new category of belonging in itself.

*Go Tell It on the Mountain* as a contained narrative leaves much to be desired at its conclusion. Elizabeth remains a tainted woman in her own eyes and Gabriel’s. The bitterness between Gabriel and Florence endures, and Baldwin never lets us see John

stand up to his step father in any kind of cathartic way. Even more disconcerting is John's religious seizure and moment of "enlightenment" in which he is saved-- an act the character recoils at earlier in the novel. Baldwin leaves us with a slew of traumatized characters who, for the most part, remain trapped. This less-than-happy ending, however, is not paradoxical but merely realistic. The confounding aspects of the novel, at least for critics and scholars who seek specific representations of identity narrative within the text, relate to Baldwin's seeming critique of and capitulation to the role of religion within both the text and emerging political climate. Furthermore, Baldwin's avoidance of sketching characters who can be seen as representatives for the poor, gay, colored or queer almost begs the question "what's the point?" The two most vexing or paradoxical plot moves made by Baldwin in *Go Tell it on the Mountain* are the triumph of faith and the lack of a racialized narrative, both of which advance an argument against stable identity categorization and challenges the ethics of a burgeoning social movements.

Baldwin's use of religious imagery and language throughout *Go Tell it on the Mountain* serves the strategic purpose of somehow commenting on the institution and its' relation to his greater project. I argue that, despite the fact that John and Florence both undergo conversion experiences; Baldwin's depiction is not an endearing one. In attempting to make sense of Baldwin's use of physically violent religious language (i.e. Church of the Fire Baptized), Michael Cobb argues that "minority resistance is often articulated through injury that gives the minority a strong voice and claim through that violence" (Cobb 288). While I would argue that publicity can be granted

via a shared traumatic history, I see this strategy operating more through Baldwin's narrative technique that through his invocation of religious imagery. The historical and cultural role played by organized religion for both African Americans and Queer individuals seem to sit at opposite ends of a spectrum; for African Americans the church was a place to organize, lobby and develop a shared cultural aesthetic, whereas for many queer individuals the church has been a place of psychic and physical trauma that continues to exist today. I read Baldwin's use of religious language and his characterization of the church similarly to how I read his portrayal of monetary exchange. The church is a place that Baldwin shows can be characterized as neither wholly good or evil; it simply exists. Baldwin's fluency within this particular public helped mask some of his more radical agendas while facilitating their reception at the same time. While some may still find it upsetting that, as a queer youth, Baldwin leaves us with John being called to the ministry, Baldwin's subversive motives (as outlined by his other use of certain aesthetic strategies) makes it read less problematically.

Throughout *Go Tell it on the Mountain* Baldwin displays characters who, through his artistic mastery, resist easy categorization. None of the Grimeses fit into any easily identifiable narrative. Baldwin, as a political and literary figure, uses these characters as aesthetic templates through which he crafts an anticipatory critique of the Civil Rights Movement. Furthermore, through invoking five specific aesthetic techniques, Baldwin pays homage to those figures making similar arguments before him. The vagueness of Baldwin's race, gender, class and sexual identity narratives

also makes it possible for this argument to be made in the future. Subjectivity, according to Baldwin, is not experienced as a universal set of criteria. The somewhat convoluted way that Baldwin sutures together these portrayals with his own definition of “protest aesthetics” allows the reader to see Baldwin’s participating in a larger ideological battle- a battle in which the combatants are at times on the same side while simultaneously resisting one another. For Baldwin, nothing-- not identity (ascribed or chosen), political affiliation, race, class, or gender-- exists as simply real. Instead, these categories’ contradictory nature needs to be recognized as such as a means to address the possibility of real change.

#### Chapter 4: Lady Gaga as Harlem Renaissance Relic

In a 2010 New York Times' op-ed forum "The Stone," Nancy Bauer urges us "if you want to get a bead on the state of feminism these days, look no further than the ubiquitous pop star Lady Gaga," and later wonders, after a close reading of Gaga's "Telephone" music video, "is this an expression of Lady Gaga's strength as a woman or an exercise in self-objectification?" Bauer's interrogation of Gaga's art and politics brings the pop star into a discourse beyond Billboard charts and episodes of Entertainment Tonight, but does so without removing Gaga from the context of her millions of fans who similarly recognize, as ladygaga.com fan-forum member DJJKW does, "Ms. Gaga, U have got the whole world flipped!!" Lady Gaga has legions of fans and scholars alike who agree there is something *more* happening in Gaga's lyrics, music videos, fashion choices and public appearances than simple catchy melodies and a marketable physique. No contemporary pop star can take all the credit for their sound, style or success; they are as much indebted to their white, middle-aged record executives as they are to their similarly cavalier and (now) laughably less provocative predecessors. While some see Lady Gaga as the next Madonna, fewer have explored the possibility of a genealogy that predates 1980. What a closer look at Gaga's aesthetic strategy and political project affords us is not just one more reason to buy a ticket to her tour, but a template by which we can connect her to a group of artists/activists who were creating long before her.

Just as Butler uses Sophocles' "The Antigone" to imagine an ideological space outside the Symbolic, in which heteronormative kinship patterns govern

intelligibility, Stefanie Germanotta uses the persona of Lady Gaga to establish an artistic political agenda that critiques the Symbolic while gesturing towards our subjection within it (Butler 72). For Butler, Antigone accomplishes this maneuver through a vaguely incestuous and politically defiant burial ritual for her brother Polyneices. Germanotta instead uses the name “Lady Gaga,” and in doing so names herself as the matron of unintelligibility. Gaga, literally understood as cultural shorthand for infantile speech patterns, gestures toward the prelinguistic state that precedes the Mirror Stage. According to Lacan, infants experience this blissful state of interconnectedness until recognizing themselves as distinct individuals following a glimpse in a mirror. In figuring herself as an already-self-aware individual within this psychoanalytic construct, Gaga grants herself both the agency which is inherently lacking during this stage of development while liberating herself from the governing structures (i.e. language) of the Symbolic. Before we can address what or how Gaga is saying though, we must understand that it requires viewing her through a lens with which we have no cultural language to describe what we see. The acceptance of this truth brings into question both the physical manifestations of the Gaga persona as well as the implications of her political messages.

Bauer’s attempt to decipher the meaning behind Gaga’s inhabiting of traditional standards of feminine beauty while enacting questionably empowering feminist narratives in the music video “Telephone,” left Bauer ultimately unable to conclude whether Gaga was acting in either or both of Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s notion of “bad

faith.”<sup>1</sup> Bauer suggests that this neither/both strategy that Gaga employs to obtain power through pleasing men sexually is a slippery slope; young women who look to pop stars for role models may be less skilled at negotiating the capitulations between male/female subject/object positions. This project is not, thankfully, particularly interested in addressing the ethical ramifications of role modeling performed or not performed by Lady Gaga. However, Bauer’s recognition of Gaga’s use of simultaneity and paradox is helpful to this project’s larger argument. In her essay, Bauer points this out through a reading of Gaga’s music video “Telephone” when she writes “The rejection by Gaga and Beyoncé of the world in which they are — to use a favorite word of Gaga’s — “freaks” takes the form of their exploiting their hyperbolic feminization to mow down everyone in their way, or even not in their way.” It is the Gaga persona’s placement against the coercive norms of the Symbolic that identify her as a figure similar to Larsen, Baldwin, and Hurston, and one Edelman would describe as a *sinthomosexual*. Gaga both invites the male gaze and punishes it; she both claims a feminist agenda and adheres to strict standards of heteronormative desirability and masculine interpolation, but not, as Bauer suggests, to claim a space in the greater feminist political and cultural project. Instead Gaga uses simultaneity

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<sup>1</sup> “Lady Power.” Bauer defines Sartre’s notion of bad faith as a response to the self-delusion that an individual is able to fully inhabit one role as either complete subject or complete object. Simone de Beauvoir on the other hand, recognizes that in regards to sexual relations, men and women can simultaneously occupy both subject and object positions. Beauvoir’s notion of bad faith occurs when the female partner is stuck playing the role of eternal object, while the male partner continually assumes the role of subject. Bauer ultimately concludes that Gaga is neither acting in “bad faith (in both Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s figuring) but that Gaga is not enacting Beauvoir’s ideal, egalitarian simultaneity either.

and paradox to speak “to the particular way each subject manages to knot together the orders of the Symbolic, the Imaginary, and the Real” (Edelman 35).

If Gaga seems invested in using her persona to do more than engage in one specific “fight,” our questions about her formal strategies and artistic project are again left unanswered.<sup>2</sup> Ell Bedard comes close but ultimately fails in answering these questions of who, what and why when she concludes:

In Gaga, there are a number of unresolved tensions: between titillation and the grotesque, between the pure pleasure of pop culture and the ideologies being showcased, and between her absolute complicity and subversion of dominant discourses and capitalist forces. What these paradoxes demand is critical attention: through investigation and discussion, we cannot determine who or what Gaga ‘is’. Rather, we are able to trace the various discourses – of gender, of capital, and of popular culture – to create a fluid and temporary sketch of what Lady Gaga presents as a phenomenon of late capitalist post-modernity.

(Lady Power)

For Bedard, Gaga’s simultaneity is a mimetic trick used to illuminate the “late

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<sup>2</sup> I should note that while I argue that Gaga seems less invested in engaging in the political culture wars of the left and right, she does do so quite frequently. One appearance involved rallying in Portland, ME during the first “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” US Senate debate. While this appearance took for granted traditional definitions of binary sexuality, Gaga seemed less interested in using her persona to construct a queer identity and instead merely to implore the US Senators to stop reproducing binaries in general. For more reading regarding Gaga’s politics of sexuality and queer identity see Out magazines feature piece at <http://out.com/detail.asp?id=25720>.

capitalist post-modern” condition. Gaga’s use of plurality, pastiche, simulacra, paradox and parody all position her artistic persona, according to Bedard, within a pre-existing discourse of post-modern philosophers. Bedard’s close readings fail, though, when they avoid seeking out messages outside of the one that says “this is what it means to exist in a post-modern free-market economy.” To reduce Gaga to a simply mimetic figure robs her of her radical potential and shunts her work away from a genealogy that predates Baudrillard and Jameson. Take for example Gaga’s outfit worn during her acceptance speech at the 2010 MTV Video Music Awards where “Bad Romance” won Music Video of the Year. The “gown,” which consisted of various cuts of beef sewn to a corset and a pair of heels (all designed by Franc Fernandez), embodied the above mentioned tensions inherent in the Gaga persona. Aside from being simultaneously titillating and grotesque the meat dress motions to a deeply critical and much less philosophically vague artistic project that parallels that of Larsen. Just as Larsen used the economic aspects of the novel to construct a critique of them, Gaga similarly uses celebrity culture to critique identity objectification.

The meat dress, which simultaneously critiques MTV, its award ceremony and the greater capitalist forces that propelled her to that stage, also critiqued Gaga’s fans (or little monsters) and dissenters, and lastly critiqued the content of the video “Bad Romance” itself, a summative example of Gaga’s purpose. The meat dress was a broad-stroke “fuck you” strapped and sewn to a constructed identity whose very gesture towards the confines of the Symbolic functions as an eternal “fuck you” to all

who witness it. Any labels we attempt to use to contain, manipulate or otherwise make sense of the Gaga persona reiterate her awkward positioning in a system of signs and signification. The “Bad Romance” music video predictably displays a narrative of a bad romance in which Gaga writhes on the floor of a Russian whorehouse while men bid for the chance to sleep with her, at the video’s end Gaga immolates her john, with the final shot being a smoking corpse with a lingerie clad Gaga beside, sparks shooting from a cone bra. The viewer’s receipt of the messages “this video depicts a bad romance,” “this artist depicts the apex of feminine sexual desirability,” and “Gaga’s physical response to these states of being is violent destruction and sexual excitement” is completely unhinged through its multiplicity of message and viewer perspective. In a 4-minute time span Gaga affects paradoxical states of being when she weeps, sleeps, writhes, murders and comes all within the narrative context of a site of economic exchange (the whorehouse), within a medium (the music video) of commercial advertising (see Gaga in the McQueen gown), for which she ultimately received an award from a media company that depends on her album sales to sell advertising space on its TV network.

Gaga’s donning of the meat dress during her acceptance speech, with its allusion to the sexual consumption of women, the beastly nature of capitalist consumption, the gory excess of celebrity culture, and the ravenous zeal with which her fans consume her every move, was a logical extension of the paradoxical nature of the music video. All of which, of course, function as a metonym for life inside the Symbolic: we as subjects, consist of a never ending series of hybrid identity

categories which we daily negotiate and manipulate in order to gain access to necessary forms of power not linguistically figured to allow for non-normative subjects to gain access.

The seeming complexity of Gaga's play with all we know to be true might easily be attributed to her ability to use multiple media forms to achieve a level of ubiquity not previously possible prior to the Internet age. But as mentioned earlier, this equation of technology with the seeming originality of Gaga's project gives both her and technology entirely too much credit. If we can take the simple message of Gaga's performance and look for moments of artistic expression that signal a critique of a system that forces us to sever parts of our identity to fulfill a requirement for that identity, in order to gain access to a public sphere which validates that identity, we can locate several strands of Larsen's earlier techniques. Aside from her nuanced reference to the Symbolic, Gaga uses a palate of fairly pedestrian formal techniques to remind us of her greater project. Bedard notices most of them such as paradox, pastiche, simulacra and plurality, and although she wrongly attributes them to an espousal of post-modern identity, her identification of these techniques provide us many lenses by which we can examine other works.

### Conclusion

Establishing a connection between the aesthetic and political projects of Hurston, Larsen, Baldwin, and Gaga has an illuminating effect on both artists. If anything, it legitimates Gaga's wearing of a dress made of raw animal. For *Passing*, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *Go Tell it on the Mountain*, these connections free the texts to be read from multiple perspectives and heard by a constantly changing public. Furthermore, in participating in an inheritable aesthetic technique, Larsen's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's works becomes less rooted in the identity-specific needs of various historical political movements. By emphasizing their self-conscious use of narrative simultaneity, paradox, queer desire, humor, and self-commodification, we can pinpoint the moments in which the author launches subversive or radical critiques of contemporary culture at any given time. As a hybrid subjects themselves, these three authors' crafting of narratives that force the reader into a similarly uneasy psychic space has to register as more than just historically contained race politics. The hybrid condition is one remade in new combinations every day. Movements that seek to deny this fact or to locate a stable, universal representation are merely reproducing discourses of power and subjugation. This argument seeks to recognize the power inherent in Larsen's, Hurston's, and Baldwin's work to challenge these reductive impulses and to speak to an audience from outside the bounds of history. This challenge results not in the tearing away of a beloved text from a movement that claims it with good intentions, but instead in a reading of the text that creates a space for those not included in that movements' advocacy project.

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